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The Wind Still Blows

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The Wind Still Blows

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

by

Sophie Kautenburger

THE WIND STILL BLOWS

For Mom and Dad

“Letting go gives us freedom, and freedom is the only condition for happiness. If, in our heart, we still cling to anything - anger, anxiety, or possessions - we cannot be free.”

— Thích Nhất Hạnh

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Ann Lauterbach—who disapproves of being called wise, who thinks Forsythia is like a scream. To my mother, who has been my closest friend, always, through heartbreak and joy. And to my father, who reminds me to listen for the spring peepers.

A NOTE TO THE READER:

The poems in sections one and three stand both together and alone. They can be read individually, but also as a sequence.

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I

Self-Portrait

*

I am the light improperly refracted
the research cut short
trees distorted in an unexpected ripple

*

meaning is rain falling on rocks
Earth spinning on its axis
string tied to a former reality

*

she reads an article about breathing

breathing is involuntary

it says

now there are two of us

thinking about why babies cry

*

present is bones
is singular outpour deserved to die
but lived

*

regurgitated by the mother
out drops the girl
roots spreading in soil

II

Adrift

Girl

She pulls with strong hands slip
of the string loosened from a strict bind
faced with herself and
the other
red heart beating
wild
drawing out words fiercely
ashen yarn inside her throat picking up
stones picking up
dead birds her hair long she pushes her fingers into dirt
feeling the string
spooling upward pulled out
thru her mouth
the air of the world rushes in
she is thrown from the edge
rugged yarn
against her thumb remembering
it was she who pressed the knife against Adam's apple
who could see his bones
buried deep praying
for her virginity to come back her open hands
offering miles of string to the sun who stood
before the rood and could not kneel as she opened her stomach
with sooty fingers digging for
origins and touched the letters
carved into park benches *e n d l e s s*

c o m b u s t i o n

n e c e s s a r y

while biting the spoiled fruit
and listening for the Buddha in crowded cities

she could fall in love
with anyone and speak to the string
gently feed it unexplanations tell it her truths
bury it inside the Earth and let it sprout beneath
the sky as if or almost

alive

Sisters

I can't make the word gangbang beautiful—
not after reading Virginia Woolf
or stealing valium from your mother's purse.
There is no place to hide in those syllables.
Lying on your basement carpet
I raise the sunken city,
see that Isis is missing a limb, love the photography
of her nakedness as I uncover the definition of woman—
not The Queen of Kings poisoned by an asp,
but an atmospheric wave, pushed into motion. It is also
laughing on rickety Ferris wheels...learning how
an O'Keeffe can be a gentle hand on my shoulder
and an inescapable fire at the same time. These things
go untraced, with my hope that one day the women,
the ones in the tombs, will rise to say

you are with us now

and become secret perfumes to inhale. There will be no
girl hiding from Keats or Auden,
crouched behind a throne. No fleeing
to Syria in the shadow of a brother. The fear will go unmentioned.
Instead, it will be a bold brow, conquering,
as the waters of the Nile carry my army through millennia
into gas station bathrooms where I see myself in mirrors
and past discount stores full of dusty rugs. Yes, I will become
an installation—The Great Lady of Perfection,
excellent in counsel, The Great One, sacred image of my father. No
longer will two-toned criminal artifacts hide the
death of my sister—could I do this to her,
conceal the origin of her bruise? All will be revealed

in the acidized skulls, broken earrings
and clitoral stimulation that we wished for
but never received. Memories of giving fellatio to Mark Antony will rise
only to evaporate and rise again.

Our waterfall eras are smearing into crossing arms. I see a stone sphinx covered
in rootless weeds, heirloom vegetables rotting on a marble countertop,
feel the damage of not being able to orgasm
without the entire Ptolemaic army in my bed. And they
would relish us between the sheets—we are those strange hairless cats
they covet, hairless cats are easily women—
as our singing draws them into a sleep from which
they never recover. In our triumph we will be comets shooting
above desecrated libraries, burning into new centuries,
and I will say *remember me* to the innocent eyes
peering through riverside reeds.

