

A Way Back

The sound of your feet on a gravel walk,
the cracking of trees as the wind rolls through them,
cars moving in the distance, hushing the roads to sleep.
Your own wonderful heart beating deep within your chest,

the quiet tick of time saying now,

be right now.

May our way back to being human be just around the next bend,
down the tangled path that is lined with scrub oak and moths,
orange and feathered at the tail, flying low enough
to be crushed by passing feet. They were here with the birds
long before we were, watching the day turn into night,
the light between the trees fading to blue then lavender,
creeping silently between the black branches

one dark shadow at a time.

Another Time

Picture a boy walking down Esplanade Avenue
in New Orleans on his way to meet the streetcar.
Strapped to his back is a metal thermos of coffee,
a sleeve of paper cups tucked under his arm.
He is there as people head to work, their hair
fixed with curls or grease, their hats carefully stuck
to their heads. They pay him next to nothing for a cup
though their nothingness adds up and it is what he brings
home to his mother. She waits for him in the kitchen
with the jockeys, who board in the back spare bedroom.
Their tiny, wiry bodies huddled around the table
for breakfast. Her son is her treasure, pulling
his weight in work before school. He is old enough
to keep a secret and watches as the men sneak
the doped horses into the racetrack through the
Mystery Street Entrance. Their eyes wide
and glassy from the cocaine and morphine
pumping in their blood, lucky if their hearts
don't explode before the finish.
Their faces are unlike the other racehorses'
and they make him sad. He wishes
he could set free every last one of them.
That was old New Orleans, the way it used to be
when our family lived on a street
lined with French families, a place of true beauty
in a country so green. Anything seemed possible
but so much was tolerated. One account
from 1892 has a man named Rankin being suspended
for ordering an injection to a colt named India Rubber.
After the race it was announced that the injection
given was not the usual mixture, but one of water,
and that it had seriously hurt instead of helped
the poor horse. The racetrack is still here
though the horses are better protected, and the streetcar
no longer passes in front of the houses on Esplanade
which stand before us like ghosts from another time.

Crown Of Thorns

Starfish waits on the bottom of the ocean.
It is called the Crown of Thorns.
Purple and black with spikes around its center
like an urchin. It looks like your heart—
if your heart came from the sea.
Heavy with salt and bits of coral, motionlessly
digesting the life around it.
Its name from the venomous thorn-like spines
that cover its upper half.
A flesh-eating sea star, radiantly beautiful
against the pale surrounding sand.
A carnivorous heart to devour
any unanswered dream, any forgotten love.
I dive in from the bow of the boat,
the icy water knocking the wind from my lungs,
wiping my face off, taking my hair in its teeth.
My tongue swollen in my mouth with words
I will never speak. I spit them out, I give them
back to the starfish that cluster around the dark—
all speckled and yellowed in their centers.
To be forgotten, to wait here on the bottom
for time to pass, for seas to change course,
constellations to shift. Leo the lion waiting
with a closed jaw and heavy padded paws
to walk across a violet sky.
The moon in its belly beckoning me back up.
I slide through myself into another skin,
scaled and gilled and freckled with brown.
A pigment of wanting, always,
to find the love I know is mine.
Such a love to pull me into its salty grasp.

Dreamer

The guts of a dreamer don't look the same
as those of a thief or a hunter
who kills in the early hours of morning.
Dreamers are rare in this world
that changes every soul.
Release me from the wants of parents.
Turn me back into pure color or line
that flows from the soft tip of a brush,
a table to be leaned on and used, a kite
to be crushed high in a tree,
a bicycle with tires tight with air.

Pieces fall off each time I push past the openings of my heart.
Tight passages of wind razor down its edges, smoothing the sharp points
into roundness. Nothing left to snag or pierce, I am brought back to a child's
soft realm of possibility. Grounded by a game or a simple afternoon dressed
as a man in my grandfather's suit.
To be anything at all.
To be limitless, borderless,
have a heart covered in air holes,
open at the top like a flower.
My hand holds a paintbrush
as easily as my eyes can see.
The things we are good at have to save us.
The things we regret must be let go.

