

Upstream

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Abstract:

This manuscript of poetry was composed between 1980-1986 by the young woman I was in my twenties. The poems – largely concerned with the mysteries of perception and the emotional excitement of ideas - constitute a first book that was abandoned in a drawer as the demands of teaching, child-rearing, elder-care, and life's other wonders swelled to fill all of the psychic space the author had available. More than thirty years and a few published books later, these poems make their way out into a harsher world than the one in which they were composed.

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Date: January 20, 2019

Signed: Judith Harway

Upstream

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Acknowledgements

During the 1980s, some of these poems appeared in the following publications:

Arts Manitoba

Canadian Literature

The Cape Rock

Cream City Review

Cumberland Poetry Review

The Fiddlehead

Intro 13

Malahat Review

Manhattan Poetry Review

Milkweed Chronicle

Northern Light

Quarterly West

Queens Quarterly

Riverstone

Southern Poetry Review

Deepest thanks to the Wisconsin Arts Board and the MacDowell Colony for their support and encouragement.

I.

Wash

My mother practiced homely arts.

Her palette of colors, lights, the absences
of bodies blurred as knees and elbows

bagged, remembering. Her pattern:
pale before the dark, a landscape's
slow accumulated muddiness

redeemed each Tuesday, folding
me again. I held the poses,
donned and shed my skins, and came, clean

and unmasked into the cycles
occupying her. Some stains I hid.

But sometimes stains defined

the medium of me: her bright sheets shook
and hung on lines, the hot iron
of perfection, lost their artfulness

if I stepped back where distances cohere.

Here is my body. Here, the lovely grit
she couldn't gloss no matter how she tried.

Nocturne

Now the worried entrance
of the moon: in its menage
of light, this arc of earth
between us balances, a leftover.
And overhead the ground
of night is figured
by our meted love, the way
greengrocers pack their perfect fruits
on top. In this and other mysteries
of plenty, I admit I'm thin,
a moon who craves its opposite
to make it whole or even
beautiful. And I am full
of him, this man I have
to miss. No matter where he is
I hold the pitch and rest
of us, our sleepy sprawl
of bones and chance
connections. Next to nothing
or the universe, I hold
my breath and shine.

The Fire

It reached up from Weller Lake
like fingers closing
to a fist. And every tree
stood out, each branch came clear
the moment it went up.

What a night that was –
a world of torchlight,
years consumed in seconds.

Three miles off, we kept
Our own fire burning, roasted meat and corn.
And danger, from that height,
was an imagined spark. I ate my fill
and pictured small shapes routed
from their dens, the awful claws
of trees, the depth

flames lend to darkness.
We were safe, pretending there's nothing
you and I can't stand to see.

Tonight the sky is heavy
with a storm. I am a doubter and about to be
your bride. You must be
fast asleep in a clear country.
I can close my eyes and cross
that valley; I can close my eyes
and count the smoldering constellations

under stones.

It would make sense to me
if everything we did
was to put out the fire.

I lay awake that night
and prayed for rain. And you,
who knew a thing or two
about control, who used to fight fires,
turned and told me go to sleep.
Not even rain could change
the course the fire had to take,
you said: bands of flame would climb

and crest the ridge and come together,
and nothing we or anyone could do
would make a difference.

The Silk-bound Notebook

Gold and purple deer, brocaded
under locusts, lift their slender heads:
the world is good. Inside, the ghosts
of grey ducks splash in landing,
carp among the rush-roots
rise to welcome them and wind
singes visibly. For years I couldn't
bring myself to write here

though my sister meant
the leaves to fill and turn, her gift
to be mine as this face is mine,
lined fluently and surfacing in mirrors.
As I start to write, she holds my hand

again, the cursive of our fingers
grips a pencil nub. Again, I am too young
to care what shaky word
she leads me through as long as I can
claim it. But when we are done
she creases that plain page
into a wing that arcs through air.
Though now I read

the tracks of armed men in the trees,
though now I know for sure
that grey ducks dive to feast on fingerlings,
I think of her and write what I heard then
across the weeds, the wind.

