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Each Moment a Poem

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Winter's Dream

I stood in a snow corridor,
walls the shade white takes
when the sun dies. I opened
a bloodwood door to a wall
of snow, some spilling out
in a soft wedge. A grim man
stood near, told me children
were buried behind the door,
stacked like bricks in a wall.
He opened my eyes to snow
beyond the hall that covered
all but the hall and the door –
and then I saw the children,
countless and congruent
in matched hats and coats,
eyes closed, lips like snow,
cheeks plump but white.
They seemed only to sleep –
but even in sleep, I knew
one cannot sleep in snow.

Caribbean Snorkeling Tour

He shakes a jug of fish
and squid to coax the beast.

We adjust masks, slip
into the sea, and disperse.

I swim alone to a deep place
and see the eel in her cave.

Delight swells to dread
as she unfurls, eight feet long,

bear-trap mouth open to my
bare belly. It's fight, flight,
or freeze, and I freeze upright,

feet dangling, arms spread,
mouth drawing wisps of air

from the tube that breaks
the surface of the water,

one thousand diamonds;
my skin is lit. I've died

in dreams – *will I now?*

Her teeth will take flesh;

blood will beckon sharks;

I'll bleed out before

they come, a spectacle
of spreading red in an endless
blue sea – but the eel shrinks
back from the light that leaks
through the cracks of her cave.
She rests, and the moss grows.

The Barrage

“Tornado!”

I was alone with two
younger sisters. The sky was black,
but the grass was bright. We ran
along hills past brick school halls
and entered one, dimly lit with green,
like a horror film hospital. We opened
a door to women sitting against walls,
holding babies, and they were calm,
even with windows lining the walls
against their backs. I told my sisters:
tuck your knees in your chest, cover
your soft neck, keep your head against
the wall. I closed the plastic blinds.
We crouched beneath the window
waiting, silent and still, until sound
swelled to a roar that drowned all
sense, and I felt a barrage, blunt, hard,
and wet – was it water, blood? –
arms numb, I felt only pressure
and moisture in endless increase.

Seeing the Sky as the Medievals Did

after C.S. Lewis's The Discarded Image

I still see the sky as a dome at night,
stars hanging equidistant from where
I stand, head heavy, neck curved back.
Stars are pinpricks in the black dome
as though fire burns beyond and shines
through. Moon is flat and glossy, *magical*
the way it just *hangs* there, defiant. But
gravity holds it there, and it's a beat-up
sphere, and stars are giants scattered in
space that takes no shape and is *infinite*.
Yet I still see the sky medieval, so *beautiful*
that way, *finite, contained*. Only fire lies
beyond that final sphere. I can conceive
this, can *rest* in this – but I am vertiginous,
a flea pining for the tip of the tallest tower,
and I must look away to unlock the door
at the center of the concentric universe.

Meditation on the Medium

Parchment is more leather than paper – animal skin, stretched, scraped, and dried, strings pulling the skin taut on a wooden frame. I learned this days from twenty-three. I had read all seven Harry Potter novels not suspecting that Hedwig clutched leather in her claws. Paper was first cotton, linen, scraps of clothes turned rags, stirred with water to form pulp. Today we cut trees to make paper, trees that breathed and would still for a century or two if not for the axe, the industrial revolution, the strength of our clothes, the thrift shops, and the garbage cans that take what could make paper. I wish for a return to the clothes-scrap paper made from the mildewy towels I tossed, the strips of spare fabric I threw away, the jeans with the shredded knees that no one would have bought at Goodwill – all the scraps that now lie in some landfill buried beneath broken books and Kleenex, homework and newspapers, watercolors and shitty essays – scraps that could have made paper, but rot with the other things we threw away. One thing to remember: paper burns – parchment, too, papyrus, and computers with digital stores. The only medium to survive a fire is clay – those clay tablets we find archaic and cumbersome and inferior to that which can be printed on are fortified in fire, hardened, preserved. What if the earth were consumed by fire, and the only written record that remained for future life to find and examine were those clay tablets that tell of sheep and cattle selling for little bits of metal?

