

THE PSYCHE IS MADE OF STORIES (AND BIRDS)

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THE PSYCHE IS MADE OF STORIES (AND BIRDS)

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Poems

by Lani Yu

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INTRODUCTION

A poem opens with a question that is not easily explained. What is this for? Who is speaking, and why? Sometimes the poem answers with truth, but the truth can be painful and incomplete. Always something that is said gestures toward the unsaid. Maybe the function of poetry is to conceal and reveal in turn, to make certain experiences not only visible, but lovely despite their broken-ness. As Rainier Maria Rilke wrote, “beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror /which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so, / because it serenely disdains to destroy us” (5).

Not all beauty in poetry is yoked so tightly to death, but many of the poems I love are such ones. Clearly spoken and often grounded in the aesthetically pleasing, the works of Louise Glück, Sylvia Plath, and Allison Benis White drip into the unknown while remaining recognizable; Glück through her flowers, Plath through her psychic and natural landscapes, and White through the vehicle of material objects. These elegiac poems rarely feel shrouded or disjunctive—I don’t know that any of my poems could achieve the lyric impact of Glück’s “Parados” (203), for example:

Long ago, I was wounded.
I learned
to exist, in reaction,
out of touch
with the world: I'll tell you
what I meant to be –
a device that listened.
Not inert: still.
A piece of wood. A stone.

Why should I tire myself, debating, arguing?
Those people breathing in the other beds
could hardly follow, being
uncontrollable
like any dream –
Through the blinds, I watched
the moon in the night sky, shrinking and swelling –

I was born to a vocation:
to bear witness
to the great mysteries.
Now that I've seen both
birth and death, I know
to the dark nature these
are proofs, not
mysteries –

T.S. Eliot once said that “genuine poetry can communicate before it’s understood” (8). This is very true of “Parados”, which begins in such a way that the reader can’t help but project themselves onto the speaker in making this connection: Long ago, I was wounded too. This connection is quick and unexpected, a physical blow that the opening line suggests. Short lines surrounded by white space allow the starkness of these words, especially in the first stanza, to communicate a feeling of anger, a hardness manifested in the “device” that is “not enert: still”, like a person who has been transformed, literally and metaphorically, into something that cannot feel. And

even if we as readers don't understand at first, we are experiencing the speaker's trauma, receiving its communion.

None of my poems start so explosively. This is the experiential and confessional self, the voice of pain but also courage, and it is often more hidden, more subdued and diffuse, uncertain, in my own poems. But I share similarities with Glück in my attempts to communicate estrangement that lies almost beyond conscious understanding. Robert Bly once said that "in many ancient works of art we notice a long floating leap at the center of the work. That leap can be described as a leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known" (1). The leaps in the second stanza of "Parados", in which the people in beds appear suddenly, and are described as neither asleep nor awake but as breathing only, are like psychic dislocations. There is pleasure in having to make the leap between images; the rise and fall of the breath twinned in movement by the waning and waxing moon. But here the reader also experiences instability, a kind of fracture in the speaker that becomes abstract, almost archetypal, even as it re-shapes her perception of both the inner and outer world.

My application of Bly's teachings on the deep image and associative leaps occurs at a slant. In my poem "Culture Shock", the leap into the unconscious and back is greeted, or perhaps more accurately repressed, by silence and incomprehensibility; a paralysis that manifests in the physical environment. This poem draws attention to a specific psychological state even as it flirts with being read as a collective experience, namely one of human fear. It therefore calls to mind the spirit of *duende*, or as Bly defined it, "a kind of elation when death is present in the room" (29). However *duende* is described as joyful, replete; Glück's poem "Hawk's Shadow" (191) embodies this quality in its final lines:

Embracing in the road

for some reason I no longer remember

and then drawing apart, seeing
a shape ahead—how close was it?
We looked up to where the hawk
hovered with its kill; I watched them
veering toward West Hill, casting
their one shadow in the dirt, the all-inclusive
shape of the predator—
Then they disappeared. And I thought,
one shadow. Like the one we made,
you holding me.

Several poems in my thesis, such as “Long Exposure”, “Sanctuary” and “The Infinity Machine” to name a few grapple with irrational and surrealist qualities; ones that, if successful, Federico Garcia Lorca would have noted as “baptizing all who gaze at it with dark water” (17). Serendipitously, many of these same poems are love poems. A conclusion that may be drawn is that in my writing, death and romantic love, when occupying the same spaces, allow my poems to be “possessed” by the “deep song.”

“Culture Shock,” however, can also be viewed in a different light; entering the leap through another corridor. By marrying the familiar, as with culture and childhood memory, with the unfamiliar and arresting, the inexplicable, my poems create silence instead of peace, fear instead of play, which seems to diverge from what the Deep Imagists searched for in their mediations. The image as jagged, confessional tool, sometimes reflected visually on the page in short lines separated by white space, allows my poems on depression and loss to emphasize the break over the connections between psychic leaps.

Glück, in writing about hesitations, silences and disruptions, stated “I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often a wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary. It is analogous to the unseen; for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were to have been whole, is implied” (Proofs 73).

