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Yet Still We Pass

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Bard College

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Yet Still We Pass

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Michaela Elyse Siegel

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

Yet Still We Pass

For Barbara Ann O'Connor, forever my Mamaw

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Pale Morning

Goose Disappearing

Here—it is the
break of pale
morning settled

deep into grey
eaves that I
feel. Bed bathed

in cold sunshine,
drip of leftover
rain tattooing

a groove into
bruised earth
below. Weak

shadow on the
wall, silhouette
of sleep-frozen

head and arm
against background
of white. When I rise,

the carpet beneath my
feet is far away,
doorway a colossal

monument. Beyond
window, in bleached
sky, a lone goose

flies to the west.
My eyes follow
until trees and sky

close in, a collapsing
waterfall, full
eclipse all at once,

and quiet April air,
evening shadows
arcing, even in this

early morning, all
suddenly together,
converge, a moment

almost missed.

Again

But are you sure? Make
sure, you must make
sure. And only touch
correctly, and wash
soon, wash often. Be
washed, absolved. You
shameful, you?

They laugh with teeth
when they hear. Are you
proud? Maybe. Perhaps
is a better word. Better
use it, better be perfect.

Perfection, mulling.
There is a plant called
a mullein. Sullen mullein.
They look sullen in
those fields. Point them
out and you could have
a different career.

No, again. Mull
that, mull it over. Thrice
now, you golden number.
You cyclical prison, so
beautiful and familiar
and without you, what
am I?

Snapshots

Red square
napkin, man with

tattoo of blue
jay above right knee,

the way they flow
right out of me and

I want to capture
them. The fraternity

of these words—
pale pink crocus,

or blue, robin pecking
for worms—all comes

around again. People
laugh in the park—

linear narrative, fine,
open that chest of

drawers. Two
homeless men playing

chess, someone breaking up
with their boyfriend.

A tear gone
now, it's been too

long. Red napkin
floating by, begin again—

deep pang in being, winds
and turns and strays.

A life between others,
dog staring

through wire fence, lonely
eyes clouded with cataracts.

Girl walking home from
school, pink backpack

streaked with
mud. Teenage boy

sitting on back porch
crying. All this to

exist simultaneously.
Gathering vitality,

pain comes, so too joy—
We are here and feel

everything.

On the Esopus

Adolescents in innertubes on river / beneath its surface girl wearing scuba goggles / parents frantic on the shore / scanning the river for her / barking of dog in the distance / goggled girl emerges from water / trudging to the river bank / gleefully oblivious / those in the innertubes / hurling beer cans in the water / parents spotting daughter at last / shrieking in anger at her / dogs' barking redoubled / more dogs decamp from red van parked in nearby campground / commencing to bark / boy in innertube choking on walnut / unnoticed / beer can dropped into water / his friends laughing in ignorance / suddenly aware he is not laughing / girl and her angry parents exiting the campground in RV / dogs from red van congregating at shore / their owners clambering after them / grey dog paddles out toward anonymous flotsam as teens begin to scream for help / chestnut dog glancing back at owners yelling at her to STAY / boy motionless in innertube / from late model Toyota yet more dogs pouring out / grey dog now briefly licking side of innertube / girl still wearing goggles with parents as they drive away / through distorting lens of goggles / girl watching commotion at river's edge / the boy's friends screaming / dogs barking / it's a beautiful day / 2:43 / not a cloud in the sky.

Chest of Drawers

Opens and closes.

Bangs against

wood. Wood against
wood.

Inside, baby
wrapped in

linen.

Not crying, no
noise. Outside

window, herd of

deer,

chased by

hunter. Gun
over shoulder.

Points, fires, misses,

walks onward.

Wood

against
wood.

Man seeks
something to follow.

Sky opens, drops of
rain.

Deer stand
under juniper, white

chins vulnerable as
they eat. Needles

scattered playthings
beneath innocence.

Earthliness—all living

pressed

against hard places,
soft underbellies,

or better,
the scrape of man against himself,

here between
living and dying.

Or just between.

In the Between

Two. You
sit. I sit. It

is good. Hand
reaches, picks up

my own.
Light flashes. Hearts

beat. I wonder
who can see.

No need to.

*

We lie. Bed
warmed by
bodies. So

close, our
moon-skinned
bodies. We

whisper. Dark
swells. We
settle like

hibernating
bears. Sunrise.
Dream-enslaved,

we wake. Your
eyes still closed. I
kiss them, you

smile, reach,
half asleep,
to return the gift

to my shoulder.