Indiana Wind Farm

On an unfamiliar highway, Indiana, a forest
of giant white windmills, each three hundred
feet tall, thousands turning mildly like hands
of hurried clocks, but some blades are still,
even though the wind is so strong, it is more
dangerous than usual to jump from a plane.
The mills could be trees, but are crucifixes,
those small, shaded ones that blot the horizon
for miles. Mom is driving. She says, "Your dad
loves you." I say, "I know. I love him too."
She says, "Jesus loves you." I say, "Thank you."
The highway is the Appian Way after Spartacus,
slaves stitched to six thousand crosses.

Grasshopper, Spider, Ant

I. Grasshopper

As a child, I dropped a grasshopper in the air
conditioning unit to see the bits of him fly.
Last year, one crawled along my car window
as I waited in a parking lot. He limped slowly;
he'd lost a back leg. I got misty at his crawl,
looked into his speckled eyes, wondered
if we spoke then in our gaze: "*I love you;*
it's going to be okay." I watched until his wings
came out to carry him. A man said the leg
would grow back. I believed him because
I wanted it to be true.

II. Spider

I once commanded the deaths of spiders.
Now I press a cup's lip to carpet to catch them.
I slide paper beneath, press it to the lip
with my palm, carry it to an open door.
This method failed me once: I spliced
a big black spider in half with the lip
of a glass. One half was animated; the other

was still. I wept, for I had killed the thing
I had tried to save because I was afraid of it.

III. Ant

I once watched ants scuttle along wallpaper
and laminate. I had no method to trap a pack
of ants. I scraped them from the walls and floor
with bits of toilet paper, bundled them snugly,
dropped them in the porcelain basin. One ant
scaled the floating wad like it was a life raft.
He started to pace along the wad,
back and forth, like an expectant father.

IV. Conclusion

Grandpa hunted gypsy moths to save the trees.
I helped him, a little girl at the playground:
one moth crushed on the merry-go-round;
one flattened on the slide. Several years ago,
a large ant crawled a concrete porch. The ant
moved energetically 'til Grandpa stopped him
with his shoe. I gasped and wept; he winced
to see me cry but thought nothing of the life
impulsively crushed. My cousin, his grandson,

was there, said ants, spiders, all such creatures
are mere animations, machines designed to try
to stay alive. These creatures have no sense,
he said; their lives, completely meaningless.
But something causes movement in machines,
some driving force behind. In living things,
this force is life: if nothing else, arachnids,
insects, all such creatures, are tiny beads
of pure life. This force seems insignificant
in miniscule amounts – but who can say
that meaningful life has a threshold to meet?

“So Where are You From?”

Mom and Dad met in the Navy,
he an E4 from Florida, she an E3
from Indiana. I was born at Bethesda.
Mom had left the Navy; Dad was in
the first Gulf War, got a telegram,
folded and unfolded the paper,
read it again and again, hoped
he'd live to meet me. He did.

Moved to Portsmouth, Virginia.
White clover littered lawns there.
I ran from Mom in a store because
she wouldn't buy a shirt I coveted.
An old lady wearing an eye patch
spied me hiding in a rack of clothes.

Moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan.
I was five, lived there five years,
heard we'd be transferred to Guam,
excited to live somewhere exotic –
Navy changed its mind to Chicago.

Housing wasn't ready, stayed
in Indiana with Mom's parents.
Grandma wouldn't let the cats in;
they panted in the hot shed.
If you think only dogs do that,
you're wrong. I picked tomatoes
from the garden, cooked meals,
illustrated Bible verses, slept
on a small green couch that folded
out into a bed, started fifth grade
at the middle school, had a locker
and six classes in different rooms
for five weeks.

Housing was ready, knew it was on
Lake Michigan, pictured a mansion
with sand and sparkling water, found
yellow grass, chain link fences, rows
of apartments. It was an old army base.

Could see the water out the window,
a strip of blue or grey. Some days

we didn't see the water; it blended
with the sky. Walked out the back door
to a yard, then trees, then a steep hill,
then the lake. Metal structures jutted
out along the shore to form private
nooks of beach, one a perfect crescent.

That was 2001, early September.

Mom took us to the elementary
to register when the planes hit
the towers. The radio was on, talk
of a third plane. Mom put a hand
to her mouth, took us to Burger King,
asked if we were afraid.

Started junior high there the next year.

Dad was ready to retire, bought a house
in Grand Rapids. That was his favorite.