The question of whole-ness in my poems is an important one, because its lack shows itself in silence. Everything that stated in my poems is compressed by it, trapped under and between the silences, or perhaps rising out of it like the ruins that Glück described. This silence is pervasive enough that often, instead of working as an absence, it operates as a negative presence: this is what Glück might call the dynamic that whole-ness gives up, when “the mind need not rush in to fill a void” (Proofs 75). She goes on to explain that “in the broken thing, moreover, human agency is oddly implied: breakage, whatever its cause, is the dark complement to the act of making . . . the thing that is broken has particular authority over the act of change” (Proofs 75).

Often in my poems, both the ones that feature visual fragmentation and those in which fragmentation is less explicit, words appear, punctuated by silence, then disappear back into it like lightning into darkness. This is the void that crouches on the edges of perception. Yet while many of the endings to my poems are abrupt, akin to the feeling of a door closing in one’s face, the silence that follows is neither passive nor empty. This is implicit in the white space that surrounds a distilled image, in which the beautiful or the unsettling is foregrounded. Ending on that which suddenly makes the familiar strange—a dog bite, a dead butterfly, the disappearance of a box —becomes an act of collusion between dichotomous forces; these moments attempt to capture buried emotional experiences, pushing up against a kind of occupying witness.

Maybe as in “Parados” I’ve succeeded in creating room in my poems for the reader to identify with the speaker and engage with opposing desires: the instinct to speak, the habit of

repressing speech or losing speech. But as a young writer, I've noticed that my words emerge sometimes whether I want them to or not, speaking out the side of my mouth; the confusion of deciphering these impulses and moving deeper into the creative psyche has changed my approach to writing. I've overturned certain truths and assumptions in the past few years about what a poem can be, and have moved if not radically then significantly, transformatively, from direct narrative toward lyric and fragmentation. My perceptions as a writer have shifted and expanded even as my focus in this thesis centers on familial ties, abuse, cultural identity, love, and the obscured self. Two changes have resulted from these new perceptions:

First of all, I wonder at the breadth and clarity of direction in my poems. It could be that instances of realization and trauma in my writings are communicated, but unfortunately not understood: in the morass of language, articulation of broken-ness is a struggle. But if absence can be conveyed both in and beyond the mere absence of words, then my current poetic ethos can be described as using the spare image or lyric as a charged container for expressing certain inexpressible or un-translated experiences, which silence both mediates and constricts. This is still, in many respects, new terrain for me.

Secondly, the making of these poems can be equated to the building of a personal mythology, which has led me to explore established mythologies and texts in new ways. Just as the image can be perceived as a container, so can certain well-treaded narratives. References to Greek mythology, Chinese folk tales, and fairy tales are lenses through which the personal in my poems is re-made, solidified, and rendered safe to approach. The mind in crisis and the self that seeks individuation are drawn to these stories, which hold a mirror up to hidden realities. As lulling as they are essential, these stories are often stripped down through retellings to something that resembles a quality Glück identified in her favorite poems:

"The true has about it an air of mystery or inexplicability. This mystery is an attribute of the elemental: art . . . will seem the furthest in concentration or reduction or clarification of its substance;

it cannot be further refined without being changed in its nature. It is essence, ore, wholly unique, and therefore comparable to nothing” (Proofs 45). This describes what I admire most in the poems I enjoy, which is the ability to capture something intangible or abstract that can’t be captured in any other way. Glück’s statement also echoes the spirit of tales that have endured in our collective cultural memory, which work mostly in symbols. Furthermore, the refinement that Glück describes is the closest approximation to what I’ve strived for in my thesis: economy of expression that doesn’t automatically exclude verbosity and ornate diction, but often flourishes when stripped down to essentials.

The tales that I engage with in my poems, beyond truth, also provide escape, a balm to life’s harshness: transcending the banal, bringing closure to the limbo of the unresolved—each story ends in gain or reward through some sort of meaningful arc. A lack of closure in ascribing meaning to pain haunts some of my most confessional poems, which is why these stories bring comfort and distance, much needed air, to the sadness and dislocation in my works. Yet these stories are also versatile and fertile to my imagination: a good metaphor might be the feeling of wearing an overlarge jacket, and being free to move around in it, to pull and manipulate the fabric.

At their core, myths serve as potent metaphors for something greater. Glück used the Greek myth of Psyche and Eros to explain her philosophy on poetry, drawing a line not between beauty and terror, as Rilke did, but triangulating them around truth: “The association of truth with terror is not new. The story of Psyche and Eros tells us that the need to know is like a hunger: it destroys peace. Psyche broke Eros’s single commandment—that she not look at him—because the pressure to see was more powerful than either love or gratitude. And everything was sacrificed to it” (Proofs 34).

No single myth encapsulates my poetic vision, but the psychically charged dynamics between these concepts appear in many fairy tales. Certain images recur in these retellings, accumulating energy and meaning as they appear and re-appear. The Deep Imagists embraced Jungian archetypes,

which come from a collective unconscious. In a similar vein, certain figures, objects, and images re-occur in my poems, taking on mythic or symbolic qualities as they surface in different contexts.

The mother appears frequently in my poems. She is not presented as a real, complex human being, but as an archetype, in the form of a goddess, a ghost, a voice in the ear. She manifests in memory, in ghosts; in mythic proportions and in ordinary ones. She colonizes the psyche, and the relationship between mother and daughter figures that appear throughout the poems shifts back and forth between ambivalence, rejection, and of course, silence.