Trace

Grandfather thinks everything at yard sales

is worth a dime

a quarter is too much

he says

I'll give you a dime

coming home with dirty paintbrushes and
taxidermy fish bringing

watercolor trees to life until one day he is lost in a thick forest
and cannot remember his name

Resurrection

They lay in the abyss—
the remains—
 a broken wing and a muddied shell,
casting shadows on the floor
of this long-forgotten necropolis.
No dust is disturbed,
No megalithic monument broken. I am the eagle
that feeds on myself and now you,
my secret collection of fragments,
climb from the debris as some beast
(arachnidian)
 with long appendages
and an earthy stench,
surging toward my untouchable vein,
 hungry.
Your eyes are vessels of bitter, watery azure,
 furious—
and this memory becomes a pale bird in darkness. There is no judge,
 no teacher.
There is nothing but the veil
as I reach past this death
to grasp the beginning of another sun.

Scry

With almost no delay,
the entry is moving.

Does it echo for us
as the nonliving do?

Fold in,

they say,

fold in

as Eve mocks this life,
this stellar evolution.

My paracosm expands through unnumbered doorframes,
colliding with a distant midnight

where a new lexicon speaks—

axiom,

nemesis,

incendiary.

Like stars in the vision of an open eye,

we travel alone,

returning first to a bathtub with opaline bubbles

and your body,

unbending in water.

Then, to the approaching vision

of the child in the oatmeal-colored room,

two doctors,

and a bridge beyond the window

illuminated above an obscurity of trees.

Blue

Rain has fallen here—

my heart tells me this—

and there are people who whisper

I love you

on oil paint,

as if we can hear them. In the memory,

pink buds become your kisses (*funerary*)

and there are willow branches that

curve

like your arms. There is fear

of a smudge or of too much sunlight

and water that seems to say

I have a vision.

looking across the garden,

Monet sinks into despair

and I remember your eyes.

Sixth Extinction

Inhalation necessary

air expelled and forgotten

we were never safely held by our own hands

parasitic hearts leeching blood from the Holocene

not distant as they say

but near

naming monstrosities as the end

but never ourselves

letting the hemorrhage pour

uncontrolled onto ripe fruits

papaya kiwi

orange

filling blood bags to power the lightbulbs

to feed the glass boxes that our eyes are locked upon

our bodies floating in primordial fluid

perhaps a chambered nautilus or severed arm to drift by

and from us red seeps into the thickness where we exist

choking all else overbearing the world with ourselves

the one creation led astray

and I am its center

that which I touch rotting slowly

or engulfed in flames

atmospheric pressure drawing my knees to soil

my body mangled starved

acidic tears flowing outward

fern to curl

around my unborn child

Pythia

Eyes removed, I peer into blackness,
blue hydrangeas in my hands.
Swallowed by endless murmurings of the shades,
day and night are no longer for me. The shackles
that bind my wrists together are rusting
against old blood, new blood,
as I forever offer my bouquet to the lightless world.
Inhaling fumes from the fissure, my head can do nothing
but tilt back, the holes where my eyes once were: voids to receive all that is.
Then come the visions
revealed in this death-blanket—
bright petals or smooth faces masquerading in darkness
speaking sometimes *wither,*
wither,
their echoes like chains sliding on the floor
and then the voices spoken by those in robes commanding
predict.

Dig

Woodpecker morning

sunrays on onyx hair

winter solstice

microbiome disrupted two hands and a shovel

dig

neuron excavated

tremor lessoned

analog clock rediscovered

dig

hair dampened pelvic bone unearthed

nasal cavity chipped

a bag of rusted coins

dig

black and brown wires

as if roots a metal box with a metal lock dented by

a metal shovel

dig

no place for tears

only absorption only earthworm breakfasts

dig

a map of layers

unreadable some jagged stones

red mud on forearms

red mud beneath fingernails

dig

a pair of eyes never found

a heart somewhere deep below

dig

Departure

And it will be noon on a Saturday
when the train leaves the station.

 New York will grow distant,
 Jim's urn will sit covered in dust,
and grandma will tell us grandpa's last words—

My brain is dying
—as the scratched record plays.

 A sweater will be removed
and worn again,
 a widow's son will pretend to drown
in Mosquito Pond,

 a woman will breastfeed her baby
in the back of The Salvation Army—
 mom, dad,
you and I—

 the satellite will reach us all.

 My blood will stain your blue carpet
for years to come
and it will be as much poetry

 as the

call me

written in this old phonebook.

