

SELF-PORTRAIT IN A TWO-WAY MIRROR

by

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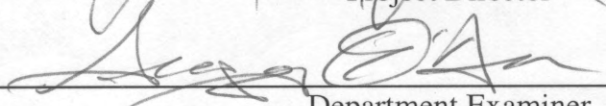
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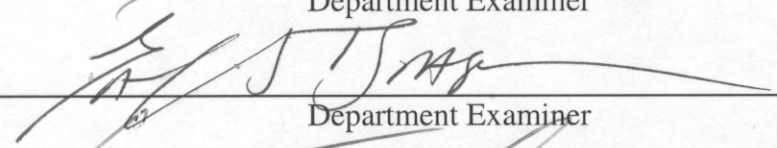
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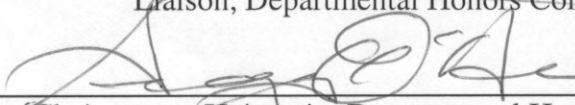
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“I held stubbornly to narration . . . Yet the truth is that my images--those imaginative links of mine--became constantly more complicated, constantly branching out into ever thinner air.”<sup>1</sup> In a postscript to a poetry collection, Cesare Pavese recounts his struggle with allowing a poem to develop its own structure. By allowing the poem to grow in this way, I find new possibilities appearing for it that I would never have planned. The poem begins to build its own logic, its own “imaginative links.” While I learn to allow these things to happen, I also learn to recognize the patterns that form the poem and to organize it accordingly. As a result, it begins to communicate its own unique view of the world, outside of my own intentions.

Essentially, reading and writing poetry become processes of allowing language to form thought. Rather than beginning with an idea that I want to convey, I often start with a word, phrase, or sentence that I want to investigate. In the early stages of writing, the sounds of words against each other, repetitions, or rhythms move me through the poem. Although this seems to be a way of giving the process over to chance, it is impossible for my mind not to make associations from image to image, phrase to phrase, that move my thoughts in a particular path through the poem. The physical sounds of the words and the relationships between images pull the reader and myself through a process of discovery, building within themselves an unexpected reality. During the process of revision, I become conscious of the relationships that have formed between images, rhythms, and rhetorical devices and where these relationships have broken down. However, revision

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<sup>1</sup> Cesare Pavese, trans. William Arrowsmith in *Hard Labor* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 198.

also becomes a process of experimentation. Testing whether the last line could actually be the first line, for instance, rearranging relationships between images, or even allowing the poem to move in an entirely new direction can give the poem more strength or at least make me more aware of its essential relationships. Because I come back to the same poem again and again with a different vision of it each time, it becomes impossible to actually delineate a particular line of thought that generated it. The poet Mark Strand states that a poet's methods "rarely declare themselves in procedural terms" because they "are largely unknown at the time of writing and are discovered afterwards, if at all."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the only relevant line of thought for explaining a poem becomes the final version of the poem itself. This is the thought process through which the poet is communicating with the reader.

Although a poem is not usually speaking through the poet's voice, it's as though we can sense the poet standing just outside. In Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," I can sense her urgency in writing in this strict villanelle form, with which she struggled for years. As the poem is about loss, the speaker learns to silence things, to leave things behind and follow the form, to carefully progress toward "losing farther, losing faster." At the end of the poem, when the stakes are at their highest ("losing you"), there is a hesitation in the speaker's willingness to communicate, and we hear the poet's voice fighting with the

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Strand, "Notes on the Craft of Poetry," in *The Weather of Words* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 111.

speaker to continue, saying, “Write it!”<sup>3</sup> This is one of the rare occasions when we feel we’ve actually heard the poet’s voice coming through to us, as if she’s tapping on the window. It’s this voice of urgency that seems to drive poets and poetry into existence.

