



# TRACELESS

Miranda Smith



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## CRAVING

The whole day I wanted  
to scratch insect bites,  
to keep green  
daylight in a fragment of glass  
and hook it from  
the ear. To touch  
the warped spine of  
the double-helix,  
desire soaring  
from my eyes like arrows,  
even to a passing cloud  
that seemed to have escaped  
from an Italian chapel.  
I languished, watching  
a banana peel  
bending on the table  
like a woman's back,  
the green leaking into  
the yellow curve, knowing  
I'd soon lose it  
to darkness.

## **BE STILL**

Like a doorway anyone  
could walk through,  
everyone facing forward, no one  
watching anyone else, watch  
the breath, like a mother running her finger along  
her child's spine. Eyes loose  
over the room, like casting a net:  
guess snow.

It's a little like becoming  
spring-time: a long tract of time.  
Thoughts drift away like cloud cover.  
Rest, and rainbows might  
lodge in your eyelashes.

Be obviously where you are:  
like leaving a dinner party  
to stand alone on a balcony,  
everyone knowing exactly where you are,  
where you are not. You are not.  
You are almost.

You've forgotten, again: the breath,  
remember, the breath.

## **GOLDEN ABSENCE**

I've been carved out again,  
to enter  
the air delicate  
as a spiraled shell,  
to make palaces  
of teacups, garden hoes  
of spoons—  
I've found a shimmering chamber  
in the ribcage,  
through which it all  
can pass.  
I hope no prince  
will notice I've  
become a golden absence;  
I want to be lost,  
a pool of water  
that knows no pocket  
of land.

## **FOLDS TO REVISIT**

Silence, morning to  
midday, like frost on every  
surface. In silence, I ditch  
  
room after room, a bird in

migration, entrances bright  
with survival. In the kitchen,

a paring knife. Silence  
is also speech: my body  
speaks, puppet in a vast  
arena, tied to the vanishing  
point. Three-tier bird cage, we

roost in the attic and swoop  
down, unremarkable,  
unseeking, obeying laws  
of our species that fix

the night sky, points to compile  
and re-visit. No dancing, no  
music, or meat (except  
for Saturday): In the kitchen,  
I toss the same choiceless  
salad, lettuce a tide, the plate  
a passionless beach. I begin again

in my bedroom, map  
in hand, bedclothes  
folded. Folds of horizontal  
intent, folds for visiting and  
revisiting. In the kitchen,

I cup my hands  
Beneath the hard spray.

In the kitchen, I am alone  
again with a task, both  
necessary and fleeting, I am  
some magic juncture

between a carrot,  
a potato peeler,  
and a hand.

### **MY POSSESSIONS, NEARLY ALL GIFTS**

This is my bedroom. On the low bedside table: Two books. Always two books. On a ring-box: Jade Buddha, thumb-height, Mom's vassal. My desk-lamp — a flick of the switch, and Jade Buddha glows milky green, as if his body is made of clouds and star-powder.

*I believe objects have spirits*, dad announced once, fingering his half-boat pocket-knife. We were moving, packing boxes.

Underneath my bed: the laptop computer — Pandora's box — remains shut. Don't be tempted by music. Zipped suitcase holds two letters: Open in case of emergency. I grow fond of packages, containers.

I especially admire a box of candy: It arrives in the mail, beautiful, French, domed like a cottage. An older monastic wants it. We have never spoken. A scribbled note under the door: Are you using the box? Now is my chance: to give it away. It rests in my arms like a birdcage as I bring it downstairs.

### **GRANDFATHER TELLS ME SECRETS**

You left and still miss the ripe green

of the avocado tree, the way childhood  
gave itself to you, a spoon and green belly  
in the palm.

You never dreamt of palaces, though others did.  
No, you dreamt of weddings  
in early evening, lights strung in the trees  
like cherries, the grip of a guitar's neck.  
Your dreams star a singing guajiro.

Now, in my dreams, a guajiro wanders  
a party, singing.  
In daytime, memory resumes:  
the guajiro is dressed as policeman  
with hat and gun, nights trap him  
one by one until he is not man  
but wolf, shuddering  
through a forest tableau,  
clipping fixture  
beneath the moon.