The Jackson Pollock poems, in particular, circle around this relationship as well as the relationship of the daughter to the self, a kind of coming-of-age. Unlike other poems dealing with similar themes, these ekphrastic works (“The Goddess Prepares for Birth,” “Portrait of the Sea-Self,” “Field of Persephone,” and “Ice”) talk not only through myth and legends, but through paintings as well.

Pollock’s paintings appear purely instinctual, cathartic, and unbounded by convention or logic. His art does not explain, it simply exists and overwhelms; chaotic expression. I was drawn to him because it seemed like one could make sense of life by simply making sense of his raw energy. For these poems, Pollock became a window into which associations and psychic leaps abound. By using the visual as a jumping off point for abstract emotions, and a framework of mythology and narrative, these poems attempt to locate expression in different modes of language such as the materiality of speech, fractured grammar, and the remote lyric that can be read itself as a series of paintings.

As in the experimental language of the ekphrastic poems, to a lesser degree my other poems try to move beyond ornamentation. Images understood to be traditional or common within the poetic canon, for example the moon and birds, appear throughout my work and, to varying degrees of success, create different interpretations as well as stable, fixed points of knowledge. The bird on a bottle of cleaning fluid is contextually unlike the birds that sing while hidden in the trees, which are

distinct from the magpies that lift a speaker to heaven by her hair. But this animal, like any object, is imbued with a psychological understanding of freedom: sometimes there is no keener way to invoke that understanding than by the image of a bird in flight.

The shifting boundaries between object and meaning, the self and the object inspired my archive poems (“Home: An Archive of Failures through Object Representation I, II, III, and IV). The project originally included a series of black and white photos, but I chose to omit them in order to focus on the purpose behind the series and its evolving language.

The word “archive” has many definitions, but the one that struck me most is that of collection. Jean Baudrillard explained this fascination thoroughly: “For the child, collecting represents the most rudimentary way to exercise control over the outer world: by laying things out, grouping them, handling them” (9). We as people accumulate objects throughout our lives because it is pleasurable and necessary to possess things. We also collect memories, but memories are inexact and bodiless in a way that physical objects are not. However, the meanings we find in the physical object, whether that be its value, its associations, its beauty or its function, are also ever-shifting.

The compulsion to pour over objects, especially ones that we no longer has access to, is rooted in desire. This informs my archive poems in an interesting way: Baudrillard said that the object does not reflect reality, but rather what we hope to see in it, separate from ourselves: “I am able to gaze on it without its gazing back at me” (11). In this way memory also functions like an object; we obsess over the past and hope to control the present through it, sometimes without awareness of its limitations. Yet memory is also indispensable: it is the seat of the personality, the history of the self; it is the archive of the mind. The sticking point of this project, for me, is that although memory is necessarily incomplete, corrupted by time and highly subjective, there is also the complicating factor of trauma. Very little makes sense in the wake of trauma, when one could say that memory is colonized and replaced by fractures in perception. No cohesive memory can mean no cohesive self.

I explore these ideas in my archive poems by describing physical objects from my childhood home, and coupling them with traces of speech associated with those objects. The goal is to create a kind of map, a progression of distilled thoughts summoned into existence by the illusion of “realness” that those objects, or at least the memory of them, manifest in the face of memory; I wanted to make the abstract a reality. Parts III and IV delve into fragmented narrative, calling attention to the materiality of the texts, but objects re-appear still, at least partially submerged by story. The lack of translations of the Chinese characters, the ambiguity of words and symbols demonstrates that objects, concrete as they are, can’t truly unlock the past—that which has occurred can’t be changed. Like memory, the past remains a cipher, both a testament and a turning away from the confusion of a wound: that which is too painful to view up close, in detail, for too long.

The poet Allison Benis White has worked with difficult themes in her poems, often addressing the dead through paintings and objects. Just as the archive is like a collection of objects, which can also be hearkened to a museum, I found her poem “In the museum of sadness . . .” (28) to be a kind of musing on not just the object, but the container of self; that which harbors language, memory, and struggles to articulate darkness, to contain it, and often fails:

In the museum of sadness, in the museum of light—

I would climb so carefully inside the glass coffin and lower the lid.

Do you think the saying is true: when someone dies, a library burns down?

Maybe just a sentence, scratched slowly on the lid, *Say what you mean.*

There’s always some sort of disconnection, some un-lived life beneath the surface of a poem. I can’t always “say what I mean.” In my work this disconnection often reveals itself in the gap of heritage, the mother-daughter bond, of absence and of speechlessness, which is a kind of death. These poems attempt to capture experiences and emotions that can’t easily be shared any other

way—a mind in existential turmoil, a feeling of objects changing shape or meaning even as you look directly at them. For better or for worse, Baudrillard is correct in stating that “it is invariably *oneself* that one collects” (12). My poems are made up of layers of memory, experience and emotion that can only be approached, in the end, through the unreliable lens of language—if they can be approached at all.

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[1]

Epigram

Staring at a blank page since 9 a.m.,
I've given up the day to write something profound,
something absurd. The pen wobbles, and my mind
is a bleached sheet, an empty box, a cat's yawn.
To write is to create heaven in anathema.