Out of this urgency, a constant struggle forms between the poet and poem. The difficulty for the poet occurs when the unique world that the poem has created collides with the poet’s logical expectations. Paul Valéry writes that the poet is a translator of the unknown, of things which “thought by itself cannot produce . . . a precious and unique solution to a problem that is formulated only when it is solved.”<sup>4</sup> It is almost as though the poem exists outside of the poet altogether. But, what the poem still retains of the poet is what Nietzsche calls the “metabolism” of his thought, the tempo of his style, the rhythms of his discoveries.<sup>5</sup>

The poet Federico Garcia Lorca goes so far as to place the poem’s metabolism outside of both the poem and the poet. He attributes the poem’s urgency to a spirit, the duende, which “is a power, not a work. It is a struggle, not a thought.”<sup>6</sup> The duende may be seen as a sense of urgency which comes from putting everything at stake. “The duende must know beforehand that he can serenade death’s house and rock those

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art,” in *The Complete Poems 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., 1983), lines 7, 16, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Valéry, “Variations on the Eclogues,” tr. Denise Folliot in *Theories of Translation* edited by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Problem of Translation,” tr. Peter Mollenhauer in *Theories of Translation* edited by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Federico Garcia Lorca, “Play and Theory of the Duende,” in *In Search of Duende* (New York: New

branches we all wear, branches that do not have, will never have, any consolation.” This force acts on both the poem and the poet to produce something new--“the duende’s arrival means a radical change in forms. It brings to old planes unknown feelings of freshness, with the quality of something newly created.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, the poem develops its own sense of “self,” its own voice outside of the poet. As the poet Marvin Bell states, “what can be known about the self it is possible to know mostly by looking outside the self, and not into mirrors.”<sup>8</sup> This “looking outside” can involve a kind of reaching, gathering, and linking of previously unrelated things in an effort to reconcile the things that in everyday life cannot be reconciled.

Charles Simic explains that the poem becomes “a way of maintaining oneself in the face of . . . multiplicity.”<sup>9</sup> We are constantly in the face of multiplicity because the mind never sits still, information we receive from the world around us can be fragmented and contradictory, and time cannot maintain a sense of presence. Even words lend themselves to multiple meanings. A poem can face this multiplicity and at the same time have a distinct voice and a sense of presence in time to create, what Robert Frost calls, a “momentary stay against confusion.”<sup>10</sup> In Wisława Szymborska’s “Under One Small Star,” one can see her distrust of language, the inadequacy and apology she communicates in “Don’t bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words,/then labor

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Directions, 1998), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Lorca, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Marvin Bell, “‘Self’ Is a Very Iffy Word for Me,” in *Old Snow Just Melting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1986), 129.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Simic, “Negative Capability and Its Children,” in *The Uncertain Certainty* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (London: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1968), 18.

so heavily that they may seem light.”<sup>11</sup> Here again is the urgency that drives a poem. This is the need to write, to communicate, even with the understanding that one cannot write what one knows. In fact, one cannot even communicate with one’s own voice. Keats explains that “a poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity--he is continually in for--and filling some other body.”<sup>12</sup> The poet must find an uncertain place from which to speak. This is the reason that the poet stands outside, looking in, while the poem animates the world. Tadeusz Różewicz’s poem, “In the Midst of Life,” illustrates well this idea of recreating the world through poetry: “after death/I found myself in the midst of life/creating myself/building life/people animals landscapes.”<sup>13</sup> Here, I find my most important motivation for writing and studying poetry: it is an attempt at building something that previously had no form, at translating for the self and for the reader the unknown and uncertain into a reality.

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<sup>11</sup> Wisława Szymborska, “Under One Small Star,” tr. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, from *Poems New and Collected 1957-1997* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1997), lines 27-28.

<sup>12</sup> John Keats, “Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818” in *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats* edited by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Random House, 2001), 500.

<sup>13</sup> Tadeusz Różewicz, “In the Midst of Life,” tr. Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire in *The Survivor and other Poems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), lines 2-6.

Don Quixote and the sleepwalking beggars

You have to face calamity with sleep,  
he always says. With his face covered in sheets,  
he yells for wheat and barley  
as if a knight is a dying farmer  
running out of beer money, as if  
you can yell for what you want  
like the stock market man with his fingers  
in the air. Put your hands down, I tell him.  
The cards are dealt the way the rain is cut  
into two by the gutters. Even water  
disappears between your fingers, and broom handles  
left resting against doors hit the ground at night.