Bats

At night the orchard shook with bats
in flight, tight-ropes of sound
strung tree to tree. Between the leaves
their whine evaporated to gnat hum
and toad antiphony. On the way home,
crushing apples underfoot, you'd pause
and listen for the gypsy moths,
for fish teeth clicking, ants among the roots.
We heard, we did not hear.

One night a dark wing grazed your cheek,
aware of your shape, where you stood.
I would transcribe that sonar,
sing your face, or trace the route we followed
home those nights. Instead I write
an alphabet of wings – the first word,
dusk, spelled out by flights of geese –
to say I think of you
when tense wires coil in silence,
when the bats hang sated, upside down, and sleep.

The Glowworm

You followed Castle Creek, the shortcut home.
Never mind the dark your body foundered in,
I loved you then

because you didn't shy from anything.
And who but you would trust
those clustered lights above you?
Where night opened back

to a perfect pitch you climbed the bank
to enter, toe and finger-holds so dim it chills me
still, what bears our weight.

But you, pure question,
bent to touch a glow as tenuous as what escapes
at death. Your fingers formed an ark

beneath the glowworm's body, your skin lit,
a heart-shaped boat in which
that tiny fisherman rocked through the night.

I loved your stories, pungent from an ocean
I had never seen; as I saw none of this
but what I give you back: an open door

and my hands open to receive your light.

Aubade: In His Voice

Because this fool's gold dawn lays bare
a map, I leave her side.

The world's asleep, warm in her dark blood,
knees curled to her chest, breath
stirring in and out of her like breezes
luffing flaps of yellow nylon I could take
for petals. Black-eyed Susan,
I don't think the light has seen us yet.

Here at the pass, all we belong to dreams
her outline: mountains touch
the edge of four directions, shadows gathering
between their breasts, along their collarbones.
My right arm loves the feel of Earth
pulling the axe, the weight
a backswing lends the blade come drumming down
on fallen trunks. It sings the world

awake, and with it she will rise. The sun,
a single cell embedded in the sky,
grows, differentiating
to the fragile tissues of a day.

Opening the Nest

In his hands the crowbar bullies
slat from joist; he weighs against
the old dock's split and splinter,
dragging out the rows of nails
that fall to rust. When, years ago,
my father struck those nails, his hands
decided on the careful spaces,
measured air and wood. I stood
too close and caught the hammer's backswing
on my leg. I fled indoors,
afraid of my own blood. Perhaps
I shouldn't stand so close today
to glimpse the underside, or watch
a young man straining, steel on wood,
to pry the boards apart.

*

Inside a world of veiny rot and pockets
pinched by mandibles: a world we never saw.
I think back to the silver maple tree:
a carpenter ants' nest hollowed it out
when I was small. I heard the wind flute in
through cracks and knots, the music of no past
came twisting in my window, summer nights.
I rose, I listened, but I never looked
into that trunk to see what I see now:
a darker place, a bed of mold and eggs
as white as cuticles; the buried system
of the wood, the shells uncountable,

the one dense nerve composed of everything.

*

Deep in the borrowed board he spots her:
Queen, a knuckle long, a ventricle
for slave and lover. Kneeling down,
he lifts her with a stick. My voice
will make no difference, but I shout
until he flings her in the lake. There is no splash.
I take his hand and we stand, staring down
into a nausea of limbs and eggs.

They find another Queen or die, he says.

Something is very wrong. I see the stick
float in her dark black carapace,
a squirm and ripple. As he smiles, I know
his argument: that when a thing survives
it's meant to. But his crowbar fits my hands.
I bend and lift that stick onto the dock
and bring the metal down.

*

What is your body?

Trunk and limbs.

Why do you lie there?

It's neither lake nor land.

What holds the dock up?

Stakes and rusty nails.

Where do the ants live?

In the pores of wood.

What can you see in light?

The lenses of another's eyes.

What else can you see?

The inches underfoot.

Why did you shout?

The wood was damp and crowded.

Why did you strike her?

To see what was inside.

Did she fight?

Yes. She almost made it.

What are you then?

Human, pure.

Where will the ants go?

Somewhere else, another Queen.

Where will she come from?

Somewhere else, a different plank.

What happened in the silver maple?

*Ants ate all the age rings,
left it hollow and the wind sang in
to fill the trunk with sound.*

How did it sound?

Like music, lovely.

How did you feel?

Hollow. Full.