Echo

Gazing into dark water

I examine the face of She Who Appears Below

knowing more yet seeing less

her eyes shimmering beneath gentle waves untouchable

as if in glass

I cannot love she whispers

I cannot flee and seeing she speaks a truth

I move my hand closer to her face only to obscure her

and obscured she cannot speak

release me she begs alone in her kingdom of rejected light

perhaps but for the one she calls *he*

made from nothing but memory

who becomes a fin cutting thru her face

sending waves wobbling outwards jumbling her words

my last image of her eyes terror

and I know place we fit together

cannot be singular only plural

for the corridor we once used was different from the one I see now

which we walk thru in our many faces

Cast

Never returned, my shadow-self is wandering. She lives inside the dome—a planetarium of rebirthed stars and voids. Saved in these cosmic vapors are memories, visions: lupines in a meadow; glasses at the end of a wedding night; blood in the whiskers on my father's chin. I touch them gently. The Seven Sisters send messages from afar. *Find Orion's belt and travel to his bow; seek the eye of Taurus; move into the cluster of preserved souls.* There is a slowness to my drift into the atmosphere. It is moving entirely backwards, this place. Through a church window is a room full of broken watches, a portal to ancient myths. There is no visible door, no plaque of remembrance to read. But there is a song that opens. Dissolved into nonbeing, I descend into the notes, sewn and severed beyond time.

First

Perhaps I am nothing—
alone in this place of contemplation,
hidden among the tremolos
of crickets and whispering reeds,
unseen.

Lying at the edge of this circular stone,
I have survived many days,
like a dying specimen
given a second chance by rain.

At times I emerge as a reflection—
a fragment of the watery arc,
carrying passing clouds as gently as the sky—
and feel a presence.

How am I to know? I ask.

To what end? answers the Oracle.

III

Metamorphosis

*

her body

not her own

goes looking soon

she finds the bones

didn't I tell you they were here

laughs the guide

pressing its thumb into Earth.

*

the sundial speaks

we breathe air close to visibility

but never seen my voice touching your ear

your index finger brushing my sternum

do you feel it now the rape so carefully

concealed red perennials

by the river

*

there is no sky

only heaviness on the bones of a child

and an echo in a woman's heart her hand

reaching for the ungraspable moon

*

find the end of the war

how can I find the end of the war

if I can't even learn to peel mangoes

*

no

I cannot remove Russian troops
with my fingers just like
Diazepam cannot erase overdosing
on mom's birthday

*

there are some things I'll never forget
teaching you how long to wait for pears to ripen
braiding your hair on the subway
the *no* you whispered as snow began to fall

*

I see the sunset from my dream
and touch the map of days
on it a corridor spiraling into darkness
or is it a well
broken body in its depths
birdsong from across the meadow

*

overtake me with your wrathful waves
as I circle my hands around your neck in the murky depths
where we count sacred coins
seeking refuge in lost caverns
murmuring lullabies of sunlight leagues away
tears invisible in the watery gloom
and wrap our arms around the bodies we were born with

*

I sit watching vendors
sell white pinwheels to children
a pregnant cat crosses the street
you are the blur
in my periphery

*

in the fray we are neighboring circumstellar discs

I see your cosmic dust as much as you see my dimming vapors

*

your words are mortified to speak in my hands
floating thru my fingers they dissemble
whispering about hidden letters as the page turns
and I am found flustered by existence

*

walking below

the graffitied bridge I become

the stride of an enigmatic drum cars

pushing against concrete

*

trapping urban squirrels is impossible
there is a stockade by city hall
we get married we pick up guns

*

your drawing is my dream

it sees a girl standing in the street

motherless

*

dragging her teddy bear through the snow

a child wails *why do we have to leave*

because we cannot stay explains her mother

*

please let me come back inside
it is so cold I am almost
Chernobyl 1986

*

The apartment stands rubbled
blueprint useless reinforcements snapped
we are left with scorched bricks
and sooty hair

*

days become non-days
crocuses bloom along the sidewalk
strangers smile in the city
how was it ever spring

*

I did not count the months or days without you
instead I watched your hair grow long
like shooting stars
onward

AFTERWORD

The manuscript you have read is not chronologically arranged. It is arranged, rather, by the emotional pull of each poem to its neighboring poems. In the process of writing these poems, I have learned to see language as a form of self-discovery and, in turn, a form of discovery of the world. Releasing the urge to control the vision I have for an individual poem has been a great practice in mindfulness for me. To loosen my grip on ideals and to follow the natural path that a poem wants to take has helped me in my own life journey. Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh once said that letting go gives us freedom, and that freedom is the only condition for happiness. I now practice letting go every day, whether it is in my poetry or otherwise. I see life as a constant cycle of letting go, and try to practice doing so with open hands. This way, the world is free to reach me, and I am free to love the world.



The End