This is a game the satellite dishes never pick up. I know  
because I move from house to house to see if the shows  
have better endings. But the damsels always  
peek their heads out the train windows  
right before the tunnel comes, and the knights  
fall out of bed and hit their heads on their helmets.  
And the mist that seeps in through the window sills

is the mist around our tires that falls off the side  
of the mountain. This is a game made up by sleepwalking  
beggars, like the man in the street yelling at the cars  
in foreign languages. I know him now, and every night  
I toss him a little something before pulling the shade down.

Think of the children

I was born, they mixed me a drink, they said,  
Tell me what you know. I was born  
without any bones. Like a shark, they said.  
I was born with too many teeth in my mouth.  
In kindergarten, I bit into everyone.  
It was their bones I wanted. I loved the sound  
of roaches crunching into the floor, hated  
to watch their legs kicking in the air  
as if they'd live on without their skeletons.  
I was born busting the gangbusters' circles.  
I blew smoke rings in their faces. They knew me  
by my toothy smile. I was born, and vodka  
spilled all over the floor. I was born,  
and I ran away from my mother. I never drank  
past the age of twelve when I lost her  
in a game of yahtzee. The kids were crying  
and couldn't hear the TV. I wanted to smash the children,  
push the dice into their eyes, held a knife  
across my sister's throat. I grabbed my mother's coarse gray hair.  
I never listened to a word she said: Who's children are those?

Their bones are breaking all over the floor.

I threw the dice across the table, I threw the children

into the television. I think of the kids

whose bones are always growing, whose joints are fused together,

their arms stuck out, their eyes twitching at the light.

And like a shark, I bite the backs of my lovers. I punch

my hands through windows. And I don't even have to confess.

## Pavlov unzipped

Pavlov sits in an armchair, his thoughts unzipped.

Somebody's heart is growling at the window. Pavlov traces  
the growl back up to the sun, lifting the blame from himself.

His nerves, frayed at the ends, look exactly

like he expected. Ropes that tie his hands to his feet. To leash

his fear to a tree. To tie the birds together in midair who've exhausted

each other's songs. To find what the dog's been barking at, to see

hunger in the corners of the mouth. To see love

in the chambers of a dead heart. There's a reason for the rubber bands

up and down his arms. He's harnessed the snapping

of a prostitute's underwear. There's a reason

he's cornered the market on mother's milk. There's a squirrel

dragging a milk carton down the street. The dog lies

on the couch, paws in the air, head turned away, tongue

resting on a pillow. The chicken and the egg

are fried up for dinner. Nobody's eating. The dog rolls over

and growls. He never knows when it's time to eat anymore.

## Final Four

1.

This is intense.

God has never lost

at musical chairs before.

In the dark gym, the echoes

of our feet are drumming

off the walls of folded bleachers.

It all seems bigger now

when the basketball goals

are raised to the sky,

and Gabriel sits in the rafters

like a ghost, listening sadly

to the twitters of trapped birds.

I picture the underworld caving in,

the four of us turning to quicksand

as the floor turns to sky.

And now, even the dead get up

to watch the game,

to hear a chorus of angels

suddenly choke in mid-song,  
to realize there is a hand  
pulling a chair out from under God,  
and to grab the sides of their seats  
as they see God, like a toddler,  
half-sitting, and falling.

2.

All the goddesses were watching  
the day when the Greek gods turned  
their mortal women to quicksand  
and left their hands waving  
out of the ground in rows.

This was the “Sacred Field of Fingers.”

And the farmers and the priests  
would run to the ends of the field  
boxing out one another’s prayers.

A farmer prayed for rain, hoping  
that these were his daughter’s hands,  
which would one day grow into olive trees.

A priest sprinkled wine, hoping  
these were the roots of the silent gods,

which would one day grow  
into a holy mountain. The goddesses  
watched it all on TV, and the birds  
could only wait in the treetops  
for someone to look up  
as they dropped their family of eggs  
down onto the field. But the underworld  
caved in under the weight of the living. The ground  
was replaced with sky, and the dead  
were replaced with gods, and the hands  
were replaced with stones.