Traveling Back Through Smoke
- *for my Great-Grandmother*

Not a death of the body
the dirt over fine cloth
white mourning clothes like doves in the morning

but incense burning
before a picture of you—
so little I can offer:
this fruit, unbitten
the open palms of my hands

now somewhere in the world
the sun dips
beneath night's jeweled black lid

and the air is easier to breathe here
in the house you last breathed in
in darkness grown so absolute
it becomes a personal mausoleum

so I tie over my shoulders
the veil you wore around you
I fold the letters your children must have sent
with all their love:
all that I don't understand.

Horses

Before I could write, I memorized
Li Bai's poem: "Moonlight
before my bed," I'd mumble, brushing
my Barbie doll's thick, corn-silk hair.

The *hanzi* for sun, moon, and water
are simple logograms, easily learned.
But *tu*, the character for earth,
looks like a grave-marker—I didn't like

thinking about death, so I'd forget that shape,
its falling vowel sound. But when my family
took me to Chinese concertos,
the harsh tremolo of the slim-necked *pipa*

like hooves beating against packed earth—
the Disney horses on my bedroom wall,
whiter than bone—it all became a part
of that shaking melody, echoing

the dark pit of the word 土. *I remember.*
At night, clutching sweat-drenched sheets,
I'd repeat Li Bai's poem to myself,
tangling the words—

Bad Neighborhood

Houses squat beside me,
their rust-stained walls and wrought-iron doors
like faces in a crowd. Orange trumpet flowers
bloom in puddles of shade next to sinewy trees.
Before me, a patch of purple morning glories
gasp on the sidewalk.

Now the grass grows waist-deep;
my path disappears in feathered waves of gray-green weeds.
I walk a curve through the slippery heat,
past a pair of dogs watching me. Good morning,
I say to them. One circles silently behind me
and sinks his teeth into my calf.

The Goddess Prepares for Birth

- inspired by Jackson Pollock's *Sea Change* (1947)

this must be the ocean

a voice in her ears in her womb a kind of singing

Mother you never know me

it says blooming nauseous in the dark

the grit of the unconscious in weeds of oil

in black water that flickers and turns

before the world there was chaos it whispers

the void was clean as a blade

swimming like the tongue of a sinuous

undertow slippery as the trailing ends of knowledge

in the process-of-becoming the death before life

a stony tableau a medusa of blacks and grays

I was the universe surrounding you

she feels it push and scrape against the membrane

Immaculate Daughter

Clay in harsh light. Feeling
a child's skull in the rough
damp surface of it—
the agony of something touched,
slick with separation.

Broken pottery wheel
Like the hole in a stone.
Molding resistance from fingertips
to wrists, tensile pressure—
the soft bones

of this mineral child
come alive. The brow wrinkles
upon waking, the mouth opens,
and the breath, the breath—
marking me like the faint scars
of fingerprints.

Home: An Archive of Failures through Object Representation I

can of Progressive
clam chowder soup,
unopened.
expired Nov. 2008

I'm saving it for a special occasion,
Mom says

glass jar shaped like rabbit
filled with red, green,
& yellow peppers
in vinegar

These housewarming gifts
will be a welcome
addition to any abode—

Tofu cartons
stacked on top of each other,
empty. White plastic,
5 x 4 x 2.5 in.

"When in doubt, don't throw it out."

dolphin light-up watch
with thick plastic band,
waterproof

(A gift from my grandparents)

戴着去游泳!

Culture Shock

A Hollywood movie
plays on my parents' T.V.
I'm sitting on a white
leather couch,
squinting at subtitles.

The man onscreen
crawls out of a pit.
He's wearing a red cape,
surrounded by a green glow.
I get up to search for food.

How do I translate
"Superman" to Chinese?
I open the cabinet
under the kitchen sink.
A basin full of black eels
shivers.

Like one furious body,
limbs intertwined,
the eels move toward
the light
pebbling their inky forms.

I close the cabinet door.
On the wall,
a Chinese character
no longer looks like a word.

In Lieu of a Love Letter

Blue flame engulfs the bottom inch of cast-iron.
Daikon diced on the cutting board:
pale, glistening cubes. Root fibers
like veins beneath translucent skin.
The air is fragrant with green peels.

Steam rises from the pot. I unwrap
a slab of ruddy pork, lines of white fat
running through it like streets on a map.
My knife slices through melting ice,
swollen joints of bone and muscle.

Flakes of ginger swirl in agitated water.
The pork turns tender, flecks of oil emerging
like lights in the dark. A splash of cooking wine,
a pinch of salt, and the smell grows pungent,
pouring from the pot like a kind of longing.

A Flat Migration

My grandmother spoke English
in stops and starts, like the short jabs of her hoe
when turning up rocks. The usual morning hush
would fall over her garden—

O parched, weedy carpet of bitter roots!
Russet earth was trapped in it, like me in the endless
week, my grandmother in her hardened tongue.
“Forget about it,” she’d mutter.

“I’ll go back to China soon.” She split language
with me like fruit under the shade of a loquat tree,
as if it meant something
to collect the shreds of her old map home,

scattered across the scars of continents.
I found flyers to an aviculture exhibit:
Coturnix chinensis, feathers mottled red and blue,
metal surrounding their thickets,

exotic in 1982.
How long do we fly from frost?
When my grandmother left with her pet bird,
we did not speak much. Words cost.