Myth

In the end it was the bark that mattered, the lone
flower, the color of her iris, no two the same.

What mattered wasn't a sum or a measure of success,
no man in a suit, no statue on a pedestal,

just the air entering the lung.
How well it filled the caverns and
entered the bloodstream. How complete.

How perfect it was.

In that future, a woman opens a window in the morning,

lets the sun in and the warmth of the April day.

Maybe there are clouds,
or none at all.

And the sky shines out so blue—
the world gentle at last, and taking its time.

Living Room

Outside window—
green turning
yellow, swaying in
season's coming

chill, waving away
what once was.
Late-day
grey, winter's

veil. Wind like
a deep sigh that
flutters pages. Inside,
eye twitches for

the pale-lemon
sun, unstrained,
with no black
spots. Quietly,

curtains move, blue
against cream-white.
Philodendron
searches upward,

no arms yet,
no place.

The Edge of the World

Meditation

At the Hudson, peering off into the distance:
crows and black vultures, stalks

of cattail, acres of woody brush,
wetland muck everywhere,

and open sky, streaks of dark against
midday sun, red-winged blackbird

flying in and out of sight, boats skimming
across the river, sailboats, commercial

barques, ripples in the water, a turtle
surfacing, a doe and her fawn at the bank.

I have visited this place many times,
quietly, alone, or with people

long since forgotten.

All the same, this sky, this air,

the rustle of the early spring trees,
the ebb and flow of the tide,

all of it my lauded ghost
of a memory.

Seeing Their God

Upon waking, a hint of coffee,
and through the window,
a robin pecks into hard ground

for worms. Yesterday a storm
blew in but soon broke
over the canyon at sunrise.

Red and orange and pink
fingers of light caress
the brick-colored mountains,

tipped with green. Water drips
from roof into rain barrel,
slow and steady. A cat perched

on the rim looks toward the horizon.
Sitting at the edge of the world—
like a smile passing across one's face

seconds before dying, a road
grown over by weeds, a last
breath of ambivalent air.

What Am I in This Immediacy?

A man walks slowly down the sidewalk,
white soles of his shoes dotted with mud.
It was raining yesterday,
and cold,

such a drag to have entered spring and feel this way.
At least the lawn is greener,
a few daffodils have bloomed.

On the fourth floor of this library,
where the dull drone of machinery drowns out everything,
I see the tops of trees,

people running on the sidewalk,
silent,

the horizon in a haze, obscured by clouds,
the occasional passing car,
a hawk that cuts through the canopy.

I look at my phone, fiddle with keys,
brush small eraser rubbings off the table,
ingest ibuprofen, read and look up.

Sometimes I am also alive—

electrified and hungry,
becoming
the man with the muddy shoes,
the blooming daffodil,

even now the hawk,
its wings
air's feathered ornament.

Sometimes I am here.

Here in everything.

Summation

Scattering of lines across
face from window. Brown
eyes like dark coffee, a rich
pool to sink into.

Panes in window layered
across cheeks, a geometry
of freckles. Will I settle
here long enough

to be enveloped
by the air that floats in
this room? Or will I sink
into upholstery, fated
to disappear?

Panes are now scattered
across the floor, my cheeks
bare again. Sun nearly set.
I sit so quietly, shoulders

pushed back against chair,
hands motionless save
for one finger, moving back
and forth against the blue

fabric of my pants. A question
of staying or going, the
dark settling, air thickening
with a summation of *things*—

the low hum of crickets,
echoing along the curving
shadows, and there, more
distantly, a train whistling.

What remains unspoken,
held instead in the jar of coins
or the plate of keys by the door,
all silent now?

Reflection

Mug against swath
of trees, shadows
doubling next to
wilted bouquet,
vulture flying into
curtain, vanishing
in its folds.

Close to the glass
I see an aging birch,
its bark peeling,
flapping in wind,
silvery receipts of
a life ending.

Dark knot halfway
up trunk—
at its center, my
eye, bitter, empty—

Whose hour
possesses me?

At the Station

At the station—
cool wooden bench
streaked with dark
reminders, soot,

scratches revealing
lighter wood
below, spots of
paint, perhaps a name.

A passing boy and
mother, suitcase
in hand, hurrying
to move on, a

pigeon roosting
among old gum
wrappers and
tickets, bobbing

head, indifferent.
Whistle of the train—
the rush of bodies
by, the blur of

wheels and chatter and
quickness of fleeting life.
This is all it is, all
it will ever be.

