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The First Half of Everything

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The First Half of Everything

Poems by Sara Keats

A Grace For My College Apartment

Something about the last supper.

Something about friends and enemies.

Something in the air that makes our laughter flat and squinted.

Let us break bread. Let us drink on and on.

Let us be endless.

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Song of the Twenty-Somethings

"Not everyone can remember exactly what happened the night before,
but they're pretty sure they did something"
- "People are Doing Things at Night" by Jen Doll

We are out all night. We are doing *things*. We forget the question.
In the morning, we eat oatmeal and drink Diet Coke with Lime.
We drink our coffee iced. Of course, it's free trade. We forget the question.
We drink coconut water after practicing our unpronounceable yoga.
We brought our own mats. We inherited spines, and they are limber. We are ready.

Our sinuses are filling up with hot air.
We're mouthing a grace for the twenty-first century.
We are discovering love like Columbus discovered America,
only with wit, and ferocious apathy.

We are going to live forever. We're training daily to master time.
Hours are nothing to us; no moving hands, just numbers in the corner.
A minute is a long, long time to blink.

Nobody likes to scoff as much as we do,
Nobody sings with such phony mirth.
We celebrate those among us in self-help therapy,
blesséd be his self-obsession.
Lo, strangers know our secrets, and love us for them.
They love us with their stranger thumbs.

We believe the first half of everything we hear. We forget the question.
We are going to live forever. We have the pictures to prove it.
We are going to retire someday to a grass-green-grass development called Fox Pass.
It's joke about *faux pas*. We'll never be done joking around.

Cecelia, briefly

In the yellow smudge that is her apartment, grimly carpeted and dusty, Cecelia is eating raisins. Lovely in her greasy frailty, she roots with desperation in the red box. Fishing the shrived mites out with the tip of her licked finger is a surprising display of seduction to someone, but she is alone. She shoves a pillow up her shirt and thinks, "In the future, I want a child of equal or lesser value to myself. What will I do if my daughter is prettier than me?" She stokes the bulging part of her t-shirt, and stares into the middle distance, thinking about how ugly raisins are, and how delicious.

The History of Love

We were forbidden from the thick of the thicket.
We called it a forest. We were small.
My mother worked, but never forgot my birthday.
His mother forgot lunch, but she let him keep a pet newt.

The forest was nothing more than a clump of trees and untamed hydrangeas
sighing against the Victorian mansions split
into wood-floored bedrooms and narrow kitchens.
Snooping down creaking shadow-stuffed halls and conjuring new narratives,
the house swallowed up our small selves.

We were small in the house, but bigger than the ants we herded
onto the great expanses of paper plates
in the overgrown garden.

*

I am working on a project tentatively titled the History of Love.
It begins with my mother
sitting in an over-stuffed yellow chair
and sneezing into her shoulder.
I am working out the ending.

*

We were royalty, sometimes, observing the garden,
strolling about the grounds. We both had parents
that had married other parents, and both knew
you could love someone on Monday
and yell a lot Thursday.

We knew about swinging on vines and storming the castle.
At school together, kneeling in twig-ridden sandboxes,
we built cities and tunnels for worms.
I dug the tunnels; he found the worms.

After school, what did we do with all of those ants
milling about on the smooth expanse of paper
to which we had enticed them?

*

Of course, love comes in many flavors, which,
if eaten too quickly, cause brain freezes, et cetera,
and so, in an attempt at sagacity, I lap it up slowly.

The childhood varieties, I inhaled
in desperate tablespoons,
which, I believe, has bred me
insatiable.

I burrow my nose in affection.
I demand to be encircled.

*

His newt was dull.
When no one was looking,
it went elsewhere.

I dreamt of newt-dug tunnels
undermining the thicket.

*

We children of weekend fathers with townhouses and community pools
are quick to forget the two-of-everything melancholy, how good
the rain smelled when we slept with the windows open,
how good it was to have a small light to read by at night
and thin sheets to make up the roof of your fort, how important
a once-a-week friend could be, and how easy it is to lose touch.

*

My father's garage was stuffed with adventures,
boxes to crawl over and under and rearrange.
There were entire shoeboxes of pens to disassemble,
there were bits of rope to turn into lassos.
My friend, my garden king, boosted me onto bicycles;
I showed him the shining trombone.