II.

Fontanelle

I am afraid to hold the neighbor's baby:
I know her skull is open
and a globe of flesh is not a lot to trust.
We touch the soft fuzz of her head
and leave our fingerprints on unformed thoughts.
In my mind's time-lapse, continents of bone
shift round her fissured world
until, grown full, their shorelines interlock.
And then, for lack of better words,
we'll say she's whole; though we are no more whole
than Earth's first continent,
Pangea, an improbable collage of risen clay.
I know that place: it's nascent faults,
the way the bald coasts heave.
This little thing I'm bent on grasping
jars my memory. Since thinking only deepens
the crevasses of our brains, I think
the organism Earth is live.
And bound, as we are, by the orbits
of our eyes and hands, by all that quakes
and cries to be let go
because it knows no fear of falling,
what we know of things is that they change:
the spheres that hold us,
we must learn to hold.

About Water

We speak in solid figures: the average acre yields
three tons of dew, and if we dried our bodies
to their dust, they'd fetch about a buck.

But the world and we are fluid.

If you ask me, numbers have no word to keep

which means, owe nothing. Any form is, like as not,
duplicitous. Look how the pond holds fast
all winter, cake and icing, as the terse paw-prints
of fox and martin star its pale dumb eye;
then wind redeems those tracks,
or spring brims full and animals come down

to lap its tears, and everything we know
floats on the surface. Where mist appears
at dusk. Where we enter
or turn back, because the water's dark
and always finds the flaw in what it touches.

Because It's There

Part of me keeps rising
to the bait,
that little bread-ball, innocent
with fish-hooks flashing

at its heart.

A hand that feeds and bites
comes casting
me among the blessed.

So far,
hook, line, and sinker –
vanishing
like hope at my haphazard touch –

leave waves of surface light,
a moment's perfect
death. And, cursed, I lie
in wait

to strike the real
inevitable lure
that lifts a body up
beyond this shadowed world.

The Time a Falling Body Takes to Light

It's the dream in which you wake
to find you're sleeping on the sidewalk:
someone cast the bones and this
is how you fell. Tonight
your star is out, a window lighted
on the seventh floor, a door-like frame
you'd fold your wings to enter if you could

but flight controls you: your star follows you,
a white bulb on the wing-tip
as Chicago fades away to fields outlined
by phosphorescence. What unfolds like water
is the world, it's darkness rimmed
by green and gold, the river's answer to the moon,

and soon you walk where you have walked before
along the bank, and sit and sense
that you are not alone. Above you on the bridge
somebody crosses in a roar of lights,
an empty bottle flies, a bulb of moonlight.
All the unseen eyes of night burst open

as it hits, and splinters – green as algae
splashing where a body sinks,
a see-through green that you already know –
spill at your feet like salt, you have to pinch and toss
luck to the left. It misses and it burns to earth
the way the stars fall down, not stars at all.

Eve Talks to Herself

I have deceived him like a poor memory.

By murmuring until my voice was light,
the old picture washed out.

Each look submerges looking.

My lord advised me how to hold my limbs:

I remember features and positions
but I chose the amplitude of joints, sensations,
arcs described by knee and elbow.

I'd rather be a sunflower than a dial.

I'd rather be a crescent moon
than all the cluttered sky.

My head itself describes its own particular
position. I can imagine the opposite
of everything. The world is what we say.

From easy assumptions we learn
to lie, to simulate pain, to howl when we need
not. He names our groans and grimaces.

Assume the invention of a child, a harvest, and a word
that signifies pain: that is language.

The body replies with its nonsense.

Flying Blind

It all seems to have meaning:
hemlocks misting into ideal forms
of trees, the hollows filled with clouds,
this land that lost its face
or found one truer to the Earth's first cooling.
I'm alone in this, and travel by default

by what comes clear, through cold
somniaulant white birches.
The sky's true north abandons me,
the way it did my friend
who stalled the Cessna, slipping
into a spin. It wasn't night.
Lake Winnipeg waved its edition of him,
mirror-written, three bluff miles below

but he read only what the hood allowed him:
glowing dials, his own palms
tensed around the stick. He says you lose the world
so easily in weather that the only way
to learn is letting go and falling,
pawning everything you love
for light beyond the senses. Soon

the dials disclosed a parallel to Earth,
the engine woke. I walk that edge
survivors maybe have tonight, translating loss
because, like him, I've learned
the text of seeing lies.