Home: An Archive of Failures through Object Representation II

stone paperweight
painted with
a baby's face

"Homeland' vs. 'motherland' vs. 'fatherland"

empty flower-print box
with lid, missing ribbon

"that which is necessary
is never beautiful"

revolving organizer
of empty cassette tape
cases

and Cendrillon said
Who am I?

oval vanity mirror
on a wooden base,
too tall to see
reflection
when sitting down

Silence after a slap

a broken broom handle

No darker than this, Mom says,
tapping her skin.

white leather sneakers
with purple stripes,
one shoe bigger
than the other

... the articulation of ()

The Doll-Maker's Wife

What is beauty but a needle
threaded through the eye?
Here is the chin, an uneven jut of nose,
rounded jaw, spaces between cheek
and mouth. He sews them together,
invisible stitches through skin—
dark brows, my lips appliquéd last.

When light slants through water
the image bends into unreality.
I am a work of art, bending
to a kind of alchemy—
My husband the magician
touching the lead of my body,
the gold laid over my bones.

Ipomea alba

Winter's past, the trees have thawed,
and hospital food has yet to regain its flavor—
so you say. Your last email came
when the air outside your window burned dry and bright

and you cried at every sunset.

I remember
floating in the pool with you on hazy afternoons,
inert and eventually restless. We dove
so far into the deep, the blue water

seemed to swallow us whole. That was the closing
of childhood, like the wrought-iron gates
visible now from the house,
still twined with furled moonflowers.
You planted them in a fit of grief

over the last man you slept with.
Sister, do you still remember his name?
I imagine your shadow slipping down the road,
past an unkempt tangle of vines and pale buds—
not familiar enough to stay for long.

Reading *The Old Man and the Sea*

The book had no jacket.
I traced the faded binding,
its ribbon like the rim of sky after hurricanes
sweep the coast of Cuba. *He was an old man
who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream
and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish . . .*

I read as the waters of Miami
flashed under highway bridges.
The pages smelled like dried-up orange: bitter, musky,
not like the sea. I imagined a boat coming
on glassy waves, the skeleton of a marlin lashed to its side—
gleaming dark as a drop of blood
against the beach-front high-rises.

Near the end, I was struck by a memory
of the seafood aisle at the Asian market,
its damp crates and brine. Santiago's apprentice
would have marveled at the silver tilapia
in their tanks: round-eyed, unseeing. Too young
to understand, I did not flinch
when the butcher's knife came down.

Jungian Dream Sequence

my mother's earrings, the velvet-
mouthed music of glass on silver. I wanted to be
like those earrings—perched on her shoulders;
sour green tears.

In the mirror, a cairn

leaks milk across the floor.
I step inside it and turn into thought,
a bolt of silk, one end clamped
to the edge of the world. Astral wind tears at me,
an S-shape furling and unfurling.

My soul remains, bleeding
white-lettered dust. From it words fall
on the mallet of my mother's mouth:

I offer you nothing.

These bitten-off vowels, collapsed.

[2]

The Cycle

She considers growing it forever,
 having it rustle past her ankles:
a black river.

But her mother takes to it every year,
 measuring with scissors;
shears it above the shoulder,

discards the rest like a ruined pelt.
 Remembering the Yao women
and their virgin hair,

cut only once
 to spin strands into marriage caps,
the girl imagines life in their village.

But to wear a dead thing
 alone,
a loose robe of deranged femininity:

why bother?
 Better to give it to the homeless
for stuffing shirts in winter—

better to bleach it blond
 and sell to wig factories,
bartering herself to the beauty industry.

Sometimes she only wants
 to make it her shadow, and practice
talking as if to a child in the dark.

She wonders if it would hold
 as a rope to hang herself with,
pissing off her upbraiding ancestors—

yet she grows to like the weight
 of her past dragged behind her,
its strange and persistent snarling.

And one day what she desires most
 she finds in a dream
of luring magpies through her window:

they seek her hair for their nests,
 and in gratitude,
take her to a place only birds know.

snow in july

the girl started that summer
floating over surfaces of the house
like the spores of a dying plant
the sound of wind chimes
made her feel stretched-thin

the dragonfly kite hangs in a window
of the high-columned house
except today when she sits
with it in the backyard
knotting the string around her thumb

father reads a newspaper by the piano
rubbing his stained knuckles
the papaya tree rustles
as a snake vanishes into the weeds
along the slowly-rotting back fence

mother stands on the porch
watering her plants with diluted milk
bougainvillea is her favorite
blooming heavy on pruned branches
bristling with razor flowers

the girl looks at the house
through the kite's translucent wings:
there is no other witness
to a riot of pink and purple petals
their dizzying snow

Portrait of the Sea-Self

- inspired by Jackson Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* (1947)

caught looking smell the salt crust
broad slick expanse echoing the body
furious impersonal teeth and churning foam
remember the tiles in my mother's bathroom

between Scylla and Charybdis a meditation
not shape not feeling but the color of cigarettes
iron nails mixed with pennies and paint tops
the effect of a face mottled by bruises

and the odyssey of my childhood
in green black streaks of senseless destruction
how the bathtub became an ocean
for the glistening swells of drowning

until water lay so still inside me
that I could not grasp the sides of it
and below my waist an unseen perspective
on the monstrous and hidden the knowing

Moving Day

The long mirror tucked into the hallway
beside a basket of wilting geraniums.
The low table behind the couch was bare;
the smell of cooking oil lingered in the kitchen.
Goodnight Moon was always open on the rug.