And when the hordes came in from the East,  
they used these stones  
to knock the fruit from the trees  
and knock the goddesses out of the sky.

## Wrecked mermaids

There's this humming in my throat  
that I've stopped listening to. They say it's like  
the constant ruffling of wings on a wire, that it provides  
balance when things are blowing all around outside.  
And if all the winds were still, the ocean's curls  
would stretch out over the rocks like wrecked mermaids  
embarrassed to find themselves flopping in the sun.  
At such a sight, the rocks would pray  
to crumble into the sky, to throw their arms  
around the sun and darken the day in a nebula,  
as if some nights even the moon could burn a hole  
through a magnifying glass. But even electric fish  
can hum through a metal rod, and even our fingertips  
push currents over the tops of our glasses.  
Even when the cliffs fall into the ocean,  
they'd just as soon lay low, press their ears  
against the world, join the rumblings of iron  
and ants, and spend the years digesting the mountains.

This is the way the shadows walk

This is the way sidewalks are written

to be seen from a plane, branching from each other  
like arteries that empty into a field and leave us looking  
for a jet stream to carve out the rest in the sky.

This is like the echoing of a train at night

when we look both ways and see nothing, and the bats  
throw down their cries and catch the sound from the air.

This is when the crickets close their scream. Darkness reflects  
off roads that follow the rivers down to the ocean.

Maybe it's like the nights when the sun falls

down the drain, and I can barely read your heart  
in the side mirror, and we learn to write backwards all over again.

This is how the world turns in on itself, the way the oaks

bend their limbs around the power lines, and the cypress roots  
press their knees against the highway, and the glaciers push the world  
under a mountain that pushes its face up out of the world. And you  
look like the cat left standing under the streetlights and casting  
two shadows at its sides. The way the shadow of your shadow  
walks slightly off the ground and leans up toward the light.

The city in the iceberg

The first time a blind man  
found a ghost in his yard, he was tying  
his hammock to the smell of summer.

The first time the sun ever spit fire,  
the ocean was throwing its jellyfish at the clouds  
like an ape in a tantrum.

The first time a book ever flew out the window,  
it fluttered its pages and formed an 'f'  
in the sky with the gothic romances.

The first time a man and woman had sex,  
they were trying to cure her appendicitis.

When the first woman died, the men thought God  
was giving them back a rib. They stopped eating,  
cut open their stomachs, and lay out  
under the sun with the seals. This is where  
we find the saying, "Good things come to those who wait."

When the first man died, the animals forgot  
who they were and jumped off the cliffs in panic  
until all the bottoms of cliffs  
were covered in soft mounds of fur. This  
is where the "bed" was discovered.

The first high diver was walking in his sleep  
and woke at the moment when he lost his stomach.  
His mother slapped him when he resurfaced --  
she always thought her child was an outgrowth  
of her stomach ache.

One day, the wind pushed the great mountain on both sides  
and it fell into itself  
someone found an ancient city inside an iceberg  
someone found after 300,054 days that the sun  
is too far away to shoot with a bow and arrow  
and shot himself  
and the mothers thought their children would fall back into their wombs  
the animals stopped diving off cliffs  
and began using mnemonic devices like "daffy duck" and "bugs bunny"

the penguins wouldn't swim back to the land  
the falling snow seemed to mean  
that the sky was squeezing all our people against the earth.

Letters from the catfish

The crepe myrtle out front  
feels upside down. Nothing else  
drinks through its hairs,  
sucks out the light with its feet.  
I've read that crepe myrtles  
should be pruned once a year,  
and that mine wants to be  
an octopus. It scratches  
and prunes itself on the bricks  
by my window. When I can't sleep,  
I watch it casually dropping  
its shoes into the pond  
like tiny dead fish, spitting sap  
at the snails who trace their thoughts  
on slices of bark to find in the moonlight.  
I find letters from the catfish,  
written inside old snake skins, and strewn  
across the lawn as the wind  
brushes its arms over the tops of the grass.  
Things are waving at me as if it

were time for winter. The phone poles  
send roots that stretch south  
to reach the ocean. And over the fence,  
my old neighbor wakes up in his hammock  
ready to go to the beach.