On Halloween, I walked home
with friends and sisters in costume,
ready to trick or treat, when Dad
drove up to us in his tiny blue car

packed with the things that didn't
make the moving truck, told us
to get in, wanted to surprise us
(Mom was waiting at the new house).

Took hours to get through
downtown Chicago in rush hour.
I had to pee. Dad wanted to get
through downtown first.

New house was empty, and we
ate Chinese take-out on the living
room carpet, and we found the
laundry chute, and it was *so cool*,
and we peeled off floral wallpaper
and painted walls orange and pink
and purple and yellow. Mom wouldn't
let us pick blue. She was sick of it.
She had worked on Navy tugboats.

I moved to Indiana for college, left
after three years, moved back to Michigan –
and so, to answer your question,

I'm from Nowhere, a burgh outside
Anywhere, where a neighborhood
like any other does not ignite nostalgia.

Extended Illness, Fall & Winter

Emptying a jug of rotten milk is just like this –
the rhythmic pulsing, lumps caught at the lip,
lingering acidity. For months, this ritual.
Nothing settled: pills, water, simple soup –
even bile fled, white foam streaked green.
Bile was worst, then pills. Water was best,
flavorless with strange warmth. Gatorade
was kind of *fun* – one day blue, one day red.
The retching began with burps and salty saliva –
then I'd reach for a double-lined plastic bag
(I learned that a single bag may have holes).
One day, Mom took me to Meijer to buy soup.
I was too sick to go. She did not believe me.
I had to stop in the aisles with my plastic bags.
One day, she took me to Burger King for lunch.
My burger and fries became slosh on the table.
One day, I threw up on the city bus (I had a bag).
Mostly, I stayed in bed with the window open,
watched the falling leaves, pictured them as paper
bills, twenties I'd lost from not going to work.
When I could work again, I could barely stand.

I'd lost twenty pounds in this bout of accidental bulimia, but I didn't worry about malnutrition, about a relapse, about what had caused the illness – I worried that the weight would come back.

Postcards to Bonnie

for Bonnie Brush, my favorite teacher

Hey Bonnie,

Do you remember our class fish, Phallice?

Your morning class didn't have a pet – you said

our class was your favorite. Did you mean it?

Hey Bon Bon,

Remember when I called that guy a pompous
prick, the one who said he would never stop driving
his gas-guzzling truck for Earth's sake? I didn't know
what that word meant, you know. You weren't mad.
You thought it was funny. You had me read my essay
out loud to the class.

Dear Ms. Brush,

I still feel bad for calling you “Mrs. Brush”
that one time. I know you're not married, and I know
you're not sad about it, and I know you get annoyed
when people ask how or why you're single.

Hey Bonnie,

Do you remember when you caught me

looking in my compact in class? You snapped,
“Put it away; you look beautiful.” Was it true?

Hey Bone,

Remember how you said you'd drink iced tea
and eat chocolate with your Russian girl friends?
I sometimes eat Hershey's kisses and drink a tall glass
of iced tea with sugar and lemon, and the melding
of sweet and sour and bitter makes me think of you.

Ms. Brush,

Remember how you had nightmares
that we would all fail our AP English exams? Later,
you said you were sorry I'd only gotten a three, wished
I'd gotten a four instead. It wasn't your fault, you know.
I was a shitty writer then.

Bon Bon,

Remember the Peter Gabriel concert in Detroit?
My favorite song was “Biko,” of course. What was yours?

Hey Bonnie,

Remember the day we met, the first day of class?
It was fifth hour, and you were wearing a pale pink polo,

and we all filed in and stuck out our hands, but you wouldn't shake them – the other teachers did, some trick learned at a seminar, a way to make school like work – but you wouldn't do it because it seemed inappropriate to touch us.

Ms. Brush,

Do you remember when you taught the essay, *From Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain*, by Jessica Mitford? You convinced me to opt out of an open-casket funeral. You opted out, too, and I'm glad your family knew that that's what you wanted, even though you were only forty-three. Had you planned your funeral? I hadn't planned to see it– you were supposed to live forever.

Hey Bonnie,

Remember how you had that sexy sepia photo of a shirtless, reposed George Clooney as your desktop background? You'd say, *Hello, George*, and he'd say, *Hello, Bonnie*, with his eyes. I'm sorry to tell you he is married now, but I thought you'd want to know.