Unleashed

Again, Again

No, again. Mull that, mull it over.
 The mullein sit silken—
 towering statues, points, cones

flower up, pointing, is that
 God, is mullein a god, a
 god-pointer? Sheep's ear,

hear. Little lamb, those
 are what you need. Lamb's
 ear, mullein, they all grow

up. Grow up! Jesus, God,
 take his name in sweet
 vain. Vein. Pulsing, anger.

Tiered, upward. Like
 those pointers. They take
 God's name in vain. Do

you have one? Some-
 thing to take in vain?
 I'll name you—

Walk while the world blurs.
 Turn to the field and
 notice the steeples, unleashed

like weeds.

Ruminations

A prayer—these reaching trees,
in the foreground

columns hard and curved, as
a pressing on

the center of my
chest, there, against

the blue of mountains
across the river—

pain. Billowing. So
many stacks of books,

smelling like air
before a storm,

and it is here I wish
curtains made

sound. A girl through
the window, thinking

of stillness. Is this a
cancer here? A creeping

against carpet, or concession,
and you were taught

that all tenderness is
indicative of that

which must be
removed. Out, out.

The look in your
eyes: a still watchface,

yellowing sky before dusk,
these quiet birds,

hands caressing, yet
you do not say

anything. Which one
of us is the liar? A final

truth: smaller stones
soon are worn into

pebbles, smooth and
innocent.

Voyeur

Certain drawers in this house
don't close fully, clothes peek out,

beetle eyes in daydreams, little girls
playing on the front lawn of disillusionment.

Certainly the skin is thinner,
more permeable, like an amphibian's.

They are the indicator species
of our time, little girls.

When they die, how the tar
begins to leech.

How the rain falls
upward.

It Is 60 Degrees!

The praying
mantis eats her
mate. Then

catches a
wasp by the
neck: dessert.

Sun high
on this
day, cloudless,

blue a contrast
to dark horizon.
Top of maple

red like a
girl's hair,
underbelly

green and
raw. Wasp
wing in brown

leaves. Arms
of mantis
outstretched.

World open and
razored, regretful.

Tree, Pocket, Fountain

after Stephen Ratcliffe

Here—a tree
rising above
noise—branches

entwined among
fingers on a table
covered in dark lace.

Yet still, the lace
suffocates.
She will wait

until the man leaves,
hand poised on something
concealed in pocket:

a bullet of lipstick?
a penny? dagger?
napkin?

To make it home—
she takes a detour,
and there,

at the old
water fountain—
overgrowth below

metal bowl, rust in
halo around lip—
two deer lick

salt from the cracked
ground, tongues
red from clay.

It Was Just

Last year when Edgar,
or was it Evan,

from the shop down on the corner—
said, “It’s been seventy years

since anything *real* happened.
A stroke of luck,

an ace against a king even,
boys turning into men

so slowly these days.

Can’t go down a street without
worrying about dying.

Lethal’s about all we got on the menu.
Atomic.

Many people don’t even
eat anymore, not anything.

They get tubes installed instead.”

Shame on You!

When I walk in a city I am
a bug under a magnifying glass
scuttling into bits of trash, here
and there the butt of a cigarette,
plastic crown for a little girl's birthday
party because why not tell them
they can be princesses
in a world that really hates them?
So many people can't even eat
without turning on the television.
They've never seen the carpeted ground
of an old-growth forest, the way the moss
moves over stones in a current of life,
how certain flowers need
very little light to survive,
everything become a web of pulses,
all serving one purpose,
to nourish and die
and begin again.

Yet Still We Pass

As leaves turn, a
stillness settles. Crows
gather on top branches,
black vultures circle.

Path below is scattered
with small stones
and paddled maple seeds.
Air turns into something

at once cutting
and heavy. Time
slows here—ghosts
of people who pass

without turning.
One after another,
limbs grow bare, ease
themselves into change.

We, as this autumn
wind, biting and fleeting,
disrupt the already
precarious way.

Yet still we pass,
and soon the earth
is left to become itself
again, full and laden.

Our Wildness

It is Raining

1.

And I have many things
to do:

wash my hair, pick up
small stones

and paint on them
tiny eyes and mouths.

Grey sky now whitening—
pouring rain splatters

in quick
concentric circles,

boy spins round and round,
holding his backpack like

a dance partner. How
is it that this day

has come to pass in such a way
that to wake

is to walk so
eagerly in the rain,

to watch the worms move also
in their small life—

to resist the ponderousness
of ceaseless thinking?

As the morning breaks
and the sun

cuts through clouds,
the curve of the window

reminds me of my body
stretched over its bones.