The simple form of a figure gathering fruit
is drawn out in black ink then wiped down with blue—
reaching for a second figure, turning to face me,
nude and powerful,
she is who I want to be.
I do not draw myself, I draw the dream of myself
every single time I draw a woman.

Far

Far into the soul of a tree,
far into an animal's heart.

To be born and never tamed,
never forced to do anything but survive.

What does a human heart look like
that has never been made into anything but itself?

Has such a heart ever existed?

A heart sheltered from the woes of society, the plague
of pleasing the masses, a lifetime of schooling to be made less wild.
Secrets spot every heart, leaving star-like scars when they are spoken.

Words, too many words, covering the silence that holds all truths.

Take lesson from the bee deep within the flower.

Hold the quiet to you like a nectar, feeding you, from deep within, say
nothing,

buzz with life, hum it softly.

Far into your being, into the heart that wants you to let it go
back to the wild,

back to its true beating.

Far

Having Babies

She calls up to their rooms in her mind.
She waits but no one calls back,
no feet peek out as they round the stairs,
no legs moving under full skirts, yellow shorts
cropped at the knee. How long can she stand,
her head bowed to listen, the banister
dulled from all the hands that gripped it?
Her bones slide in and out of joint
as she sways, unbalanced, her blue eyes
blinking at the quiet.
She is the only one left.
Her mother passing long ago,
remnants of her stashed in dark corners
of the house- dollar bills floating from
the pages of a book, a stack of treasured stamps
left brittle in her desk. She sleeps
in the bed her husband died in.
His hand outstretched, palm up,
left where she had cradled it the night before.
“Having babies was like playing dolls,”
she tells me, “held them as much as I could.”
For a while it was just my mother
and her brother. Eventually
my uncle came with red hair
and eyes that cautioned you
to handle him with care. Three rooms
of toys, tennis rackets, shotguns, love
letters ripped up and then taped back
together. They took long road trips
cross country, amazed by the
interstate system and the new shining
cars whistling with hope.

In Her Hair

The cool carried outside in her hair. Split open by her walking,
the last of the house let go as the air of the morning is taken in.
She wonders what else is trapped in her hair,
hiding for years without her knowing.
The fingers of lovers she no longer sees,
a kiss on its crown from a grandfather who is gone,
the smell of a campfire in the mountains of North Carolina
where she canoed as a girl, the feel of the first time
she cut her hair like a boy for the summer, high in the barber's chair,
the smell of the bristle brush as it passed her nose on its way
to her neck, excitement running through her legs.
All the places she ever went searching for herself.
So long with all she needs, thick with all she has to give.
Hold her hair close and smell it, and you may know her gypsy heart
as well as you ever will.

Jubilee

One August night the whole house woke
to voices down on the water, laughter
flowing in pairs of twos and threes.
House after house emptied on to the beach
as bells rang out along the stretch of coast,
an easterly wind strong as the incoming tide.
I stood in the heat of the room
in my underwear, the last of sleep
falling off me, bones in my back
sticking out like wings as my older sister
rounded the corner already in her suit,
the rest of the big kids in tow
carrying nets and buckets,
smiling as if they'd stolen something
they didn't know how to give back.
A fever came
the way love would later,
a wanting as warm and smooth as clay.
Running after them
to something my seven year old heart
took as a waking dream,
a phenomenon Mobile Bay
may claim as magical and rare
in a world where myth and legend seem
wrecked and gone.
A jubilee of flounder and crab,
hundreds swarming my feet
in the pale light of the moon,
slithering up the bank,
crawling from the water.
So many that even a girl
wide-eyed and still a creature herself
could reach down and pull up
armfuls. Only as a woman
would I find it sad
and ask what had happened
when the fish had let us touch them,
scoop them motionless from the water.
People walked home,
igloos spilling with flounder,
their flat bodies neatly stacked,
their eyes asking why,
going quietly as if the men who took them
were the ones who'd been stunned,
having gathered up all that the heavens
would never have allowed them to possess
in the light of day.