*

Last week, I bought a leather jacket for ten dollars.
It smells like short-story fatherhood, the sixties, et cetera.
I take its dinginess and faux-familiarity in stride.

My editor is waiting on my third draft.
I toe the dirt, feigning chagrin.
The mud packs around the tip of my boot.

I am thinking of building
stick bridges and digging
tunnels for newts and worms.

To the girl who wrote, "I really, really wish I were pretty" on the wall of the library study cubical

Really, really.

Mumble-grumble patriarchy, mumble-grumble love,
but what really gets me is where and how you wrote it
(fine-tip sharpie marker on the fake-wood plastic)
because when graffiti isn't art, it's got to be a prayer.

I am no rat-faced god, got no shoe-string solutions, can't turn your pumpkin into a stretch-limo carriage, can't even spin your magazines into answers. No, but that isn't really what you're asking. Pretty doesn't fix anything, it only greases the gears of this aching, tumbling clock.

Ramen

I've got something to tell you.

I'm not the bird with the broken wing, I'm not the stones beneath
your feet, and I'm not a shadow rolling in over the mountain.
No, I'm a long dead-chicken at the supermarket, more meat than god,
and even that I'm starting to question. Because if I'm a market-variety
super chicken, then I only know I'm greasy, and that's not fair at all.

If I am a chicken, I'm a chicken-in-sheep's-clothing,
a chew-it-up-and-spit-it-out metaphor with a motif twist. If I had any faith
in fake-it-'til-you-make-it transformations, I'd say I was a tiger
or a glass-eyed house cat, or even some frayed out psycho kitty,
raised by dumb dogs on fake-felt mice and kibble too big to swallow,
but I've never heard of chickens morphing into cats and I won't be
the first to try.

So I'm a wishing-cat chicken, but neither of those really work because
I need something more temporal. Someday I'll be the wind
and I'll mean it when I say it. One potayto, pahtato, but we all say it
the one-way right-way in this part of the world, so there's your answer
and we better call it "right"

I don't read the back of the box and I don't think about sodium, I think
about comfort and cheap love, not in the sex-sense but a love you buy
in bulk: special now forty-eight three-ounce packs for only eight dollars!
I'll have it all! The crunch and the salt, the just add water and I'll jazz it up with frozen peas.
I'm not chicken, but I just might be chicken-flavored.
I'm a cheap dry soup, but I promise to make much out of little.

To Be a Bread Breaker

tear at it
with flushed hikers' hands and
smear the rank, soft cheeses,
mispronounced
because our French accents are phony—
we just learned them from TV.

I had this cheese in Austria,
that really blew my mind
in that small way
that a nomadic meal
of a well-to-do picnic can.
*Ah, you think, this
is what they're talking about.*
What tiny adventures are decadent lunches.

I was sixteen and seeking
shy-girl thrills by climbing
small Alps and hugging cows
with new friends. At the top
of the mountain, a guestbook
in a tin box was tacked to
the huge white cross.

*I've had the most enlightening picnic, I wrote,
The sunshine, nice bread, good cheese and company.
This is what I want.*

the universal truths of being almost thirteen

getting dark out/why wasn't i home yet/where was my bike/who the hell was i with/ toes dug
into earth/cherry laces flying//something inside of me was screaming/she was the intricately
fashioned expression that would place me at equilibrium// waffled boot prints in the
sand//I applauded her love of pirates, video games, Salvation, thrift store clothing that she
would slice apart/suture//

she knew the moment we met I wanted
nothing more than to be molded
into her miniature/perfect twilight
blanketing/four-way intersection heart.

but me!/bland oatmeal/girl with limp hair/grey
t-shirt my mom bought me from the boys' section
and her!/perfect/fish pale skin/combat boots/the most
crooked smile/goodness/goddess

i needed to rescued from the banality of turning thirteen//she wrapped her lanky arms
around my waist//and pulled me close enough/memorize the shea butter and cheap
cigarette smell//scent, and/something warm amidst my cheek/her painted lips/my face
slowly/unconsciously//the sensation
/ghost of fantasies

//my phone rang/

the discontinuity that phone call brought
//edged cautiously towards me/her drawn in eyebrows up and up
at my shaky voice/trying to explain myself to my father/readjusted
eyes to the illuminating street lights//

I choked back my sobbing/a twelve-year old ass/blushed immensely//then, pirouetting up
divinity street/tiny wrists waving/
//Don't worry, hun, I'll see you again soon//
hand on/bony/silent goodbye behind her

Strathmere, New Jersey

We aren't allowed on the beach at night,
but we're going out anyway, to drink the honest darkness
and the wine we made in washed-out milk jugs all summer.