In pressing my face
to the glass, my breath

condenses
into a cloud and I am reminded

2. To Press On

of the feeling of
grasping a

plant by the roots,
pulling upward,

splitting seed from soil,
severing life.

Broken umbrella, so many
bobbing sheets

of stretched water resistant fabric,
faceless bodies beneath, still

I see the obtuse angles
of roofs, hear all

the loud shoes,
as if those who walk

in them need to be heard—
So lonely, so green,

the tips of branches
open, as though they were young,

unspoiled. Stretch of horizon
shuddering

under wind and rain and
black specks of birds,

tossed this way and that,
boy reading his own words

in awe of what is
coming out of him,

girl sitting quietly, unthinking—
she, the evacuation

of a mass from out of the air.
There is

no emptiness quite like
this sky and

3. The Rain Has Stopped

the needle point
of the weathervane, the black tips

of trees reaching
upward to whoever is out there.

I watch as people go by
in distrust

of the ground
beneath them.

In the wake, there is speculation
as to what should transpire—

Is it too philosophical
to consider every angle?

The way the roofs combine
to form a geometric canopy

to lock us in—
Why even have roofs?

To keep the rain out
is to inhibit our wildness.

Right now the only living things
are the evergreens

but there is a hint of hopeful budding,
and I am reminded again

of widening circles in water
as men walk by in their dirty shoes—

how my life has so steeped
in the faces of others

that to see them is to
feed on them as from

a mirror or vessel,
so much so that

I come to consume
myself, encapsulated

in stifling, membranous
sacs—

What would it be to
to birth myself alone,

without fingers to
touch the new skin?

What I See and Imagine

Now, green peeking from ends
of branches, life anew again,
ducks nibbling bread
on the pond, cattail fluff,
sandwiches at the bank,
skipping small stones, flat
ones taken in the hand—
this persistent rain a
welcome curtain every
day since the turn of spring.
So much doing, going,
remembering,
the geese overhead,
the noise, the returning home—
asking someone for a cup
of milk, these dripping
umbrellas here against
the door, not forgotten,
sky so immediate,
shining, that door I
open moment by moment,
passing along the
corridors of rain, bestial
and bound.

I Find Myself Once Again Confronted

By the bound pages of a book unopened, no
eyes to mull over the paper, so deliciously
hungry, those word-sucking eyes. Elephant
tears, thick and wide, falling, etching grooves

into the cheeks, blue plaid handkerchief
streaked with red, held in hand, moving
against the air flowing from a heater.

Clothes line empty, strung across horizon,

a trip wire, catching my eyes, sawing into them,
an illusion of blindness, string pressed up to retina,
image flipped upside down and projected,
earth undone by a girl looking out a window.

What are you hungry for? When I say you,
is that who I mean, or shall I forsake myself?
To become wedded to a notion, to be with
someone other than myself, here, breathing

this air. Bound pages of an unopened book,
nose pressed up to creamy paper, inhaling
the essence of another. Possessing them, I am
here, alone. Surrounded.

Revelation

The sky is heavy with clouds.

They are like women who blow away
a part of themselves every time they speak.

Tulips in a half-inch of water.

A philodendron, for god's sake,
climbing, reaching, for fresher air,
an anchor, a pill ...

We are by the moment our own negation.

Swimming in an amniotic foyer.
Suspended, waiting for our number

to be called, hoping for it.
Fearing it.

Clawing our way out.

It Is Snowing

And at the beginning of April, no less.
Such a strange world—white

covering those petals
erupting from the still-hard ground—

if we were up north,
permafrost dotted with snowshoe hares.

Here, man walks around
as if his hands gave life—as if

he weren't the killer that he is.
Some days, the man might be

a machine, running methodically
as ice on the river floating

out with the tide, infinitesimal
mouse prints accumulating on its surface.

A gunshot into late morning sky
scatters robins, jays, chickadees.

A familiar image: man taking his step,
leaving his print, breathing out a cloud

smoke-like, a pollution. Man
and his rhythms, the thrumming

of cars down the highway, cutting through
the mountains, new river to drown in.

He wears gloves to hold the wheel,
lined with harvested fur—

has a roughness about him.
Like a blight settled deep in bark,

men leer in an alleyway, too separate
from this earth, its vermin, its parasites.

Or is this image of disgust too harsh?
I bare my cheek to the bitter wind.

I *am* man just the same, whether taker
or “creator,” bearing the same weight

of old, practiced appropriation,
or hatred even.