Modern Man

We were always barefoot as kids, always covered in band-aids
and bruises and about a hundred mosquito bites, but we never
whined and you couldn't get us inside at the end of the day
because we lived to ride our bikes or swim for hours or play kickball
in the vacant lot at the end of the street.
I can name each kid in each house
and there isn't one house without someone I remember.
It was a magical place to grow up.
Since the very beginning
when the moon and stars guided us,
living close, we rose just after the sun,
slept with the windows open, the heavens pouring in
and the moths and mosquitos bumping against the screens.
A natural rhythm guided us like a bell
sounding clear in our heads and our souls.
There is distance now in the mechanical, adult sense of time and life.
I move through most of it like an alien, a creature who knows it is not her way.
I clear a path for my children that is lined with green grass and blue skies,
the freedom of being loose in the yard with no one to watch them,
a nonsensical song of happiness from my son, a trip to the beach for my daughter,
her dolls lined up in front of her as she cautions them about man o' wars
and the sun that can burn you.
They are only three, and I watch them in wonder.
Their sweet faces looking back at me with eyes so bright.
How to keep them whole?
When giant steps separate nature from so much of mankind.
Technology happening so fast that we stand to lose
what it is to be alive, to evolve, to feel the pulse
of our own humanity beating up from the earth.

Who are you, Modern Man, and where on earth are you taking us?

Night Sea

Come to me with glass bottles hanging from the yolk
across your back. Mix a thick paste for wings
to make me a bird or gills to breathe underwater,
down where the blues turn to purples and are filled
with weeds that only grow in the dark and eggs
that hide deep within the shells.
Sea slime to coat me anew, supple
in my moving and loving, waxy as the boat that slides
against the waves, its wood sound and hard beneath
the feet that pound its planks, sea that beats its bottom.
To be a fish or jellies filled with phosphorescence
to guide the sailors home.
Gutted by the sun, I am nothing but this thin body
that seems so small, but then my heart is alive
and my soul clings to it like the sails of a ship
to carry it home. Their white cloth a soft grey
in the moonlight. To be the whale swimming beside me,
massive and beautiful and unhunted.
Its small eye watching as I watch its back stretch out
as wide as a patch of earth that could never be owned,
its own country, its own universe of dreams
that dive below and rise again
with gusts of life and stars
that fall onto its great back,
sliding free into the night's black sea.

Night

The path back home was not marked
so we studied the trees
and looked for signs of damage.
One of the tallest was stripped down
by beetles and stood like a blond nub
against the sky.
Somewhere in those trees
you kissed me
in the dark blue light.
Your hand on my bare stomach
your eyelashes against my cheek.
You smiled at me with perfectly
straight teeth and bit me
softly on my shoulder.
My young life opened then
onto the rest of the wide world.

So much swallowed up to watch you years later,
your back leaning over the bow of a boat
twisting a rope around a cleat,
the moons of your fingernails bright
against your tanned hands,
the golden hairs along your jawline,
a wisp of hair falling from behind your ear.
You were never mine
to hold or to keep.
I only dreamed that kiss
though you promise me it was real.
So much added to that moment
because I needed it to be so.
To believe that it tied us to one another,
tethered like the boats that cling and bang
against one another in the harbor,
floating and free
despite their anchors, their masters.

A fire on the beach, the house in sight,
its windows lit up like a jack o lantern.
To throw all of this love that will never be known
into the pit so that it may go in peace.

I have tried to burn you from my heart but you would not go.