By day, the beach belongs to the oily ladies
reading best sellers, doing their crosswords.

My best friend's father is going to yell
when he hears us sneaking out the second time,
thimble of whiskey in us,

But I wear the bedclothes on my back; the comforter,
stripped from the bed and thrown about my shoulders,
filling up with sea air.

Gefilte Fish Love Song

Andrew didn't know a shank bone from a potato,
opened the Haggadah from the wrong side because
it isn't common knowledge that Hebrew goes the other way.
He knew the keys to my grandparents' affection
lay in his own stomach. Seeking a son-in-law approval,
he ate triple-egg popovers, cardboard matzah,
wine, and wine, and wine, and wine, hum hum humm
 hummed his way through the gefilte fish
 hum hum humm
 boiled fish guts— slime and mush—
covered in this homemade horseradish,
magical and dangerous and pink.
Humming as he gums the stuff
hum hum humm
the music of his efforts
rising from the fish-gut goo on his tongue,
the jelly sliding around the plate,
hum hum humm
You have to grow up with it, my mother told him,
squeezing his knee under the table.
hum hum humm
He forced it down.

Salt

It was the same as the last time:
people waiting and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.

We haven't time for telephones or bread.

*

Remember Lot's Wife?

That rough-hewed Eurydice, not in love with a rock star,
but mourning her Home?
She stands still, tan and sun streaked and proud and made
into salt.

*

I have been known to look back in snow and rain and hellfire,
Clap my hands over my eyes, and peek through my fingers.
Safe to be sentimental, sure, but there are prickly reminders,
warnings at bottom of a bag of pretzels, in summertime sweat,
in the taste of impossible tears and the shook shaker there, on the table.

You see it on the news in between the headlines:
The deer are being pushed out of the suburbs, into the roads.
I don't go for that wisdom of the woodlands,
but it has to mean something that they love to lick salt.

The First Wolf

"But watch out if you haven't learned that tame wolves
are the most dangerous of all"

- *Le petit Chaperon Rouge*, translated by Maria Tatar

Somewhere in Bethlehem, Colin is howling.
Two-hundred miles of turnpike between us
but I can hear him as clearly as I can
see the moon tacked to the corner of my window.

*

Colin was a wolf when I met him.
His father tried to tame him
with a rope and a bone. He hated the rope
but it was working. For now, at least
he was coming home at night.

Nineteen, belching car, overdue library books,
Colin smiled a dope's smile when I caught him
chewing groundhogs on the footpath.
I shook my fist at him, and he kissed my hand.

He was charming in the way wolves charm,
all eyes and ears and big teeth.
Colin made me spaghetti and brought me afghans.
He made me a mix-tape and said he loved me.
I let him under the red hood.

But wolves bite, and Colin bit, the third time
accompanied by much screaming in a clearing.
I left him there, in the gap between the trees,
and barreled away in my hand-me-down Sonata.

*

Somewhere in Bethlehem, Colin is howling,
and I am howling back, with reservations.
Colin waits tables, smokes weed, and whoops
into the night when he's feeling low, knowing
I will hear him, and I will answer.

Case #1:

It is the sister that tries to understand the mother

Mama, I am trying to get into your brain. I am trying to make sense of it:
the bread enough for trail markers, but not enough for breakfast,
the wilderness & the dead-of-nightness. I am trying to make sense of your heart
and your heartlessness, your cowardice and your lack
of inventiveness because even feral cats bring their kittens dead mice,
even wolves lick their pups, even the witch fed us cake.

But Mama, I am thankful for the hunger, which sharpened my spirits
to arrowhead precision. Your cruelty was a lesson in priorities and faith.
Abandonment is wicked teacher, but we, the abandoned, are fast learners,
and eat our witches rare.