*Miami, Florida, 2010*

## **IN THE KITCHEN**

Touch the amber scars  
of the thick plastic  
cutting board, its tally  
of vanished days.

*Hold the knife like this.*

The day is white  
and flat like paper.

This is the last lettuce  
of the season; head like a curled  
squirrel, small and browning.

Now inspect it for ants  
running from rivulets — chase them across  
linoleum with a sheet of paper,  
lift and ferry them  
back to the garden.

Leaf of garden lettuce:  
Prism of water and sunlight,  
like the world.  
Spun from time, the earth's rotation  
through spring and winter.  
Alpha: the only head of lettuce  
in existence.

The Cuisinart quakes  
beneath your palms,  
decimates form.

A fly steals the afternoon  
on its back, jetpacks  
across the room.

Tofu trembles underwater  
in the plastic vat,

sunset aquarium of your effort.

Your breath accompanies you, visits.

Wait for it, like a child watching

grass for a soft rustle. This

is another shrine room.

## **THINGS THAT CAN BE SHARED**

Between two friends:

a book, a meal, eggs cracked

brutally on the bowl

and fried, for the sake

of the other. Also,

inescapably, the self.

The stories they know

peer through the window, wild

myths that want to be

taken in. Afterwards,

one hands the other

a book. They don't know if

the joy resides

in the offering,

or the hand's acceptance;

in wondering what the book may contain

or knowing that soon  
both will have trekked  
across the same harsh field  
of snow and branches.

## **DAY OF THE DEAD**

The leaves on our tree  
are apple yellow, and roots are sprouting  
like eyes from a blanket of seeds.  
In the bowl, the pomegranates  
no longer blush, they scab: and yes,  
death festoons the day, only memory  
doesn't expire, to sprout  
understanding that the dead  
are dead. Perhaps today. The TV  
news suspends  
me, like a car knocked  
into neutral, or a god  
in indecision: A girl,  
my age, faces a house  
a block from hers, pressing white sky  
like a Sanatorium, but this  
is no Hollywood set. Her mother  
may be dead  
inside, and she waits  
in the cold all day  
for news. A camera catches  
her crying in a red wool hat, not

unlike my own. We hear news  
of her waiting. I walk to  
the kitchen for candied  
pecans, tasting  
only grit. How to remember  
the dead are dead? Even  
on your death bed, they say,  
the dead crowd your room, oldest  
memories rising to the surface  
of the mind like hot water, ghosts blooming  
from the root  
of your unassuming departure.

## **DRIFT**

Sure, you can think of death  
as a disappearance, or drifting  
into another room, but what about  
  
the emergency lights flashing like a circus  
come to town? The whole landscape alters.  
A contagion of terror passes through  
  
phone lines, between generations. Bad news  
sounds like a poem when it comes  
from your mother. Back when news  
  
was slow as your feet, and theatrical, visitors  
appeared one morning

in the salon, breathing differently. The set

for terror was more domestic without  
the ambulance or car, your ghosts wandered  
drawing rooms, curtains dappled the stale air

with watercolored light. A cat might drop softly  
to the ground from a couch pillow, until  
the place was redecorated in the seventies,

and ghosts moved to the backyard  
in self-exile. A car turns a drifting  
mind into a haiku whispered

by phone: by mistake,  
Grandpa pushed the gas pedal  
instead of the brake —

## **MEMORY SONG**

Because you found the carved coconut ring  
in the Indian marketplace, bought it  
for your love, and forgot it  
among the tumble of red glass bracelets  
and postcards of tribal children standing  
in the grass — where? when? whose?  
colorized like peacocks.

Because of the hero, pushing up

the pale green mountain, purple crocuses winking  
him forward, laying down in the grass  
for a nap, that would last  
a century, gray beard curling  
in the crook of his shirt like a child's palm:

Waking to find his life  
spent, and misspent  
in dreams.

Because what if the toad saw  
the face above—  
lips like red fish, worrying  
into the deep blue prism—  
and was impervious?

If he forgot he was a prince, if his feet  
were content to swim  
as the gold orb  
drowned? The way that,

At 22, I began to believe I might  
always stand behind plexiglass  
and paper backs, buttressed  
by pillowed shoes, and forgot  
how to live in time:

Whether to let the days  
pass fast, whether or not to pine  
for another age.