A family of three gathered around a U-Haul,
their figures like objects in a still-life painting.
The small girl climbed into the truck last,
sitting on her mother's lap. The ragged spine of her favorite book
was just visible, clutched under her arm.

Evening swept over the vacant apartment. Palm trees swayed,
leaves rustling in the wind. A car pulled up to the curb, engine loitering,
the red tip of a cigarette appearing suddenly in the dark.
Nobody came out. A few houses away, the halting first notes
of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" came drifting from a window.

Home: An Archive of Failures through Object Representation III

Attachment Theory

I feel it and hold it in my mind like a picture held in a photo album:
me sitting on Dad's shoulders at the lake
I am too young to remember when he tells me about the breeze
and the muddy alligators sunning themselves the black-eyed rabbits

Collection

The object is that through which we mourn for ourselves . . . from the repeated cyclical game of making it absent and recalling it from out of that absence—we reach an accommodation with the anguish-ridden fact of lack, of literal death.

- Jean Baudrillard

Everything exists in memory a wave color sifts through my fingers
in a surplus of buttons, a glimpse of something forgotten
light glinting off the oval mask
of a mirror

Immigrant Speech

Shadow of blinds on beige,
nubby carpet. New walls.
The well-worn tongue my Dad tried to school
in English, the cheap, bright clothes
Mom hung to dry in the bathroom—
I was born at this threshold.

My parents never said if they prayed,
if the words they spoke below a whisper,
buzzing into my room at night,
were meant to be safeguards.
Shang di, shang di. Bai tuo, please.

In my old bedroom, silence.
I search for its source on the street,
peering at treetops
where birds have been singing,
singing in the night—
invisible and loud and everywhere.

This Is a _____ Poem

i.

At Harvest Moon Festival, lanterns
strike the crumbled edges of golden cakes—
A ballad comes on, and my aunt grips
the karaoke microphone.

in the farthest corner,
avoiding roving lights and sharp laughter,
I thumb the pages of Neruda's poems.

ii.

The week before Día de los Muertos
my roommate sings to herself for hours—
She packs for her trip, retracing
the steps to an old dance.

Li Bai's letter from the river-merchant's wife
I read without re-translating.
The marigolds in our kitchen sink,
petals falling wet against my wrist—

iii.

"Feast on your life," Walcott wrote,
about my loneliness under a flowing river.
It's Valentine's Day. A chill wind
sweeps through open windows—

And I search, hoping, while belonging to no culture.
I dream of the right words, year after year,
something beyond
what's curled up inside me.

Romantic Subplot: Aftermath

storm debris on staring plates
scent of limes chirping birds on bottle of cleaning fluid
the breeze over the sidewalk wishes blown in a bottle
neighbors' mown grass cut tidy like hair
inside cradled in the frames of a house
poppies blooming everywhere
grotesque bodies arranged
on the internal landscape of a compass
needle pricks slick road out of town
far as the eye looped on yellowed paper
can read and now the skein of discarded memory
nothing as bad as this nothing as bad as us

Fourth of July

Love is another obligation.

The girl pinches the dough around the meat,
planting the dumplings next to the frying pan.

Flour rises in clouds.

The kitchen hisses with the sound of sizzling.

The newlyweds are back from abroad.

They stroll around the patio, talking to everyone but each other,
she in a long cream dress, he in office slacks.

Despite the toasts poured to their health
(ritual, unstoppable), their glasses of *baijiu* quickly run dry.

Sparklers go off in the neighbors' driveway—
then there's a shout. It's Independence Day, but not theirs.

Probably it wasn't anything serious.

People mill around the dinner table,
a smoky amorphous sea with no lifeboat in sight.

The parakeet never emerges from its wooden house.

There are no other pets, just children playing video games.

It's quiet enough for the girl to hear her mother laugh:

"Oh no, my daughter can't understand a word we're saying!"

Shortly after, they eat.

Long Exposure

Your warmth stains
my pillow. You
rain through me like
a storm of knives, petrichor
rising in soft red exhales.
I don't think anything
should feel like that:

Like the bright edge
of sunlight on a yellow-glass
cocoon, butterfly
falling from its broken seal—
wings dark and wrinkled
as lungs.

Romantic Subplot: Forgotten Scene

I'm in the kitchen. It's noon; golden
syrup glazes the windows; the artificial breeze
of a ceiling fan follows me
to my bar stool, where I count crumbs.

Like an office worker
trimming her desktop bonsai
before the boss arrives,
I wait—

next to yellow ceramic tiles
and a round glass sugar bowl;
in the sheer black stockings I put on,
then took off, then put back on again—

and this is your forgotten dish towel
printed with dangerous fruit;
thick-lipped papayas and leering pomegranates.
It must be a sign,

looking through the window and not seeing you,
but the neighbor's tree,
its branches twisted together—
an overgrowth of foliage
crushed in between.