Case #2:

The Enragement of Little Red Riding Hood

Mother, I am still down there
The insides of the wolf cannot be unseen.
I spit on your promises/*Momma knows*
everything/Momma knows/best

The hand-lettered notices/*Predator loose/*
BEWARE/in the kindling pile/the junk drawer
Mother, they warned us/you killed me/almost
I want to scream/*Bitch/the choking stones in my stomach*
Cruel/sent me to the forest/promised

trees and flowers/promised old lady hands/pinched cheeks/good
attitude/good deed/good girl/*Nice day,*
little girl/little cute walkable girl/talkable girl/chatty/walking in a hood
made for riding/running on a path made for strolling/foolish child/*Oh, me?*
Honey, don't wear your glasses
they make you look too
old /& then

what big teeth/eyes/nose/cock/& I am swallowed
into the warm, wet stomach/acid-up grandma/too dark to breathe/right
then/ *Heh heh, don't make 'em like they used to,* he said
blunted boom on the other side of fur/slice & slice
O/saved by another fucking woodsman/O/thankyou thankyou *thankyou!*

Case #4:

In the Forest Without Mirrors

Mother/unknown:

I might have loved you (if/if/if)

/with the purple richness of our matching royal garments.

They are deep in the back of Father's closet, still

in decade-old dry cleaner capes.

I imagine loving you

in fur-cuffed violet: We bare

our identical teeth & wave

our identical hands.

I imagine you singing, always

something ancient.

Instead, (you, dead/ me, sixteen/my essential banishment)

my feelings are a linty blue.

Your eyes, reborn on my face, forest-damn me/I curse

your intentional nose, perched resolutely above my lip/

flaring, irate queen/your features sealed with wax my death sentence.

In the forest, I can only see my nose

if I cross my eyes.

$$\frac{3}{8}$$

#1 Discouraging Cowboy Song

nothing free about the range;
home is seldom more than a word in a song
watercolor buffalo, antelope, deer—
don't sing about the cattle,
nothing but a day job, nothing
but a long ride to chicago.
don't sing about mexico,
homesteads, sod, indians,
your grimy irish roots.
oh, billy! oh, jeese!
don't sing about the baddies,
the paper-faced robbers.
don't sing about your horse,
a thing you own, your workhouse,
not some prattle-on-about lover.

The King

We saw a wonderbread-faced family in matching t-shirts examine the face of Elvis on a potato chip at a rest stop in Breezewood. The fat momma herded the whole mess of them away and the last little girl, the Cindy Lou Who of doughy tourists, didn't have the heart to throw The King away and left him lonely on the table, which is how we got our hands on him.

We laughed about it on and off for the next ten years. You don't believe in crispy crunchy signs, but just in case, you danced the offending chip through the stale air of my ancient sedan to our three-key "Hound Dog," crunched the King into itty-bitty oblivion and scattered his oily potato chip ashes across the windy turnpike.

I was still humming "Jailhouse Rock" when we unfolded ourselves onto your childhood driveway, shaking the road out of out of our elbows and knees. You kissed your father's cheek and I shook his thick hand and tried to smile.

We ate breakfast in the formal dining room, and I didn't say anything about it, not until the long car ride back again, and even then I said it half-joking. You laughed too, because at home we eat breakfast on the couch or leaning over the sink, and when we got to the Breezewood rest stop for the second time in three days, we bought our own bag of potato chips, and checked every ruffle and ridge for a face we recognized.

three-fifths of a thought

i like to think i've paid moral debt,
that no hell more hot and private
and clean is coming down the pipes.

there are at least fifty ways to fuck up
a morning. i've tried at least twenty,
at least a dozen of 'em involving
frozen cat shit, my addictions to
cigarettes and cm.com, and
my fascination with exploring pitfalls.

the news said some guy
put his cock in a cement mixer
and i'm not that guy, i swear.
sure, my stinger fell off, but
i can go to the kitchen to whine and dine
on poisoned OJ and dog food, and
die with slow-mo giddiness.