What we are is not learned,
but pulled from the earth,

from its stained soil. Such a strange
world, petals crushed under boot,

foot of snowshoe hare severed
and bloodied in the snow—

nothing better
than a show of what we are.

Typical Conversation

On the phone with
 my mother Sunday
 afternoon raining she
 thinks I need to *do*
 something *think*
 about the important
things—laundry
 that resume what's
going to happen
 this summer but
 Mom I say *what*
 about roofs ... (she
 had designed a house
 knows about these
 things wanted a gable
 in standing seam
 metal instead we got
 shingle 8/12 pitch) *are*
you there (I guess I've
 been silent for a
 while) *sorry I've*
 been looking outside
just now—(and
 remember it's rain-
 ing it's cold)—*and*
 I think the buildings
are starting to move
 she laughs nervously
it's true sometimes
 you gotta leave get

out of there fast—

her landline starts
crackling so old-

fashioned she is
if the house sudden-

ly blew away (oh
where my mind goes) I

imagine the coiled
cord still attached

to the ground a last
tether to the earth

a roof would be
torn off every-

thing lofted and ex-
ploding now I'm

screaming to her—
leave get out of there!

Scientific Method

The way it all streams together—an alloy
of steel and tears, fields of barnacles along

the flanks of whales, orchids in bloom
beneath canopies of leaves, barely visible

sun, a daughter pleading with her parents,
severed stalk of corn bent at acute angle

to the ground, the other stalks proud and waving,
and you can see, if you look a bit closer,

a car, 1971 Ford Thunderbird, an old thing,
marked with time and dust, it all streams by

doesn't it, and all at once, as air is sucked
into the lungs and released, our witness

of the whole of life in a single creature,
but as quickly killed off, poached from

our own vitality, sold, ruined, reanimated,
tea steeping too long, train barreling down

a track north into a blanket of snow,
married couple asleep in separate beds,

because why not be alone here? People
sometimes smell like unrealized larvae,

or the oiled metal of pistons, firing in
a darkness where women become thumb

tacks or small mints clinking in their metal case.
They point that pinky into the air. They

drink, consume, live, the way a road
lives, or a beach, or a glass plate in a lab

coated with the one chemical that might
make all the difference, will bring it all

together into a single unifying harmony,
all distinctions erased, all life extinguished

in an ecstasy, a blank endless joy, no sound,
no light, nothing at all but this colloidal mass

of contentment, of hatred, a bliss, single-celled,
an "is" that's nothing at all.

Hello, Hello

Why do I stretch catlike this
morning over white silk sheets,

arms above my head, toes pointed?
Could I be coming down

with something? a sickness
of the sensual? Why, as the rain

has arrived once more and again
I feel as a mirror to this world,

am I smiling at the buds on
the willow and those weeping

cherries, even while the brown
has not yet been replaced

by green vibrancy? Why, in
the midst of this dreariness,

worries for an unrealized
spring, do I say in my sick-

ness, *No matter!* The cold
and rain and I are still *here*,

my feet planted now as
the earth heaves itself up,

and I sense the grass thickening,
those silly groundhogs soon

to be rooting in the bushes,
the fresh moving air, crisp

with spring, and color moving also
over the hills, sky populated

with so many birds. They sing,
don't they, even now?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This process began with a lot of reading. My advisor, Michael Ives, introduced me to several poets who have greatly inspired me and whom I must recognize for their incredible and lasting work: Robert Creeley, Stephen Ratcliffe, James Schuyler, and Frank O'Hara. Mary Oliver has also been an anchor throughout all of this—her relationship with the natural world is something we all can learn from.

I have been preoccupied for a long time with my place in the world. Who am I now, who will I become? For most of my years at Bard, I wrote from a place that felt either too internal or entirely external from myself—in that, I lost my sense of my own voice. I was unsure of what I really wanted to *say*. At the beginning of the fall of 2023, when I began this Senior Project journey, Michael encouraged me to ground my lines in concrete *things*, and not to fill my poems with abstract words or thought. At first, I found myself still feeling estranged from my poems—as a mere observer to a world I felt I had no sure place in, no active relationship with. However, as I continued to read and write, I found myself forging connections with what I observed and imagined, infusing deeply personal emotion into my encounters with landscape, object, and atmosphere. I must again express my deepest gratitude to Michael for his mentorship and editorial help throughout this journey. His incredibly attuned ear and imagination were invaluable during this process. It is my hope that through this body of work I have succeeded in capturing the true scope of an inner transformation: In the process of composing these poems, I discovered a newfound sense of peace and confidence in both my writing and in my sense of self.

Thank you for reading.