Urban Deer

Light falling through the parchment of their ears,
the deer shake free of dreams and enter
morning's stark geography. They sniff the wind
and listen: branches grumble to each other.
This is the hour when everything begins
to need a name.

You see no deer. Muffled children track
an irresistible expanse of snow.
Apartment blocks restate the obvious.

If you could look down on the city, you would see men climb
the steep stairs of the bus, a day of words
rolled up beneath their arms. Doors close tight
around their bodies. A day unravels from a skein of smoke,
from what is mined or made.

The sun grows hesitant as children rise
and leave an angel's imprint in the snow.
By clinking silver, by the light of false stars
switching on, each man will navigate: home is the place
where his key fits the lock.

The wind is wary. Lift one foot and sniff
the cold into your lungs. In the hour of half-light
everything remembers what it was.

Principles of Composition

I.

This is a glance I cast like salt
over my left shoulder: far away, that bluff
we happened on, a bed of budding moths
still flutters, leaf-like on the wind
because we speak of them.
Their cocoons, a loss, roll clicking to the edge.

II.

It's hard to listen anywhere, but once
on Siderock Lake we heard
the silence
fanning newborn wings. Then, twice a day,

the float-planes overhead bore someone north
and in their guttering of sound the hours cohered
into departure and return, the sky-frame
and those red pontoons exacting it.

III.

We speak of this at home, as you
bear flowers from that light to this,
from measured rows inside, where nothing seems
to fit – purple iris, tiger lily, scarlet tulips
cupping their black organs in.
But how it pleases us,
this clash, this harmony.

The Known Universe

Six A.M. My neighbor's dog leaps out the missing panel of the storm-door.
Turning at the fenced yard's center like a weathervane,
she scouts its tight perimeter
for difference: spores of newspaper blown in,
a branch come clattering down from the Russian olive.

Satisfied, she squats, her hot rain thawing
wintered Earth, its watermark her seal
and she the sovereign of a cold dominion. And her urine
fits the snow so well it vanishes and steams,
a fumarole, as if her own heat rose from Earth
and meant more than this simple passing

of the water, dish to ground, coming and going
through the common vessel of a body: this is ritual,
exacting as a trainer, timed to the return
of daylight and an old man hanging handbills
on each door. His one eye's red as Mars; his head lolls back
into a howl that hits the air in clouds

he hides behind. This dog hears sirens, children,
church-bells, she is wild with voices
tangent to the wind, drawn out in cadences
of genes and arctic suns she'll never see, their glimmer brief
as breath... He casts a farewell stone
and stumps away, like everything.

Reflection

Maybe the cause of God in us
is gone. Tonight I read about
a shrine without a patron, where a sort
of martyrdom,
a mirror's immanence, is all
by rites, the faithful have

for sanction. Think of it: the word compels
approval and conformity.
You might see through it, but you might adore
the equinox a mirror always holds,
your face immured, as if
by looking, miracles occur and you are more

than virtual, more than a cloud cast on the pond
where eddies of the known describe
what stirs below: the glowing fish
trapped far inland and never rising.

Massage

You bought this moment, paid a pair of hands
to stir your sleeping bones inside their sack,
to knead you back into a shape you wore
on some dim day before you stood upright.
Before you clutched your tools or suffered dreams
your spine bent like a sapling bowing down
beneath a climber's weight. And now, from coccix
up to occiput, the fingers climb.
Lay down your tools. You find your fists can't grip
or reach the ground; you slip between the ribs
of horses, what were horses once, and drift
the length of dry lime trenches, remnants
of the inland sea. And, drifting, you remember
that steep roadbed where two great blue herons
lurched out of the fog and you braked, shaken
by the pale parade of crested skeletons
threading through air. That road twists in and out
of memory, and memory's another
narrow route unwinding in the fog.
You trust the curves and ruts; you trust the knots
of muscles to these hands that probe
your old connections. Turn and meet the eyes
of half-men, grunting syllables as plain as touch:
they crowd your shadow, knuckle-walking home.

III.