August 12th, Two Thoughts At Once

Where would we be without *Sex in the City*
or our more vulgar, cocksure college poets?

my mind is half here,
(at least a third here)
with this sweaty tangle,
 this slanting light,
 this man in the afternoon,
 & so forth

(don't think me disenchanted, but

)

Watch, I can think two thoughts at once:
One all hips & hips & leg & mouth & tongue,
and the other back in Westendorf

with Casey at the top of the summer mountain,
sitting with our backs to the huge white cross
that tops every tenth Alp,

him saying, *How do you deal with the aftermath?*
— a difficult questions because of course it varies,
but I'm too cool to cop out so I say,

In some cases, we barely speak.
In most cases, it's fine—
we see each other casually,
or socially,
or not at all,

& here, now, in the tangle, etc.,

what will this be?

all bare and barely speaking,

me half-in-love, half-head-out-the-window

Ne me quitte pas

I'm stealing your freckles, slowly—
As you sleep, I'm hiding them
in the few places you never seek.

On the long drive back to where I'm thinking of being from,
I will scatter them like breadcrumbs; they will stick
to the ground like gum to the turnpike, and later,

I will follow them in reverse,
pinch the specks between my thumb
and first finger as I pick my way
across state lines, stick them still-
warm behind my ears like a pencil,
or a cigarette or those holy oils—

ashed and anointed, my courage is blind, vibrant.

Frank Sinatra never learned to read music and February is the shortest month

and good thing, because the four weeks came and went without me
washing my jeans and a babysitting gig was the only thing keeping me
from wearing them the 17th time. As a rule, I will not show up
to a stranger's house in sweatpants,
or without getting enough sleep the night before
without drinking enough coffee to be responsible,
or not wearing a silver watch that was definitely not stolen.

Spring-cleaning-wise, I was going to put all these angry notebooks in boxes, but I like them
towering next to me.

They keep me from wondering about the agony of Republican poets.

I can be reductive like that, but it suits me like my grandfather's mouse-eaten hats.

There is something satisfactorily foreboding
about wearing a T-shirt for the third day in a row
and a fedora that is twice my age.

I am a heap of blankets, which I try to imagine
into a fort. I have no defenses, just a bag of marshmallows
to flick across the room one by one.
They pool by the closet.

Each Monday in March, you can catch me
singing jazz standards to my roommate's microwave,
trying to coax it into telling me the truth.
When I buy my own microwave,
then, baby, I will croon.

A Letter She Sent from Sugar Plum Penitentiary

*hansel, my pet, you must know I miss you terrible.
mine yungeh, I miss you terrible so.*

The witch, it seems, clever as she was with candies and architecture,
had never learned to read.

*i pray that your pleading (you must be pleading)
for my release will be met, that good people will see
that an old witch can and did love.*

It was only in the bi-weekly care of the Village Ladies for Rehabilitative Literacy that she
learned to piece together words.

*i share a room with a crocka-skinned russko, a paunchy hag
who howls in her sleep, moaning for confiscated chickin feet,
and the low wall of skulls she left behind to rot and mold.*

She traded her hair for paper. She traded her fingernails for pencils. The others brewed
cafeteria potions, but she wanted out early for good behavior and abstained.

*they feed us too-sour curdled lemon curd and turned-to-stone scones,
cold tea as dark and bitter as the forest at night.*

The witch is still new to prison; her letters are still checked twice.
Few of them leave the prison walls.

*i pray this reaches you, my leetle one, my love,
and that i might feel your taffy skin again soon,
and that you are being fed and taken well care of
and that i do not die in this place,
so full of spiders and worse witches
who do know love like our love,
who do not know comfert.*

Two Boats and the String Between Them

Between us there are silver strings, and when I can
I weave them into Cat's Cradle complexity.
Here is the tea cup, easy; the fish in a dish.
Can I teach you to marvel at the spirals and knots?

We have no romance-moon, but we have pink pollution skies.
By night, I lose the stars and cannot navigate with confidence
our cautious conversations.

I am trying to learn the grammar of your silences,
Or better yet, how to pull you through the cooling lava
Of your far away moments, how to read the hum of your tether,
reviewing my boy scout knots. Which is for mooring?
I'll suffer the rope burn.

Krakow is the poet city, but they moved the Dodge Poetry Festival to Newark, NJ

I've never been to Krakow, but I've been to the Krakow section
of the Polish-American Festival at the Shrine of Czestochowa,
a campus of a church behind a horse farm in a Philadelphia suburb—
Labor Day: the priests dancing, the church ladies manning tents,
One-eighth, one-sixteenth, every Eastern European mutt claiming heritage,
\$4 paper baskets of pirogues, red approval of the penned chickens,
the crafts for sale, but turning their eyes from the Pro-Life signs, and we,
we teenage-labor paid only in free kielbasa and embarrassing pictures,
are sneaking the plum wine by the mouthful, are stomping cabbage
and dancing fake drunk polkas.

