

Ambush

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Abstract

This is a manuscript of original poetry.

Sea Glass

"We are here so our voices can be heard, so our lives
and our levees can be rebuilt, so we can go home."

-Hurricane Katrina Aid Activist

The rain kept us awake, thrumming it's nails
On our roof. This leaky room has seen too
many sleepless afternoons, filling pails
with discarded musings. We collect blue
sea glass on the rippling shores of our minds
and place them in our chipped enamel bowls
for quivering posterity; all kinds
of wave-etched, lonely people; drifting souls.
We lie in repose on the shore, waiting
for someone to gather us, too. Who will
come for the sea-stricken people? Arching
moaning backs, begging the moon to stand still.
No one listens to the people who keen
By the shore. The moon remains to be seen.

Sticks

Yucca plants slant against the sedge-crust
hillside, whispering some rustling lore
to the circling hawk. The squirrel keeps
its perch on the stark glint of a chain link
fence, a line drawn by the man who drew lines
where he could, making sore neighbors of the
deer that pricked across the mower-cropped glade.
When I first saw him, that spring, his eyes were
inset with reflections of animals
fleeing a raging fire. I ran to
him with the swift cool of a creek, soaking
the forest that became so many piles
of sticks, charred skeletons drinking my flood:
his dying licks of flame became my eyes.

Frog

Summer savored of neon popsicles
that sweated Morse code onto the sidewalk,
encoding the scrawl of sweet, sun-ripened
days. My father grated a manual
mower over the same screaming-yellow
patch of dandelions for weeks, their sweet,
heavy heads laid out on the lawn like so
many Marie Antoinettes. “The damn things
just don’t know when to quit.” I stretched out on
the grass, glossing my highlights with lemon
juice, smirking as my father muttered how
I would surely contract some glamorous
strain of skin cancer. One day, he brought me
the startled, street-roasted husk of a frog.
“See, if you don’t watch out, this could be you.”

Silhouettes

The pen marks told me I was seven deep
as I skidded down stairs in my high heels.
I crashed into the chocolate-deep warmth of
you, tumbled upside down, head over knees,
light-stealing eyes pulling me into you.
Stretching to touch the floor/ceiling, blindly
grasping at red-cup-glow-stick-streamer-mess,
the pounding tribal lights chased us into
a corner. We climbed the walls while they watched,
capturing our vague, slanted silhouettes.
The back of my head is featured in the
pictures they took, your hands tressing my hair;
each a caress in a swift life of touch
that you shattered like stars in one blue kiss.

Human Resources

Paul was almost my father.
His voice rang in deep, blue bells.
He was tall, like the pylons that
dot the rim of the San Francisco Bay;
hard, too, in the way that comes from
having a brother whose mind had been
put in backwards.

My mother was in Human
Resources on the 85th floor of a
big socks corporation in the '70's.
She had seen things like this before:
the man in Accounting who thought
he was a cat, and lapped his coffee
from a flowered china saucer;
The hermaphrodite in Quality Control
who couldn't decide which restroom to use.

“It was all the same shit, different day.”
My mother is telling me this story, either
because I am old enough to listen,
or she is old enough to tell me.
“You know I loved your father then.
I still do. Paul was not a man,
but a star that fell from deep space
and burned up my atmosphere.
I couldn't breathe. Still can't.”

Sometimes, in my dreams, I watch
Paul take my mother's hand,
bending his huge, bearded head close
to hers, eyes crinkled in a private joke.
And then I'm there, in the disheveled room,
the brother couched deep into a corner,
eyes dancing with the calculated concision
of a card-counter, the gun kissing his left temple.
Paul reaches for the gun, gasping:
“Brother, there are better ways to die.”

For my father

For thirty-three years, now,
he's worked from eight to seven,
driving up and back the
vineyard-draped highway that
runs from Nowhere to The City.
"You have to make yourself slow down.
Just take it all in once in awhile."
The evening is our time, in the kitchen,
perched on ancient oak pub chairs,
the polite stink of roasting vegetables
tickling our palates.
I watch as my father's eyes
fade to cornflower blue
on the lip of a martini; up,
with two onions. No olives.
With another slow, savoring sip
he grips the tongs, charring
blazing ripe, red bell peppers
on an open gas burner.
His favorite filleting knife
severs succulent meat from
seeds and core. He slurps,
content, licking each fingertip
with a gusto I never see at
the dinner table.
Somewhere between birth and college,
my father clasped my in a hug,
whispering into my shoulder:
"Kid, take it straight, on the rocks,
or don't take it at all."
For years, I thought he was talking
about booze.