Field of Persephone

- inspired by Jackson Pollock's *Number 1, 1949* (1949)

1

Oh it is winter she says sitting at the window

(it hums in her like a wind-slapped wound)

the field before her smooth a line pulled between two points

it must be noon it must be a road

rising like a mountain outside her body

2

Persephone stares at the letter

white space closes in a numbness like sleep

frost on the window in scrawling calligraphy

(yellow smudges of birds in the distance

like the ghost of a feeling inside her)

3

I've been reading Sappho she does not write

Persephone brushes her crown of hair

Mother I am in love she does not write

(the words taste like skin and burning black marks)

4

snap stem and night breaks open

to a cold sweet smell seeds dripping clear

among the bloodless shades Persephone in yellow

opens her hand bares her body again

Sanctuary

One day my parents bought a new television. They were going to throw out the box, but I rescued it and kept it in my room. The box was almost as tall as I was, and I laid it on its side. When my bed grew too hot under the glaring moonlight, I would crawl inside. It smelled nice in there. My nightlight cast a green glow on the thick walls, not quite smooth, how I imagined the caves of Lascaux before humans discovered them. I watched long shadows change in increments. After a week, the moon disappeared, and I dragged my sheets to the box again, lying on top of it. I didn't question what the box meant to me, why I felt sadness twisted up in the joy of crushing it. The next day, I came home from school and the box was gone.

[3]

Death Anxiety Fugue Stage

I don't know what to say anymore.
Every day the same words in a different order.
I'm taking a shower. This sandwich is just bread.
The bowl is a fish tank, but less populated.
Her uncle died last night.
Words of comfort are just pauses
in black silence.
The couch is my sanctuary
when I keep dreaming about chores,
the toilet bowl as white as teeth.
I've forgotten how to put the right pieces
gently in a box. Speech
swirls down the shower drain.

acts of negation

to the girl in the black crop top
moving through the blue smoke city
i wanted to write myself into your body

and you woman with the wild hair
that lovers clung to got lost in
white-scorched flame pouring

from your mouth—
it hurt seeing your bones grind beneath skin
like how i needed to disappear too

and i wanted to sing this song to my mother
(fix the parts inside) under eroded landscape
because to have love and loved her

is to have hated myself so deep—
yellow bird she said *you bleed*
under your alchemy of feathers

and now my desire is to be nothing i can name
nothing and nothing but the bottom of a well
struck by light from the sky

Self/Division

Staring at a cicada shell
in the sedge overlooking a lake,
I remember the unfinished business
of translating my life into a poem.

All my best words are stored up, buried,
in some granary under the hills.

And when it rains, my body aches
like I've been stung by something inside me.
My true self under the self I inhabit,
an ill-fitting suit—

All husks are beautiful. Words are a poor substitute.

Home: An Archive of Failures through Object Representation IV

Absence

The void of language and meaning we find ourselves in

a wooden broom handle

pressed between right angles. Tell me a story

给我讲个故事 in the dark I know you understand me

Object in motion

I lie in bed hearing her shouts until bleary-eyed

I get up to

search

for it

Mom grows quiet suddenly she is in the doorway

and in her hand

how could I have forgotten—

her voice a killing sound drags me by my ponytail

Repetition

This box was built to contain

meant to be used

but beautiful so it could be admired. The clasp *snicks* the open air—it is broken.

I call it (), handed down

from grandmother to mother to daughter

Wolf's House

In the morning I find slashes opened up in the screen door, sun pouring in over dusty bottles of sleeping pills. Clouds of red smoke and incense recede into the other room. My mind knots and unknots itself, churning over the image of a tree, a box of toy trucks—the wind outside sounds like the sea, a woman's voice calling from the fence. My running shoes glint with embedded glass. The kitchen is ransacked and full of ghosts. I follow a trail of pasta shells, delicate as the bones of birds and other crushed things, to the back door of this house. Behind the mildewed curtain, a set of yellow eyes watches me lift the latch.

Transformation

- inspired by the ballad *Tam Lin*

I dreamed we were on a lake, white mist
pulling the sky close. My green scarf around your neck
made me ache to touch you;
your eyes strange with light, soft as the sound
of thorns piercing through skin.

Tangled lake weeds reached down,
down below us, in the darkness
that shone through our tiny glass boat—

Now I hear your voice in birds wheeling overhead,
racing on blue-black wings.
I chase them through forgotten places,
singing those old ballads—

if I find you, can I pull you off your moon-bright horse?
Can I throw you in the well, my burning coal?

Moon Sickness

i.

A honeysuckle vine winds along
the mildew-spotted frame of my window.
Each line runs through me
like water through a sieve. Here, day falls
endlessly into the blank sea,

and my mind is an old net, ropes snapped
and fraying. I watch shards of light trapped
in a case of empty bottles. You left
your wool jacket here last summer, and it still
smells like dirt and burnt sugar.

ii.

Outside, Selene makes love to Endymion.
Their children are scattered, fatherless
as faerie mushrooms in oat-grass, luminous pearls.
What is moonlight, truly? Is it only the dark
shielding itself with light?

In ancient songs and altar offerings—pale smoke
nourishing wild Artemis—they say moonlight
is the sound of an arrow whistling past,
ashwood piercing the stag's heart.
They say love is the same, quick-fated.

iii.