It's only now  
I'd rather not forget  
Anyone's age, or the years  
my father, wing of black hair shading  
his eyes, stood waiting in the camera store,  
ready to twist the lock  
on the crystal case.

It didn't matter what his then-wife forgot.  
My father's hair is silver now, over  
coffee that smells of chestnuts and Christmas,  
the morning between us,

springing ocotillos, our blue sky.

*A perfect moment*, dad says,  
but I'm wondering  
how to become more adult,  
like him.

*No such thing*, he laughs.  
But I'm afraid of forgetting  
my own age, you see,  
of sinking  
into the field,

of forgetting  
the moment to give:

the moment  
to grasp the golden ball,

and heave it spinning  
into the air.

**POEM FOR ALLISON LOVE, WHO ANNOUNCED SHE  
WAS SKIPPING ART CLASS TO GO BUY HAIR-BANDS**

How to explain that I wasn't surprised  
at news of your death?

As a child, I felt the death-bed  
was romantic: loves lost,  
should-haves, words unspoken;  
journey that takes us, regardless.

One night, I dreamt I saw you walking  
Down our ghost-hall, the lights bouncing  
beneath us like fishtank eyes, and we turned  
to each other, sister. I burned to tell you  
that I loved you.

In truth I didn't know you well.  
Just that your perfect nose  
was bought— you taught us the word *nosejob*,  
which we whispered like children  
trading baseball-card curse words,  
you who left through the back door

while we measured the pitcher in the red still life.  
Once you stopped me before class to ask:

*How do you stay so thin?* Nasal voice  
like no one else's, instrument  
out of tune. No class had prepared me  
to answer you on the spot.  
*I don't know*, I said.

The only words I remember saying  
to you, and I still wish  
I'd had another answer.

I want to apologize for being slender, for enjoying  
the small number marking the seam  
of my white pants. *The littlest one was Madeline.*

I wasn't brave enough to ask, *Why does it matter?*  
I wish someone had asked you, *How do you stay so thin?*

But only you asked that, Alison. There are many ways  
and internet manuals on how to refuse  
what is offered. I wonder how you saw us:  
lithe as Botticelli nymphs?  
We were tied to our reflections  
in the mirror's black bowl, our ideal selves  
prancing by like shy deer, our thumbs  
tugging moist clay into handles and edges.

I want to scrape off  
the seeming-perfection with my palette knife.  
What else would have satisfied you?

When I heard you surrendered to a coma  
after months, I knew you well enough  
that it felt the natural conclusion  
of your whodunnit, given the clues  
you scattered, a row of incongruities.

You leave me  
wondering how I am also you,  
my own failures standing out on the beach  
like shells ripe for recollection, broken  
craggs of red and peach.

Tracing the memory of those years, you are my  
polestar, Allison, your parallel steps  
in the margins, your terror,  
your question, and a confession I couldn't make.

## **PASEO DE LAS LUCES**

Cigarette wedged in a grate, brown bag ghosts by,  
and above, sky flies, unscathed by time.  
I understand the postage stamp's allure:  
"Paseo de las luces." I want to go there. But who  
has roped this thin, white-barked tree to a pole?  
Backward glance from a businessman, this glance  
is all we have, the wind is constant  
now, cold, announcement from headquarters:  
the city's night. Pad-locked double doors,  
the shadows of writing on writing. An escape-ladder

tattoos a wall, the sidewalk is closed  
a few feet (Why the parenthesis?)  
Crocodiles, wry and hungry,  
A blue-green fence like a water-logged penny,  
fantastical cage for grass.  
A tree, veined and measured  
by dead Christmas lights, the sound  
of a man limping, a stress signal,  
silhouettes of aging men on benches, waiting,  
homeless or heading home, I can't tell:  
all are experts in biding time.  
Moons of knees through blue jeans,  
flat exposed feet, a dreaming statue offers  
me his elbow, a giant wing, a dentist's drill rises.  
A sign for "ballroom" leading nowhere.

## **THEME SONG**

These superhero shoes are made of daisies  
and the latest unbreakable glass.  
I don't believe headlines:  
the first casualty of war is truth,  
so I'll sing my own.