Shit Palace
Viet Nam – 1954-1975

Grandpa spent two goddamn hours
 chasing down the water buffalo
 that Hank shot in the ass for fun.
 They laughed about it that night,
 him and Hank, cooling their jets
 in the Officer's Mess, lit up by the
 cold comfort of a glass of moonshine.
 The moon-faced bar girls talked
 low in their gook language,
 yellow hands mopping the bar top,
 long yellow arms dripping with
 something that smelled like
 work and indignation.

The next day,
 the platoon moved out, camping in
 an abandoned hotel for the night.
 Hank switched bunks with grandpa
 so he could pass out by the water
 heater: the shiver of his jungle fever
 eased by the low, blue pilot light.
 "It wasn't much, but we were warm.
 Turns out our bar gooks were still
 Pissed about the buffalo thing.
 They came to work that night with
 TNT strapped to their bicycle spokes.
 Blew the whole shit palace to hell."
 Hank was found crushed under the
 water heater, looking like the fucking
 Wicked Witch of the West, his boots
 sticking out from under the iron barrel.
 The only raggedy bits of brass left
 were grandpa and Fred, the mortician.
 The whole deal made *Stars and Stripes*.
 We read the issue, at home, while the radio
 crackled with news of so many thousand
 killed, so much collateral damage.

Linguist

Tonight's reading is standing room only.
The man in the wheelchair just behind me hacks:
"I cannot see the poetry."
I sit, crossing legs, resigning
myself to the floor where the young poets sigh.
The carpet curls its back into my feet.
The muted roses of a past aesthetic
weave their vines into the floor.
I recline in this dusty garden,
displacing the blooms that cough their
coffee grounds and mildew into the air.
The legless linguist mumbles mucus into his shirt collar;
a tired smock of lazing stripes and solids.
"Half of it is how the poet's lips form the words,
the pneumatic art of lung compression;
his velar fricatives are exceptional."
The linguist transcribes
the poet's sneeze, the sideways smirk,
the crunch of the sound system.
Closing my eyes, I feel him analyze the back of
my head, memorizing each follicle,
the quiet rasp of my breath and the sip
of my tea as it warms chapped lips.
I glance at my peers, a motley collection
of coeds in hemp shoes, shifting their
tingling legs, craning their necks to
"see the poetry."
Tonight's reading is standing room only.
The man without legs is teaching me
how to stand. I see nothing.

Politics

Grandpa ate snake in Nam,
At the bottom of a dry swimming pool;
The cement curved like the brown back of
A rice paddy worker.
“You just picked ‘em off, close-range,
And split ‘em down the middle.
The guts were good, too. Protein or some shit.”
Taking a piece of seared water moccasin,
He held it up to the firelight,
Admiring the translucent glare of
Flayed skin and pale, flakey meat.
He took it into his mouth, scale by scale,
Eyes closed; the first savor of a strange land.
“You’re goddamn right I wanted to go.
I wasn’t drafted; I wasn’t no shave-tail
Sonovabitch. This was my third war.”
He didn’t want to leave,
But he came home, all right.
He came home, and all anybody could think about
Were the politics of the thing.
“But let me tell you something;
You can’t fit a soapbox in a foxhole.”

Burned Bread

When they told me that I would inherit
your deathbed, I laughed, until I found it,
like always, in the downstairs guest bedroom
made up with clean linens. My cousins got
silverware, golf clubs, fine china, jewelry,
But your bed was moved upstairs into my
attic room, dominating the annex
with your solid oak frame and saggy mattress
that still smelled of mouth wash and tile cleanser.
Your purple heart used to click against the buttons
on your bathrobe, roots digging deep into
the plush white carpet as you religiously
adhered to your twenty minute ritual
of getting up in the morning.
Our house reeked of burned bread and marmalade:
signs of your losing battle with phantom Vietcong.
You were too slow to pop the toast in time,
but too proud to rush, perched, gun in hand,
to take down anything that breathed.