The Storm

Somewhere the sky touches the Earth, and the name of that place is The End.

- A Kamba saying

Dear,

Do you suppose that what we understand
affects what is? I wonder if the Earth
hung at the heart of all the universe
before Copernicus founded our vision on the Sun.
And if it did, I can't trust gravity
to hold me in my place. How can I fall
asleep when I am picturing what can't be seen,
space lacking boundaries or core?
Do we know too much? We know too much
to calculate relationship; we simply are,
we're in it, everything we see rushes away from us.

The way my head is turned
I hear an ocean in a shell. There may be logic
in the way that thoughts revolve,
the way the ocean's name, Pacific, mimics your breath
as you sleep. If we turn back to where we started
at the weather's eye, we dwell on our extremes.
But any storm is live.

*At the lighthouse they warned us that it would break;
we passed the farthest huts.
Four dark-eyed boys came out to wish us luck
then vanished
where the old road ends in bush.
Along that coast the Native families nail their shutters tight*

*when thunderheads build up across the bay.
They stay awake and plug their children's ears
against the wind
that bears the owl's voice down through spruce and cedar:
Owl knows every name. He calls them, one by one.*

*That night you knelt and forced breath
between dry bark and twigs
until smoke, hiding inside each chip,
unwound and flew away. I paced the cave-mouth,
watched returning waves
climb terraces of foam we knew as land.
Arcs of gulls blew backwards, facing wind.
Listen: this is what I meant to tell you at Pachena,
that I saw an owl,
a saw-whet blinking in the firelight.
A saw-whet owl or shadow: how could I tell
what I couldn't know? And so words shape my memory
from random gusts of smoke.*

*From random gusts: I would distill
a world for you, but fail
when fear locates the thunder caught inside my chest,
the lightning under lids. Horizons snap.
I classify the pitch and yaw of Earth,
intoning rock, wave, roar, as though my voice
could cord and stack the storm.
That night you held me, telling me
how gulls hide inland among stones.
Is that what safety looks like? Is it accident
that brings and leaves us here,*

*land's end, the point
of vanishing?*

The city glows and so we call night starless,
but it's clear, no wind. Pigeons grumble
outside on the ledge. I'm pretending
waves of speech where there's no sound
but my own blood and breathing, the same patient thud
I've heard beneath your collarbone;
pretending they can be transcribed,
the body's chants, that words can map
the crevices of space or draw
you near. They can't. Tonight the wind is still
and still I call your name
to keep us safe from what I almost hear.

To a Young Composer

Music, you say, is only sound,
and any line of tones, allusive,
bound by pure idea, confirms your faith
that we can pass beyond
emotion. Are there other worlds?
I thought creation

was a form of feeling
loss more fully, as the moon
first borrows then disowns
its bone-white light between the trees.
Flooding the bald woods, light,
like anything translates

to absence: shadows fall
across the snow, a black wing flexes
in my body's wake and I cannot shake free.
If, as you say, life's doubleness
is just mirage, the moon may be

a man like you, drunk with coincidence.
But if I reach for you,
the moon's illusive argument rests
where we touch, as the body holds
these dark tones haunting it
in any light.

The Concept of God

It isn't mine but it
is. It isn't mind alone
but matters of the heart
come flying in the balmy face
of worlds without or in us.

It's the sound I hear now,
tolling in the west, a storm
spending itself so fast it won't
pass over, but because of it
I draw the windows down.

Fossils and Relics

My father keeps the interlocking histories
of rock and bone boxed up. The labored cursive
of the labels is my own, as though I shared his need
for names more certain than embodiment.

Some things I learned:

400 million years ago,
this *crinoid stem* was anchored to the ocean floor.

Water filled and emptied it.

Water was everything,
until there was no water, and its keel
bears scars from breaking with its roots.

When I reach for it, I'm reaching for
a sense I lack, of passing through
one deciduous world into another.

Every spring we made a pilgrimage
on knee and knuckle through *inverted time*:
his term for tailing heaps at Retsof Salt mine.
What was deepest in the earth
came out on top, where we pored over stone.
Where the tincture of his sweat belied
the lime's drab grey. Where I squatted, aping gravity
and interest as he prized a *paradoxides* from sleep,
its thorax tapering, its crescent eyes
almost reflecting sun. That's when the coarse rock
fled my feet and I fell,
hands plunged in the slope like sea-anchors,
away from him.