You may have known me as  
the girl at the party wearing  
the Victorian lampshade, turning her head  
between traps: that, or that.

A fisherman, with a net and cap, once drew  
my constellated body from the river. I emerged  
a little shiftier. I don't exist in the way you think I do:  
every few nanoseconds

I'm new. Now I am the ripple  
in the glass as you turn toward the boutique mirror  
a third time. Now I like Japanese lanterns:  
orange, white, pink. Sometimes metal filings flock  
to my skin, and I am ground zero, off-limits,  
it's best for everyone involved.

Now it's time to teach the Pre-Raphaelites  
a thing or two about beauty.

Occasionally I'll find myself sitting  
by the pool, eyeing a lavender mountain ridge,  
not knowing how to help.

One time I appeared, smoking  
in a bathroom mirror, seconds too late.

## **BATS LIKE BLACK DIAMONDS**

I'd like to visit Carlsbad,  
the cashier says, so  
I tell her of bats, rushing  
from the cave like black diamonds—  
little does she know how long

I've kept this image without sharing,  
but now I've done it: and swapping  
postcard scenes, she tells me  
about the full-moon  
walk at White Sands: I can see  
the red blankets spread on  
the moon-blue sand, children  
Running— but no camping anymore,  
she says, and we hover  
above the register,  
my open handbag  
useless. Then she tells me  
she sweats  
too much when she  
visits her father back in Florida—  
the desert changes you,  
resets normal, she whispers, then  
rips and hands me  
the luminous receipt.

## **CIVILIZATION IN ANCIENT CHINA**

I.

I am testing your chemistry.

From jar, the word "full."

“Woman,” from releasing the arrow.

“Wife” from woman and broom.

“Man” to employ strength

in the fields.

I'm studying.

Ancient letter h breathes  
inside "Buddha," "siddhanta,"  
and a single character will join  
heart with dissatisfied,  
water and cave.

II.

Then the celebrated gorges  
of your river, cave paintings, pictograms  
in their earliest stages, colours  
I must imagine over mute  
gray shadows. A list of your thousand  
Buddha caves, names of twenty-three  
out of thirty rulers unearthed  
on indisputably genuine Anyang bones.  
The codification of law, and you

shut me out at last. I leap  
to the foot notes. Failing now,  
wanting a story,  
I open my book at random.

III.

In the north are tales  
of bear-veneration and fox-myths,

sacred mountains, dog-magic and bronze  
drums, but little is known of  
the origin of the Chao people  
and I want to cry. Less advanced  
culturally, I know the book speaks  
of me now, dynasties that could  
not be unified, eunuchs who could reach  
the emperor from his inner apartments.  
First money from the skin of a certain  
white deer. The prince, pushed  
by his enemies,  
committed suicide  
or disappeared.

IV.

Footnote: someone ignored  
a book.

There must be some mention.

V.

When I learned the word  
misogyny I didn't understand  
how it was possible. Was the word  
real? Could there be a word  
for what I hadn't experienced?

"Have you met a misogynist?"

I asked my mother.

"Oh yes," she promised.

I wondered at the man,  
envisioned him as lonely

comic book villain.

Would I be exempt from  
his hatred?

“Did he love  
anyone?” I asked.

Without love, what was  
the point?

Could the right woman  
have sliced the belly?

I’m embarrassed now by the thought  
that a woman (subject)  
is the key to unlock  
a man (object),

but is it true? There are locks.

The evidence  
points to a settlement  
of the remaining Romans on  
the Old Silk Road, where  
they married Chinese women and spent  
the rest of their days.

VI.

Opening the brain  
and extracting worms  
can cure mu-sheng (a sort  
of blindness).

VII.

My questions arc

across the sea,  
“Heart-land” continent.  
A vast, scattered literature  
does exist,  
never before digested into the compass of a single  
book, built on a frame work  
of questions.  
The difficulty is  
that the symbol  
may, and every so often does,  
have a remarkably wide  
range of meanings.

#### VIII.

Image I want: I remember at last.  
Image (did I imagine?) smiling up as I  
peered down. Enough maps, I want  
to see Cave no. 164, imagine  
radiance of predominant  
colors: black, white,  
blue, green, gold. We meet  
through time on this page  
with its chalk-yellow border,  
a peaceful empire between us.