Feminism is Not Dead

My flesh is pancaked against the stainless steel embalming table
a slab of unwholesome meat ripe for dressing in the usual style:
slit the vague, blue-tinged wrist;
release the blood into the waiting basin.
The mortician hums to the drone of fluorescent lights,
chuckling with antiseptic mirth.
He bears down, into my face, propping my lips agape with latex fingers,
lacquering my teeth with clear nail polish.
My death-puffed mouth is ringed with rouge the color of curry paste,
eyelids caked with garish shadows and shimmers.
He colors me into the woman he wants me to be, not the one they'll remember.
His bile-spattered smock brushes my bare hip
Deft hands patch my pale breasts.
I raise one wound-puttied¹ brow and flare a sneer,
But half of my face can't seem to wake up
Because it has been injected with pigmented cheek filler.
His elbow grazes the Halloween stitches that patch together my abdominal cavity.
I wonder if long hours under fluorescent lights can change our colors,
If a stale body renders men mutable.
Is playing dead the same as playing hard to get?

¹ Wound putty is a flesh-toned substance used by embalmers to cover and fill in small wounds.

The Swallow

The arc of the Great Blue Heron's neck
is the last thing you will ever see if
you are set upon in a field,
with nowhere to run,
like the mouse outside my window.
The faintest brown smudge, belly flat to
blurred, sun-sapped weedy grass;
an impressionist painter's afterthought.
All I saw was the ash gray slant of that bird,
the twig neck pinioned in pincer beaked precision,
the merciful shake that cracked the mouse
like a dead, dry leaf falling on
sun-sapped weedy grass;
the swallowing slouch of the predator
stilting across the plain.

Christmas Carol

Tingling on the branch of a Douglas Fir,
the tinny chimes of a boy's choir were
slightly out of key with the drama of
the dragonfly, its feet frozen to a Yule bow.
I cupped my hands around it and blew
breaths as sweet as the donkey in the
nativity scene (I think I had been drinking
mulled wine). Who's to say that
the animals pictured next to Jesus weren't as
hallowed by their people as the tiny,
plaster messiah is to mine?
The God I learned about in Bible School
crafted each dragonfly with artisanal
precision, made each refracted mirror
of its eyes in his divine image,
crafted me out of mud and dust
and Adam's rib on an adjacent workbench.
I hummed O' Holy Night through
my breathing, the shimmer of light
wings still tingling on the branch.
Thawed by my rescue carol, dizzily
lopsided, it hovered from its place,
an ornament on the tree lot,
and perched on my hand,
and promptly died.

Breach

Tearing into the wind
a red retro bullet
tires shrieking
basket rattling
seat settled
I raise myself
standing
unbalanced
pedals buckling
headlong
Down
Down
Down
the mammoth asphalt crest
onetwothreefourfive
Seconds
before
the curb
tumbling
down
eating it
sideways
as the
people
are destroyed
by their
laughter
Ha
and
we
are just
destroyed.
Ha.

Roommate

It's 8 am.
 You're home.
 I know this because
 you always slam
 open the door.
 Don't people
 normally slam
 doors shut?
 But no
 you slam doors open
 our door
 every morning
 so loud that it wakes me
 and,
 like a bear,
 I hunker into the kitchen,
 sniffing
 for cheerios and
 unexpired milk
 and you,
 like a minx
 smiling after
 a long night
 of screwing
 your rat-faced
 boyfriend
 and ask me if

you can use
 the shower first
 and I,
 like always,
 say "No, that's not a problem"
 because reasonable
 people never have a
 problem with taking
 the second shower
 every morning
 of every day
 and you strip naked
 and sing
 loudly
 any of a selection
 of pop songs
 that talk about
 screwing boyfriends
 and you emerge
 smelling like Suave
 and Night Musk
 eau de toilette
 and I resist the urge
 to vomit.
 Almost.

D.U.I.

A monologue overheard while listening
through my living room window.