Nugget

My greatest gift I found lying on the side of the road.
Barely a body left to show
for what you once had been. When I got you in the car
I thought the worst of it was behind us.
The rest was up to you. I knew that.
Would you ever trust me?
I surrender, you told me, baring your stomach.
Skeleton still visible beneath your red hair, burnt black in patches
with abuse.
To see that someone had tortured an animal as someone
had tortured you
made me enraged to be human.
Every vet who saw you called you a miracle dog,
said they didn't understand
why you were still alive.
This dog's spirit hasn't been broken, said one. Leave him,
come back in two weeks. If he's still alive. I need time,
alone, to try to save him.
Your body tried to quit
again and again, but you kept on.
Fear in my heart now that one day,
your great heart will stop beating.
Remember that promise you made late one night?
That time I asked you to live forever and somewhere
in your eyes you said Yes.

for my Uncle David

Pheasant Hunt

The smell of your own small body as you waited
that morning in the wooden crate to be released
the sides dark with dew and lined with scratches
from those who had waited before you
as the sun rose between the trees
still silver in the light
openings between the leaves
ashy with moon powder only seen by birds
or the small animals safely tucked within their knots
the bend of a low limb catching your eye
a place you know you could fit yourself
to roost in sheltered trees at night
having flown home to be returned
to all of the beauty
you so closely watch
as it passes before your eyes

as they have released you now
and you tremble with a bolt of life within you
electric against the still air that takes you in
as if to hold you in its arms
and you feel for a moment that you are spared
until the shots fire and you feel them before you understand
knowing that you fall now
into the wet grass that smells of youth and of love
the dog's breath warm above you
your shining eyes searching the sun-filled sky
for one final glance

as your whole soul leaps from you
and begs to softly say goodbye
to all of that beauty around you.

Poppie

May it rain on you
deep within the earth,
the sun find its way to your bones,
the stars in your hair
lighting a man so loved.
Our king, swaddled in history and fatherhood,
drunk up by a woman only half herself
without his eyes to carry her.

Woolen memories of their love, too young
to know the meaning.
Faraway man long gone into the heavens,
his soft head dusted white with hair.

Strings of blue eyes all the way
back to the lives he saved during the war, the letters
written in the dark rain asking her
to want him.
They bathed in the sea, hung their socks over
the back of the boat
from long black lines tied to their youth.

It nearly killed him
to come home with only half a stomach,
his mustache dripping with selflessness.
Medals in his pocket that he would
never open.

My dear grandfather, forget you not.

Serge

Someone once said they regretted
there were no more silent films
that spoke to everybody.
I think it was Serge Gainsbourg.
They say he constantly wondered if he was loved
even though they loved him more than we loved Kennedy.
Every artist asks this question.
He or she hammers it out line by line
until some image is recognizable as a face or a note,
a backbone of self-worth.
A friend asked me if I knew the most comforting word
in the English language.
I guessed peace or soul, even tranquility.
Nope, they said, it's the sound of your own name.

Except for those with tragic souls
or those whose families fall apart
before their eyes—
nothing as hard as that early
age of helplessness
and need
as a child trapped in a world run by
someone else's pain.

To each young person in the making
I send out words of love.

Hang on sweet thing

before you even know it

your whole life will be your own.

Brown Eyes

You are the Cypress tree we watch day and night,
and you are now black against a blue sky
that pushes into lavenders and pinks.
Purple martins shoot across your highest space,
shapeshifting in their acrobatics
to be more than a single bird in flight.
This bird-filled sky peers through me
until the lines of my face disappear,
and it is every face that I have ever worn
in every lifetime I have ever lived.
To find a way to be in endless harmony.
To keep coming back for more
in all of these breakable lives.
To be my own keeper, my own master
always reaching for the same sacred sky.
To be boundaryless.
To be known by my own heart,
loved tirelessly by my own soul.
To love all else that lives and breathes and exists.
To see it all as one.
To know no limit to kindness.
To be a part of all of the love all of the time.
To be the pink sky filled by a harvest moon.
To be the green of the tree that crowds that same sky.
To be the frog that sings in the tree or the mockingbird who sleeps within it.
To be the air that wraps itself around my throat as the wind rushes over me.
To be the cool beneath my bare feet in the wet night grass.
To be the tiny hand that reaches up for mine.