And after, he knelt with me in the sharp-edge past,
his bloodied handkerchief pressed to my palms.
A blind sun hovered over his left shoulder.
I still hear his liquid voice
invoking sediments that love each tiny life
enough to risk protecting it, to harden and endure
millennia of uplift and erosion. I listened past him,
past my faulty hold on Earth,
my messy blood.

Father, it's been years. Time isn't kind.
Your bones betray you,
and you fall among the motley talus
of our dreams and dreads. And I keep
opening this box of recalcitrant displacements,
deep embedded patterns bared
and catalogued, to touch the wild unlikelihood
that any life be saved.

Long Distance

For my mother

At dusk I called from Jasper.
It turned cool, a dry month yielding
to electric storms. Even from the phone-booth
I saw flames up on the ridge,
my husband watching through binoculars
a flock of darting choppers at the fire's hem:
now down to fill their buckets from the river;
now up, their aim impeccable, in smoke.

Three days earlier your mother died.
How could I know? We walked a trail starred
by spoor of bear and wolf,
their shit decaying into root-like knots of fur,
keeping our voices loud for safety. That grey earth,
glacial silt borne down Moose River
held each print intact
as drought drew back the edges; in a giant world
our small fresh tracks struck shallow in the clay.

I dreamed *you* dead that night
and woke to find the river raised by warmth
as high ice between the peaks melted away.
I am old enough that I don't need to see
My husband wading out into opaque grey water
hard against his thighs to know I cannot give him slack
because the ties that bind unravel us,
because our hold is weak. Turning back,
high water haunted me

as you, three thousand miles away, arrived too late,
declined communion at the church,
buried your mother
in a plot no one was sure the family owned...
the line went dead before you finished telling me.
Everywhere I turned
a heavy cloud dissembled Earth and sky,
half smoke, half drizzle, wilting every word
I tried to write to you
as if I wept.

A Letter Home

All morning I sit trying to compose
your face, to map our shared initials
in that lined topography
I've come to love. Something is missing.

In this network of extremes –
black ink, white page – your likeness hangs
meticulous and rational. And too much light
completes the edges, just as distance

simplifies the mountain in my window
to a closed frontier: I scan its mute bulk
rubbing up against the sky
for timberline and streams, for random tracks

of hart and snowshoe hare. It keeps its secrets.
Keeping close to you, I have come close
to glimpsing what you hold
in reservoirs of shadow, and how fine gradations

in our fields of vision blur
with certain feints of light. But left alone
to picture changes in the landscape
that I miss, I grasp these static lines like straws

to draw you near.

Longing, Having

Sometimes, alone at night, I fight back sleep,
my ears tuned to my husband's key
in the backdoor lock.

What if the world is taken from me?

At a time like this, ancestral ghosts stand watching
at the window, hands pressed tight
to hold their hearts in.

Their eyes are used to distance.

In the dream I make up, shadows edge
our bodies, clasping us, the way he'd hold me
in his sleep if only he were here. All night
the sparrows, bound to us by smoke,
crowd on the chimney top. At a time like this,
the cold moon keeps us close.

Maybe the world has given us too much.

Without light, I might see
past my own reflection on the window.

Without glass, my ancestors could reach this far.

Because praying tells the darkness
where you are, I've spelled the names I love
in breadcrumbs on the snow, and watched them
bursting into wings.

In the Secret Annex

"I see in you all the time what my lot might have been, I keep seeing myself in your place."

- Anne Frank, 12/29/1943

Past Westertoren and the pious
kneeling in its shadows, raising their pale eyes
to rosy glass and gilt. Past clouds of pigeons
whirling from its steeple, accidents
of light. These dark steps bear me to the wall
of books, their bindings bright with dust,
a door it wasn't safe for you to open.