I swear, I do this all the time.
Drive up hills, I mean.
Why are you looking at me
like that? I shit you not.
You want me to what?
Oh, I was driving
and then suddenly there was a hill
and the fence didn't get out of the way,
but I told it to.
I leaned out the window
and yelled for it to move.
Yes I'll pay for the damages.
How much, do you think?
Shit man, that's a lot.
I'm in college.
What?
Yeah, that's fine.
I'll do the tests, too.
So like I was saying before,
I was driving.
Yes, I do this all the time.
No, I haven't been drinking.
Say the alphabet backwards?
I can't even do that sober.
No, I haven't been drinking.
I told you, I was driving
and I yelled and the fence
didn't get out of the way.
Yes, I would prefer the blood test.
Not the breathalyzer.
It's like I was saying,
I do this all the time.

Single

We collect new colors,
stroke them onto our nails:

Racy Rouge

Peach Folly

Electric Strawberry

Thrill of Brazil

Raj Ruby

Names that smell of spices
and plane trips and men

who stay for awhile

and make grand exits

while you cry on the

phone to anyone who

will listen half a world

away. It's the same

damn thing, just grab

a few cotton balls and

douse those toes in

Acetone

scrub that man away

leave him with some

chemical burns

and ply your

sensibilities

with a new color

a color that says

"Dahling!

This is SO you.

The new you.

No one ever loves

you if you're old."

Door

The loose-woven tapestry
of the night sky is spread
above us, just visible through
the small, dirty window.

We close the laundry room
door with a shudder, a
creaking sense that tickles
the discs in your spine
and runs like a mouse
down your pant leg.

The lady who lived here
isn't dead, yet, but close.

Her husband used to putter
in the shed in the weed-
peppered yard, smoking
illegal Cubans and poking
at the same plot of geraniums
for days, it seemed. Our
neighbors never speak of
Jack, just the rustle of his
whisper as he glides from
backyard to backyard,
displacing dog bones
and trowels and flower pots,
leaving hoses running.

"I reckon Jack woke up
and didn't know he was
dead, bless his heart."

At night, we shiver as
Jack brings in the draft
from the open
laundry room door.

On composing an essay at 3am

“Anxiety is the handmaiden of creativity.”
-T.S. Eliot

Nothing is coming to me.
Pages of textual evidence,
scholarly sources, anecdotes,
notes scribbled onto napkins,
ball point pen portraits grated
onto padded yellow legal lines
but there is nothing to fill
the other 3,000 words I am
expected to craft in the style
of someone pursuing a degree
who actually cares
to draft and redraft,
partaking of every office hour
to consult and reconsult
and overdetermine.
Half the fun of it is
forming the puzzle as you solve it,
mastering rhetoric at the last
feasible second and paving
over the holes of low-blows
made of by the peer reviewers
you “forgot” to consult.
Professors never notice,
have no radar to catch the ones
who always pull all-nighters,
whisper a Hail Mary as they
slide the wad of prose under
the door. They are too good,
these dawn authors of
anxious prose. If the ink
could talk, it would jitter
off the page from the coffee
absorbed by osmosis,
clamoring to the floor and
scooting under the nearest chair
to cower, ashamed of itself.
But we are not ashamed,
we pale-fingered
dawn authors of anxious prose:
We have always written this way.

The Only Child

Dad died seven times before the doctors believed my mother.
 It was nothing personal, it was just the 70's.
 Pacemakers were cutting-edge technology.
 Soon, dad was Bionic Man,
 lead wires ticking life into his lazy heart.
 The surgeon removed his cap, washed his hands.
 The phone call came while they were honeymooning in France.
 "Having a child is inadvisable. His condition is, most likely, hereditary."
 My mother sobbed by the boat pond in the garden at the Louvre,
 Eyeing the tiny, scrubbed French children who shouted
 "Regardez! Regardez, maman! Mon bateau est tombé!"²
 My mother's boat had sailed awry, too. Empty vessel.
 She imagined what would happen if they tried:
 the sterile NICU incubator, the infant's heart
 silenced by Sick Sinus Syndrome.
 Nine months of free rent to a time bomb.

It's amazing that my mother didn't kill her mother in law
 when she found out that she had carried the Varicella Virus
 as my father swam in her womb.
 "A birth defect would explain his condition.
 You can try.
 We will wait."
 was all the surgeon said.
 And nine months later, a ten pound baby girl
 laid on her side like a purplish prime rib
 on the nursery scale,
 and yawned her purplish mouth
 and blinked wet, intelligent eyes.

¹ This phrase translates to "Look! Look momma! My boat has sunk!"