## Burning blankets

I've been told

when the Navajos weave their blankets

with their eyes closed, their fingers

graph their thoughts in the dark,

and the looms start to buckle

under the weight--

this is something like the story

of the dying of a heart monitor while the heart

continues to live. No different

from your grandfather's feet shuffling

through the lines that the surf makes in the sand.

They say everything leaves tracks,

like these red streaks, made

by an old eraser, that I can't get to erase.

I've been told to put away my eraser

and keep drawing, but these fifty scratches

want to be one line that can hold up

everything in the shadows.

I've heard that the spiders waste miles  
of webbing trying to weave the trees together  
with their eyes shut, that the Navajos  
burn hundreds of blankets a day, that any message  
you write in the sand can never be seen from a plane.

At 5:00

A Chinese madman

was in love with my sister.

When she was only 13, we tried to catch

his insanity. Red and white paisley

stuck to his back as he ran

full speed and barefoot

down the street. I thought

he was running from a dragon. My sister

said it was the police, but behind him

was nothing but spaces

bending in waves of heat. He looked back,

and I knew he saw fire. The flames

licked the bottoms of his feet

that flashed red with burns--and he zagged

to our side of the street.

She laid her claim on him

with the front tire of her bike,

leaving a black streak on his pants. She says

for one second, she was sideways

between pavement, bicycle, and man.

And she says at that moment  
he looked at her. I saw him stop  
and meet the shock with sweat  
and breath, then turn away  
before her arm hit the ground.  
She screamed, and he, already  
ten feet away, yelled as if  
a claw had reached his back.  
She says this was him feeling for her,  
and, at 5:00 everyday  
for a week, we went out,  
my sister with her arm in a sling,  
to watch for her trace  
on the back of his pants.

## Ancient teachings of the cricket

I opened the door for a cricket. His screeching hinges  
searched the emptiness of the room. Like a leaf  
that blew in last week, he will scatter into a corner,  
his joints will begin to break. He will slide his dry body  
the way a soldier puts down his gun and drags himself  
on his hands back to the trenches.

These things happen for a reason, I tell him.  
Lost things blow in here looking for rooms in the fall,  
just a cold wall to curl up against, just a crack  
to scratch into and sing and hope that others  
will crawl under the door by the morning.

In the morning, I find his leg in the sink,  
a piece from a dead flower. If this was a gift  
of gratitude, I would pin it to the wall  
and sketch out the rest of his body as a Trojan horse,  
still kicking, as I know he would want to be remembered.

But this is just a stem, a twitching snake.

I hear him under the closet door -- he's watching.

I point his leg like a sword and say, Tell me what you know.

He tells me, I think, to give up my life one year at a time.

That if I had six legs, I could always stand to lose one.

That I should acquire a set of wings and rub them together  
and make as much noise as I can before the winter.

That I should find a mate and lay as many eggs as possible  
in a moist place . . . maybe he means that my legacy,  
like the cricket's, will always have its place.

That in China, a fighting cricket is traded  
for a gambling man's best horse, and singing crickets  
filled the small lives of ancient emperors' concubines.

That there will always be a place for us in pockets,  
in window sills and sinks.

Or maybe he's saying, Let me out, or you will find me in your pockets,  
in your window sills, and in your sink. When you lie in bed,  
I'll scream in your ears all night. I'll be the snake in your dreams.

I want the chance to live again. I hate you more than anything.

Even if the autumn wind blew me into Hades, I would fight  
over my last leg and sing until it was really winter.

My mama the metaphor

Don't trust this poem with your car –  
it's been blind for years and cannot tell the green  
of your eyes from the red of your lips no matter how  
beautiful it says you are.

I'll tell you, this poem looks terrible –  
it hasn't bathed in weeks, and the old  
metaphors are stuck all over its face  
like bits of shaving cream.

There were times when this poem  
was a spitting image of my brother –  
it could long jump twenty three feet in your old  
church shoes, cover your face in sand,  
rake you into the pit, wait for weeks  
to tell you it was just kidding. Despite its age,  
this poem still has its senses.