And perhaps Krakow is the poet city,
But I've been to Newark, and Amiri Baraka is from there, Allen Ginsberg,
and someone told me Walt Whitman, but that might not be true.
All those Jersey boys riding the train over the boarder to coolness.
Newark that lives in the shadow and steals the sound of the real City,
that the train rolls through, that starts you dreaming the right gray dreams.

Horror

Yesterday,
She first saw
The Rocky Horror Picture Show
And God!
She thought it was strange:
The film was funnier than she'd imagined
and He
Seemed nice, but was shorter
than she'd thought He'd be.

She had never met surprise with such indifference
and hopes she never will again.

“I don't feel particularly sexually repressed,”
She explained,
“If I'd had toast, I would have eaten it,”

God's office was at the end of a hallway.
“I'll be honest, I was nervous”
But He mostly wanted to talk about Television,
British Soccer, Brands of Laundry Detergent,
Healthy Dinner Options for a God on the Go.

Beanstalks of Orlando

The palm trees go up and up on the fat check of Florida,
where the tourists spend weeks pointing out every damn lizard
and the roads seem sun-bleached and the pools slicked over,

and this poor fat woman and her poor scarred son
are beat up in all the typical ways by American Poverty, Inc.,
buy the dented cans at the dollar store, and eat a lot of Mickey D's.

The boy, Jack hangs around the gates of Magic Kingdom; his mother cleans houses.
She's a thorough cleaner, but no one keeps a fat maid, plus she's a smoker,
and trails a sense of grime into white-carpeted houses.

Jack sells things— he knows the guys that no one really knows—
and I'm generalizing here, but he gets desperate, returns with a score of pills
that might get the landlord off their backs. But Mrs. Mother won't have it
and out the white gold goes into the gasping courtyard.

When she's out later, Jack scrambles in the half-dust yard.
The sun is pushing it, but he keeps searching.
There, glinting behind an old tricycle, he finds The Stuff,
He blows off the dust: baby's breath. And off he goes to make good
with his findings.

You know what happens next: The Giant.

Historiography

"the principles, theory, and history of historical writing"
- the Merriam-Webster definition of historiography

Truth is an old flame you follow to Mexico, knowing already
she's changed her names, dyed her hair, and turned your letters into rolling papers.
But there's nothing to do but keep on searching, armed only with the scent
of context and an expired library card to guide you in the drug lands,
the oh-so sublimely whetting desert.

If you catch her, she will instantly transform.

$$1/2$$

Early Episodes in An Adult Relationship

1.

I was drunk-humming *Down by the Bay*,
begging for a cigarette everyone knew I would regret
& I was telling him, telling him, telling him,
that my favorite animal at one time was a raccoon,
but that I was too old for a favorite animal.
Then he said his favorite animal was a fox
and so:

2.

Should I tell them about the tree?
Should I tell them? All right.

Giant pine, huge! Solid enough to climb stoned.
Nervous friends below, but we go higher and higher.
They think we're reflecting, star-gazing, something,
but, shhh, shhh, we're all sly tongues, thick and thin lips,

3.

It was dark
in the small room
& I could sense him
more
that I could see him—

He scratched
his hand on the secret-rough
of the summer moon,
& the secrets
bled out in a whisper,

& I could only whisper
my nicest words,
stroke his gone-cold skin
and listen in
to the spaces
between syllables.

The Well at the End of the World

My first errand to the Well at the End of World was to fill a sieve.
Ten years later, I retrace the path of the Frog King I followed,
disenchanted, married, and buried.
The well has dried up. I am still in my black gown.

I stand at the gaping,
the house-height down
and imagine the lowering, think to steal myself below—
the warm stones coo:

*hide yourself amongst our cool, dark sisters
bind yourself to the slick walls
stir up visions by seeing only
through the unblinking eye that opens
the well at the end of the world*

In my fingers, I am my father's wife's apprentice,
Taught by she too hollow to love me as a daughter,
she who made me a scurrying servant and sent me first
to the Well at the End of the World.