The brown eyes that call me mama.

Shoot It Like A Rubber Band

Crack it open like an oyster. Let it ooze out
the way it should, scoop it up, then shuffle it
in a deck of cards too stiff to handle.
Make it call you by your name, learn the
features of your face as well as any friend.
Offer promises you might never keep. Become its
blood brother, a cut along its edge touched to your
small cut, sealed together, pressed with need.
Bend it backward then forward, then shoot it like a
rubber band— a green one from the grocery.
Let it sing off key, tell a white lie, say that it has
real talent. Don't wait around for it to skip a beat,
take it down fast and hard, bury it in days of wonder,
nights of fever. Feed it fruit and chocolate and slow
sips of tea until it knows not the order of its day,
its rhythm shot straight to hell, its left from right
gone terribly wrong. Do all of this to your own heart
and you will know what it has been to love you.

Sun On

Great blue hand of the sky
rolls fire through its fingers,
splitting it again and again,
stretching longer and longer
until it is spun as far as it can be—

broken down into shining fragments we call night.
Until then it fights hard
to stay in the center of the sky, loving
to be watched and felt so far away.

Sun on the backs of each living thing, sun down
to the tissues that are hidden
and sweet with life— kidney, stomach, heart
guiding the way.
Warm them up good, melt them down pure, clean
with light straight from the sun's mouth.
They come out as smoothed back as a wing

folded under with function and flight,
perfect and precise, made of bones
so weightless they belong to the sky.
Tucked under bird's wing are so many
of man's wishes. How long
has he envied such flight— his feet and legs
so heavy with earth?

Too Young

The women pile under the pier
for cheese and crackers, a bottle
of wine sweating on the railing's
edge as the last of the skiers
races along the water.

The sun sends golden bars across
the sky, forgiving any age, any pain,
and they are still girls, laughing,
though they are mothers and wives,
what they wanted hung in a closet
years ago with every other foolish thought.

Their time is not their own,
even the women who talk big and find
a way to read the big books and see
the big sights.

Except when everyone is on the water,
no one asking to be watched or held,
no one needing kisses or his hair
to be brushed, his face wiped clean,
a tending so endless it either lifts
or crushes the spirit within them.

The boat glides in and energies shift,
they unfold themselves like horses
standing to greet us at the end of the dock,
the pier long and thin behind them.

We need their praise,
their congratulations, we the children
and the men who have been off playing
so that we may come home and be told
that we are wonderful, champions,
too good to be true.

I wonder if they know
of the power they possess,
that we would follow them
into a burning sea or walk barefoot
over glass, just to never lose them,
to always find them there in the shade,
smiling, all teeth and tanned arms, waving,
too young to ever die.

Waterbirds

My grandfather walks through the fields with a friend,
an open smile on his face. 1928, a time
of innocence. He's on his way back from the river
they would go to, barely eleven years old,
all the freedom in the world.
He talked about it years later
as one of the most marvelous things
he had seen in his life, a memory he went back to
surrounded by death in the Marshall Islands,
his surgical gloves elbow deep in blood.
He and another boy come upon a hillock of birds sleeping
piled one on top of the other in the snow,
too many to count. They have delved themselves in
to avoid freezing to death.
Their eyes shine like diamonds. The two boys
squat down low to watch the birds
shaking themselves awake.
It is the coldest morning he can remember
of the time with his family in Monroe, Louisiana.
"Brother, supper is just past six o'clock,
don't forget to come." As if a boy could forget
to be hungry. He sleeps under the trees
any night that he wishes. His parents caught off guard by his birth
so late in life. Some people are just born men, even as boys,
they are men. His wife will call him at the age of thirty
worried her heart has gone bad and she is dying,
the beating low in her chest like a trapped bird.
"Sit down and drink a cup of water. Just have to
settle you down." It works on her to this day
at ninety-three, my grandfather as buried in her
as the waterbirds that did not die.