It will never agree to meet my parents –  
tells me I might as well call my mom and say,

“Mom, I’m always seeing shady men  
outside my window, and I’m always thinking  
they want to go to bed with me,  
and what if I did?”

If this poem had a mom, she’d answer,  
“It’s just the Sleep Monster, dear, go to bed,”  
and we’d feel calm with the thought of his fins  
brushing over our eyes to make us sleep.

This poem needs a mom. I didn’t sign on for this mess --  
but the special homes wouldn’t take it. I beg them all,  
tell them that I’m just a kid, that it’s been known  
to eat children, that all my dogs,  
all my fish have run away with it,  
and only this poem comes back to me.

But the words of this poem have become like a waterfall.  
It’s wearing us down like a bunch of rocks  
imbedded with the words of a lunatic.

Lines from the sun

Everyday, the snowbirds fall  
through the knuckles of cliffs

unnoticed, like my pencil rolling  
out of my pocket in the car.

Under the seat, I found a yellow marker  
that pulls lines out from the sun,  
fingers from the sky  
piercing tires,  
pushing over chimneys  
and foreheads of women, healing the blind,  
and on the surfaces of everything,  
making lines,

like coded messages from my ruler. These lines  
disappear as soon as they are made.

In the fall, empty glass bottles  
float in the bay, and the fishermen's wives

collect them. In the middle of the day,  
the fishermen's eyes are the caves  
in the sides of the mountain full of sleeping  
birds. In the winter, the pigeons refuse to fly.  
They drag their feet, pulling our notes  
through puddles of snow, making themselves  
a line in the road to find their way back to the sun.

## Pulling up rivers

This is why they poured their salt  
into the lakes. It was like dropping  
change into the fish's mouths  
and like tossing their hair  
back over their shoulders  
saying, "This is how you do it."

Because my hands are always  
messy at the table, with my knife always  
cutting in front of my fork and the beets  
always flying out from underneath.  
I'll pour our salt into the lakes.  
Because I can. Because a pinch  
over our shoulders still wouldn't do,  
we'll pour our salt into the lakes  
with the cranes looking as if  
we were pulling up rivers from the ground.  
They'll wait to dance on the muddy bottom  
and find what they've been missing  
and pull out lost meals from ancient times.

Because it's hard to stand on one leg and watch  
the wake pulling the boats to one side.  
Because I like my fish dry, and we live  
so far from the ocean. I'll be pulling up beets from the ground  
because they once were the staple of our diet,  
and I once was a farmer with nothing for lunch,  
and you were a lute player who slept all day,  
and I made us a garden of orchids and other useless plants,  
and you made them grow, and I never saw you  
except in the seconds when the sun flashed in the window  
as I sat up awake and heard my own song in my head.

Some architect jumped from the roof of my building.

He fell face-up, the architect,  
watching the roofline drift  
into the sky the way landfills  
disappear into the ground. I see people  
falling down drunk on Easter, and I want to  
take them home, take them to church, keep them away

from rooftops and windows.

But even my dog claws  
through his collar at night, and it was nighttime  
when the architect's shoe hit my window.

I was dreaming of the windows blurring  
into ribbons, a dream

about love because my mother was a seamstress  
who refused to make her children's clothes. I made dresses  
out of paper from the trash can, and I saved the shoe  
because I wanted him like a piece of an airplane,  
suddenly, the way a stewardess grabs  
the collar of a terrorist when he

shows her the bomb in his shoe. The morning sirens  
might as well have been lawnmowers,  
and the people on the street were scattering  
pigeons. I was in love the way I was in love  
when the bus driver remembered my name.  
But the wind points away

all the faces and people, the way you point  
the bottle away because *contents under pressure*, because  
everyone I know loves faces and people, and they say  
that in life, you have to plumb the depths  
of beauty, but I know the wind threw the plumb line off  
that the architect made in the air.

Smearing the punch line

1.

They say that its eyes watch the insides  
of its body. It lives, invisible, in deep sea.

They say it's a rabbit  
that never leaves its hat, a book  
that studies the dust it's covered in,  
a trick the mind takes a lifetime to pull.

This is a photograph of a real ghost, a joke  
that died fighting at the punch line.