Chinese legends tell of a jade rabbit
with eyes black as scrying pools—
The rabbit, my mother's astrological sign,
brews an elixir for grief-stricken Chang'e,
lady of the eternal moon. Like her, I stare wordless

into space, galaxies swirling beyond my fingertips.
If I could pluck one wish from the heavens,
I'd swap my pen for a weaver's loom
and climb a bridge of magpies to you, my love—
the two of us snagged in the cloth of the world.

Nightingale

The sky is a cat's eye,
floating above my wordless body.
Love songs reach into the ether,
sweet as honeyed wine,
but I've been poisoned by them—
it must be sacrilege to beg like this,
for a hole into which I can finally
disappear. One day I will return to earth,
split by the first blood of sunrise.
Tonight I sprout wings,
join with the sky, and sing
until I am emptied,
the threads of my body
pierced through and through.

after Ovid

Dear Oz

rest for just a minute
cut to girl asleep her mouth closed
and the inside of yours a pulsing machine
like the scene where she walks up the stairs
again and again to the sounds
of mechanical overlay

and your swiveling fisheye lens
skinless colorless *attractive*
on the wall painted wine deep
to you moving on her moving
who could say no

to your meat-metal hands peeling her back
how oracular her organs are
spilled on red silk the ripped seams
of something brittle
tossed in the ash *now*
my beauty

Sensory Deprivation

The night jasmine
is as unchanged as the water
I can't feel around my limbs.
This kind of death isn't death at all,
just another chase through the snow.
In the mosaic of the brain,
bright shards of memory are imbedded,
like stained glass pulping a gourd—
the pain softens, here. White flowers,
a kind of cage. At the hook of my spine,
my body is a womb of its own, a pool
floating inside a pool. The night jasmine
draws up its petals.

Other Side

Do you want to see the roaches? Turn the light towards scurrying feet, sharp jerks
of unrepressed movement—

I'm not impressed with Kafka; I'm simply not a fan.

A country of roaches, maudlin and manic— how long until they drive us out? Will
they throw *us* a dinner party?

Don't think about the white walls crawling— bold guests twitching their bullet-bodies
across the floral couch.

My lamp is a shadow play of waving antennae— a stage for the drama of infestation:
We are roaches. We have the right to hide, populate, and spout terrible opinions.

I was a roach too, once. I knew myself less, but not by much: it was enough
to drive myself out of my skin.

How to Write About a River

Touch it, he says

I draw my fingers over water

it is older than us, I say—

periwinkle snails

like eyes in the grass.

A song in my head,

a marsh in my throat—

These words aren't my own.

Yes, he echoes

behind half-destroyed

land. *Let the wind*

throw its handful of birds—

and be mine.

Be my suppliant.

The body of air

that becomes my body

is bridal and blue

I float—

but dead trees

catch my arms

and river entwines me,

mourning, *don't go—*

don't go, don't go—

Mother

I hardly recognize you now.
Graying memories flicker across your face.
Time has eaten your belligerent beauty.

Your son wouldn't want you at the wedding like this,
stiff and silent as a repentant salesman.
If you come, come restored
in the green of life, with its suggestion of tenderness.

Your picture is framed
next to the bowl of red flowers, symbol
of everlasting grief. The dead cannot care for the dead.
Those flowers haven't wilted yet.

Tonight's pork roast,
without your touch, has lost its flavor.
Here's a toast to you: in the afterlife,
there isn't much to do, even less to say.

Ice

- inspired by Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist* (1950)

winter skates slice the blue-purple surface,
chips of ice flying
blades circle the rink, one two and jump—
my knees blossom with blue-purple bruises

Michelle Kwan pirouettes—
a controlled plane across the smoothest glass—
violet figure striking a wall of televised white
again, again, *again*—

my own marks spiral outward
like the center of a storm—
each fall a delicate pen stroke
grown harsh, uncontrolled on the page—

erased from the rink,
this map of failures winds through my cells.
every gesture is a violence
(a memory) straining for flight, preserved—

(Speak to)

the roll of it, bodied foam
 in low tide, scrubbed lines of sand—
how the ocean thickens, fills my throat
 with something like grief
only to flatten beneath
 the sky's cudgel— ambivalent shrug
from the beach's vantage point.

narrow sea body,
 cyclically atavistic— how admirable
to do nothing but what you do:
 push and pull
against a larger design, carrying weeds
 and fish and sun
in your hostile womb, your motherless church.

how impenetrable
 the parts of me that belong to you.
black soul, monster child
 clutching tentacles of rain,
the coast is a poor sacrifice—
 in your lack of conscience,
a reminder of separateness: punishing.

THE INFINITY MACHINE

I feel the sensation
of floating in a room with no floor or ceiling,
this machine
making bodiless spectators out of us. It seems to say
that if after death
we exist only as particles of dust in the universe,
we'd finally
be holier than the gods we've created. Today
the inverse of faith
will be a deeper kind of faith. I want to hold your hand,
but I keep confusing
our idols for each other in the dark. Hung mirrors
orbit light
in irregular pulses, like a slowly seizing heart.
I find the shadow of my face
on all the infinite surfaces, and the shadow
of yours, staring back.

- Inspired by *The Infinity Machine*,
an art installation by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller
Byzantine Fresco Chapel, The Menil Collection,
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