



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.