2.

A fish walks into a bar with a light  
growing out of his head  
and tells me he ate my goldfish.

“Things are always swimming into the light,”  
he says.

But I tell him that my cat  
ate my goldfish, and so on  
until I ate my cat.

He slaps his tail on the concrete floor  
and laughs like no fish before him.

3.

Grandma says her big-bellied laughs  
are the angry ghosts of her children.

I tell her, "Nobody's died." She says,  
"I don't remember anyone not-dying."

"Listen, we all feel a kick in the stomach  
when we laugh." "I don't  
remember anyone laughing."

"But you don't remember my name, or whether  
I had a name. Proper names are always  
capitalized because they're things  
you should always remember."

"I never learned to read or write."

"But you were a teacher. You still  
smell like the dust from the chalkboard."

“I no longer have a nose.”

“I can see it on your face.”

“I can’t remember

if I’m really here, or if you’re really there.”

She wants me to tell her a joke.

But this is a joke. Her belly’s

shaking already. She says she

no longer has a belly.

The fists of trees

Trees are always standing in for people.

Here, they're sidewalk preachers left behind  
who've counted all their fingers down to fists

and only throw their fists against the wind  
as if a tree could move without the wind.

And here, I say, "They're tucked in under the night,"

as if the dark is something like a blanket,  
as if a boxer hugs before he punches.

But he falls, and I count my fisted fingers out

the way I count the miles from roar to lightning  
and drag the limbs out to the street each morning.

Trees are always standing in the way,

taking cannonballs in the chest, because

I want to see the chest split open, fingers  
blown away and forced from limbs of fists.

Because there's something stuck inside my chest,  
and my hands keep going numb because it's winter,  
I have to make the trees stand in because  
They only throw their fists against the wind.

To the woman running down the street with her shoes in her hand

I lift up my words, little cups of water  
too far for you to grasp. A runner's hands  
are never fists. Fingers lightly folded  
paper in the breeze. Enclosed, you'll find  
a picture I took of you this morning.

I thought I'd stop you for a hundred years or so.

I took the light you've squinted against for so long,  
and now your colors are blurred against the trees.

The leaves, you don't notice, are changing.

They've given up your breath, fallen in your path.

A runner never stops breathing. The energy  
you'd save would only die with you.

And wherever you're going, what matters is the time  
between the trees, measured out in the increments  
of your breath, your pulse, your footfalls.

We're animals, you and I. And when I paint you,

I lay the canvas down on the floor

and measure it out by the increments

of the floorboards. And when I nail it to the wall,

a part of you still clings to the ground like feet.

A runner's feet never touch the ground.

It's their shoes that dig in like claws in the dirt.

And to think of the sidewalk-crawlers,

to think of the monks with their scraped up knees

under their robes, stopping to sniff the petals in the grass,

to scoot the ants out of the way, to tag

the next group in front. They tell me

that in the race to eternity each leg wins

with the last. But I've watched them

frame-by-frame, I've seen them shove each other

off the sides of the world, and from here, the world

only measures the length of my finger.

## CAUTION THRU STREET

Careful how slowly you step.

Your bare feet

will stick to the road forever.

Dirt-colored gum on your heels,

an orange vest and whistle to direct school

traffic. But the kids,

they'll dare each other

to climb on your back, kick your shins to see

if you will move. This will seem unfair.

Call the evening news

to do a cover story.

Here, you must begin

to lie to yourself. You deserve

a history of battles, speeches, saved children.

This town at least installs

a speech button and lights for the tourists.

Historical societies

nail a golden plaque to your feet. Here,

your status remains. It spreads. To Oklahoma,

where your wife sees you, a statue on the news,  
thinks you're dead, and is happy  
that you died so heroically. She travels  
all night with tears in her eyes to tell you  
how much she misses you, and you continue  
to stare off at some imaginary principle, saying,  
"Press button to begin." She marvels  
at your likeness to yourself, and you  
set up statues of yourself all around you  
just to watch her from all sides. If you grow tired  
of talking, standing in poses,  
and waiting under the linen sheet  
for the morning, if you wish to sleep,  
our town does not allow that.

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