Below, I will revel in the muck of the bottom.
I am the widowed Frog Queen, I can spin action from air
and I will smile up at the passing sun as wistfully
as a sunflower greeting an old friend,
crush and roll undeserving insects on my curling thumbs,
and raise my voice in the song of the stones:

*I have come for the hiding, the house-height down,
To pray in my sideways cave, my temple of mourning.
I will swallow meticulous mouthfuls of shadow
until I am filled with lightness enough
to float from the top of my head and walk on.*

The Wife and Her Fisherman

the suppression of greed is necessary in the land of the humble fishermen,
which is a lesson learned hard at the tail of the whip,
whelped by the good lord on us and over us both.

I pray to be repentant, but the repentance is not forthcoming.
the hearth of my heart is cold slate, so I stay inside the hovel-
cottage home, wearing the creaking stone walls about me,
my own heavy, groaning hoop skirt. even when I am away
in the village, the sedimental stones encircle me,
riding at my hips. the people of the town must know and see
my resistant pride-fullness because though I am weighed down,
still the rumors wing—

the tale of my misfortunate deeds
are sung and spun through these lands though few-
to-none have put my name upon it, thanks to the good-
doing of my loving husband, the fisherman, who
introduces me by names enough to baffle
the neighbors and render me to relation only:
I am known as the fisherman's wife.

I bickered and begged of him to ask of a magical fish ensnared
a dwelling improved. when I opened my eyes to find our stone walls
tapestry-laden, I thought myself dreaming, delusional with hunger.
this winning aberration did not dissolve and I had no heart to break it.
I wished again with hopes to remain dreaming and did until,

with gifts revoked, I feel I have awoken, my accidental greed
hanging like heavy grapes, like implacable sorrow.

Cathy dreams of the desert

1.

"Just let me get lost in the desert and sleep there until I am dead," I think, feeling the wobble as I shade in another fat-legged horse under fat-nosed faces, my fat arms swaying as I pencil in the staccato lines of the fat beast's mane. *Haddash arms* my mother calls them, pinching the extra meat above my elbow and shaking her head, *I'm sorry you got them from me.*

2.

My mother is finally getting old, ten years behind everyone else's mother. Her olive skin is starting to pool like wallpaper in a molding house, but I still can't draw horses.

Shame on me, praying for a temporary shipwreck, one good stomach flu, the stress of something adding up to less.

3.

The desert would cure me. I would adjust to the nagging cacti. "You are boring and we hate you," they would chant gleefully and I would cut out their hearts to swallow their secret water. Survival would be an act of rebellion.

The buzzards, too, so comfortable naked they leave their heads undressed, would hiss and caw, "Look at her fat fat arms. Look at her, good enough to eat,"

I would kill those birds and suck the gristle off their bones.

The Princess and the Pea

How could our rain-recovered heroine
not feel the P in the night,
which poked and prodded,
kept her from a wink
of sleep—

Later, being famously of great sensitivity,
she knew the stirring was not a disagreement
between her lining and her supper
but something far more enduring,
which would ensure
her royalty remained.

Though her marriage to the Queen's son
was slowly strangling, she withstood
with her thick skin.

The Practiced Unkindness of the Ballet Badger

The ballet badger lives in my stomach, vacations in my liver,
and dances on the stage of my tongue, aiming his grand jeté
at my lips. The ballet badger, aggressive and unkind, eats only
the grubs worming in the rotten parts of my soul. He burrows
deep, stretches at the barre of my unbrave spine, and licks
the fallen fermenting fruits from my brain. Drunk on this,
he finds his bravery, and ties up the ribbons of his boxy, girlish shoes.

On pointe, the ballet badger is graceful, and moves with the precision
of a creature trained by a slim and ancient Russian with a cane.
lifting from the head, chest, nose, et cetera,
pointing of the paws, match it, show the teeth,
first, fifth, third; two, three, four,
an elegant, elegant insult

Stolen glances at his sketchbook

this, when he was in the shower:
they were quick & okay/I felt guilty/I'd be
furiousfuriousfurious if he read mine
without asking/that's some Harriet the Spy shit, right there.