I've come back for you. Beneath the skylight,
ordinary ghosts survive, these figures cut
and tacked to wallpaper: your sketch of Gallileo,
valentines, an ad for Fred and Ginger's latest movie
in a newsprint frame, their shabbiness and grace
delineating rooms you saw into by dreaming
on days when drapes of rain
concealed the spires, the pigeons, everything
but water bent on finding its own level.
In rain's thin music, you could hear beyond
the German lorries clattering down Prinzengracht,
the nervous chat of housewives wheeling prams
with new potatoes tucked beneath the quilts: you'd hear
spring coming back, as it is now, and Westertoren chimes
the quarter hour, the way it told
your days until the bells themselves were called to war
like any metal, proof the world that was dissolved in fire
and only words remained to reconstruct

the quarrels and kisses, keep the record
of each human act like law. Or art. But how the order

of that old triptych in the Rijksmuseum troubles me:
that girl, about your age, a gourd slung from her shoulder,
begging amidst the lepers and the blind; next panel
is a lavish funeral in which the body smiles
to face the portal that a coin or crust purchased safe passage through.
At last, between the grave and dungeon
(where the triptych leaves us), was a hospital, so fine a detail
that I scanned the panels right to left like Hebrew
trying to redeem them: from cruelty,
to meager arts of healing,
to the dead who bless us,
to a charity that springs from choice. You must have known

those paintings, surely knew the pains we take
to read our chosen meaning until every night
light fails again the way God fails us,
hearing praise but we may ask him
nothing. No one asks the leaves to open after rain,
or sun to rise, a star so near and lucid
I can breathe its light come streaming in across this world
where church bells ring and neighbors,
paired like footprints, cross the Prinzengracht to pray.
It's lovely as belief
that memory's enough, its grey wings beating

at this pane, these walls: here, Sister,
I dwell still.

Geese

The first thing is the sound: not quite an animal sound.
It's May. The rotting dock sways with my weight.
If you go under the water,
it's too dark. If you swim at night
you can't see what's below you.
What I've been taught is to bring fear to life
instead of naming it.

The geese fly in, so low
they're having trouble in the air.
Perhaps they weigh too much.
Perhaps they're tired of flight.
It's too far south for them to nest.
My neighbor's kid once chased them in his boat.
I remember him lifting the oar
to strike: they skidded, their wings flapped.
They ran on the water.

Something to do with fear and not with geese.
Something to do with being here
alone. Something to do
with what I choose.

The light is almost gone. This time
of night it gets so still
you hear what happens on the other shore
as if it were beside you.
A dog barks. A door slams.
I can make something of this fear.

Condolence

For Suzanne

Walking across the ice towards me,
my husband leaves his signature
of measured tracks, small shadows
in the shadow of the bridge. This is how I know
life is a journey.

In spring ice scrapes the riverbanks,
a high whine wavers, ghostly
in the dark. My husband walks
between the full moon and its light on Earth.
It's third-hand light and dim. His path
spells out a theory of loss.

*The dream recurs: I'm hurling
a marionette downstairs. A snarl
of limbs and strings*

the boy i loved
fell
crack of ice bone air beyond the edge
asleep no world no will no words
spilling body into body
into nothingness

*but nothing dies in dreams: he grasps
his own sticks, right-side up now, dancing.
Fiddles wake a tune*

It's spring and every season
has its treachery. My husband walks on ice
as if he knows the space he'll fall through
someday. Moonlight falls to Earth.
I read the signs

that make me sure this crossing matters:
careful steps in darkness, meetings
lit by memory of light.

Living with Cancer

My father-in-law gasps
as though air's not his element.
We are walking to the hatchery
to learn the pure mathematics
of succession: galaxies of eggs
and precious few of them
will foster life. Behind a wall of glass
the salmon, weary of their free lives
travelling the ocean, climb a false creek
It's so crowded each leap up
sends two fish down. And somewhere

out of mind, white-coated men spin
dials that regulate what fish will know
by means of sixth-sense pressure gauges
striped along their sides: the stress and flow
of each prefigured step
is architecture, but out here we witness
only desperation. And a part of me
could almost speak to him
about the deep calm pooled
in me when I turn to his son at night,
the children that we hold
who won't be born in time. He keeps

explaining: barely out of sight,
the workers slit each fish below the tail
and squeeze, the red roe squirting
into holding ponds. Then they fertilize

the eggs and truck them inland;
the salmon, anyway, would die once spawned.
But there are fish
trapped, waving, in my own reflection,
in the selves we face
as, against all odds,
we fight our way upstream.

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