Saw:

potato-faced man screaming obscenities/
horror-movie little girl/normal-looking hands/me
sleeping/a red-curtain flower found while walking
the dog and saved for later/the beginning of a comic
about Grace—

stupidfuckingbitch of a name

/ —the girl before me.

A story/I didn't know/if it was true/

there on the page/at the airport: she was telling him she loved him &
see at the end of this long week & goodbye. And later/further
down the page, he got out of the shower, sat down on and his bed &
she called & said *I think we should break up/I think this is over*

and back in my room/outside of the pages and panes,

I/so nude/had reason to hate/ slam/slap/screw
the sketchbook closed/fly back to the knot/nest of sheets

/palpitate/my blood/my body/my body/my eyes— wait/wait

for him/he's out of the shower/have him sit on the bed

yes/hot for/hot to be opposite/want

to use my whole self/want to

kiss him/fuck him/love him/hard

What I Envision: A Self-Help Saga

I get these visions of me at a dinner party with all these sparrows in silk scarves
and with a tinkling laugh I say, "I had a run-in with love," and they all think
of a metaphorical supermarket quarrel, a tussle, but I mean the old editing mark,

a run in, which looks like a curved branch and, according to my copy
of a *Smart Girl's Guide to the ABC's of Copy Editing*, is an easy way to correct errors
or to delete a paragraph break that doesn't belong.

I have so many corrections to make and only one red pen.

I'm prone to doodling in the margins of important documents
but, it's an act of love, like tracing the outline of a post-coital ear over and over
even when the lover finds it annoying.

I am very much in need of revision, which is why
I keep rearranging the pantry. My boyfriend alphabetized the spices,
but when his car turned the corner, I swept the whole shelf to the floor.

I mow the shag carpet nightly;
I've started studying my times tables at the bus stop.

I had a dream last night of a drive-in that only played one film, called *The Lover Annoys*.
My dreams can be very obvious, so I never write them down
and I sure-as-hell don't tell them to the sparrows.

Dear Jack, I Am Getting on Okay

Let's meet up at Mom's house. It's a bad week, let's go.

Let's wrap our old dog in Christmas tinsel and laugh when she shakes herself free and chews it up. There will be tiny strips of shiny plastic everywhere.

I want to go racing on the suburban highways that lead to our high school, I want to talk in that secret sibling history-laced dialect. Mom will make us meatloaf or order us pizza if only you meet me there:

Meet me by the tire swing we begged for in tandem or, if you want something less cliché, let's meet at the bar where everyone is growing older and settling down.

Meet me in the corner of Finney's in between acoustic sets and I'll buy you a beer.

Meet me on the streets we both memorized separately, when I learned to drive and our three-year gap suddenly became a canyon too wide to cross.

While I was roaming with bands of teenaged art queens, dropping half-smoked cigarettes in the snow, what were you up to? I wasn't paying attention.

Meet me somewhere quiet enough to talk,
but loud enough to look around wordlessly.

Meet me: Your voice sounds tinny in my head
so I don't want to call you. Jack, I want to tell you
this on paper, so I need your mailing address.

What I'd really write you about is my new home, Pittsburgh:
the weird weather because of those rivers, each day
a surprise: pressure systems, clouds, cold fronts.

There are about a million bridges, and I am certain
you would like them because they are bright yellow
and all the same. You've always liked strange continuities,
and simple solutions, so you would like that everything
here is up or down a hill. Let's see—

There are about a million Thai restaurants, each
with a clever name. There are about a million people
and all of them love the Steelers, love breakfast, love Pittsburgh

and I'm still trying to get it, but I don't think I will, so I'm buying
a subpar cheesesteak. It's not Gino's or Pat's but it will pass.

I was a vegetarian for a few weeks, did Mom mention that?

As fast as I can, I'm going through phases. Dear Jack,
I hope you are well. I hope you are doing great things.

Do you even get mail where you are? I don't know where to send this.

Riding and Seeing

The pretty neatness of wet pavement
under traffic lights
and the affection I had cultivated
for drizzled-on public transportation,
opened me up like a half-shell oyster,
the oozy meat of me
gloriously exposed and tingling.
The bus bent in the middle, and we snaked
and swayed like mesmerizing hips.
I watched strangers
with a hand-picked sleepy gaze
and a dose of romanticism.
I chose to be swayed.

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