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The End of Her

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The End of Her

by Kerry Alexander

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Manifest Destiny – *A Preface*

There is something to be said for the perfect time of day. The world isn't dark, but it wants to be. You can see the whole sky squinting. And warm, it feels warm, like a car in summer shade. It is important to travel far from the city. You've outrun the noise you were used to. On the ride here, you slept in the backseat. Now you're the only tree not yawning. A flower looks too yellow in the dusk light, like a school bus, or a bird. It is important to sleep in a tent. To wake up and not know how you got there.

Somewhere a cow moos and you howl back at the twenty-third mile. The river is the voice the keeps talking. You see it as an extension of a very long journey, a question asked from East to West. You can't help but think of history. What it was like to not know where you were headed, but realizing, much later, you'd made it. The river, as such, is like time travel. You paddle on and imagine your face in a museum, next to tomahawks and letters from Virginia.

Three strokes to the wind and we are mighty. Oars become nerve-sensed and it is you crawling slick-nosed into wild. It does not bother you that the moon won't stop watching, that all those spiders can walk on water. The Mississippi spent centuries hiding from America. It is a funny thought: white men walking about and pointing at lakes and naming them after their grandfathers. But it wasn't the river they were looking for. It was that one, beneath you, with its feet stretching lazy to the gulf. Wild rice covers your legs like a blessing. Red wing blackbirds firework from the brush.

And that river! Ribboning out of a pine-cloaked spool. You've gotten to the start of it and you guess it feels like nativity. Or just the nature of things. A few steps North, paper birch is writing love letters to the Fall. They've hung fabric flags from every branch. You stop to catch them waving.

By the fire you see faces, some smiling into red. Finally your eyes can't adjust to the blue and then you're washing the dishes all wrong. You go to brush your teeth and find a pathway to the moon. You think back to that town off the highway, the one where you'd stopped for gas. There was a movie theater on Main Street playing only one film, and a candy shop made to look like Lincoln's cabin. You think that this is the heart of America. You think this until you get here, which is the vein, at least, pumping straight into the Atlantic.

There's a man here, telling folklore. He's done his research and he says he makes buckets. He says he throws knives and that he loves his wife. You like him because he likes his life and he talks just like his hometown in Oklahoma. His station wagon is parked on the other side of the trees. The hatchback is up and there you find relics: a rusted axe, a flashlight, a book about Indian costume. You see, too, a stack of *National Geographics*, yellow like that flower near the tents. You imagine your face on the twenty-third page, in a canoe, on the river, in the past. It is important to wish you'd lived a hundred years before. To wake up and not know how you got here.

The Seventh Day
(*Eve*)

a garden where the sky grows
and all my stupid teeth
tug hungry at the red
where I found my body bare

(to offer the fruit was to say I am lonely
to say I am lonely was to say I'm a ghost)

a garden where the stars bloom
and all my tulip longing
tugs hungry at his breastplate
where I struck my heart cage rattle

(i can't feel bones until he feels bones
i can't feel flesh until he feels flesh)

the fall was on my fingertips –
“don't love me if you have to”

a garden where a shadow grew
and ivy on the gate
like the skin clutched to my ribcage
like an apple in his throat

Golden State
(*Judy Garland*)

Your arms untangled from mine, but I slept away the exodus.
Was dreaming of a bed somewhere, of black crows in Los Angeles.

Eyes open, I hum vaudeville, pretend I've dozed off in Grand Rapids.
I can't believe my clock hands; that once I'd never been to Los Angeles.

Now walking in circles I don't mind so much, but I can't stand the movies.
Alone, the credits flit like flies. No heart-zing, violins, Los Angeles. Just:

"Hollywood Wants to Forget You." I hold the mirror to my throat.
Red scratch, a scarf of cello cords, try to steal back my din from Los Angeles,

while I sit at home and map-make and wonder where my heart grew cold.
Do you miss my summer goosebumps? Sweetface pins, that's Los Angeles.

And this is me pretending I'm too numb to know you've gone. These
arms weren't made to hold tight, that's why I can't swim in Los Angeles.

Dreamt of my future in black and white, but Technicolor stained my best clothes.
I remember when the city would search for me. Where have you been, Los Angeles?

Dear, I can't say why I don't run or why the white pages don't show holes.
I've only reached a Mrs. Gumm and a two-star inn near Los Angeles.

Cinemat

In the seventies, my mom sewed herself a low cut gown, but she never made it to prom. The state of New York had her date's dress-shoe laces locked in a drawer because he jacked a T.V. from a motel single. The Sunday paper reported that the television had fallen out of his trunk halfway down I-90, but the cord hooked itself to the latch. He dragged that box three quarters of a mile, filling up the dark with cathode ray spitfire brighter than the motel's midnight movies.

My own prom was dateless because the boy I loved loved other boys. I spent the whole night telling my sad-drunk friends that, of course, true love will find them in the end, it's just too early, or, give it time, or, come on, let's go, they've turned on the lights. I got to thinking that maybe that's all we really want in the end: the prom date who never showed up. I cross my fingers and hope for a boy who smiles when he dances. But girls will settle for less, in spite of movies.

I once had a boyfriend who got up early in the morning to draw the curtains and eat rice cakes with peanut butter and honey. I'd wake up, alone, and I'd forget where I had found him, so I tried drawing chalk lines around us sleeping in bed, but that made him seem more dead than alive and I could never fill the outline on my own. I guess being in love meant becoming a hypotenuse. I wish he had had the nerve to lean in first. My memories of him are always backlit or fluorescent: I can't place him outside on a good day. By the end, I knew his face better in the gray light of movies.

Dolly Parton met her husband at the Wishy-Washy Laundromat. I hear stories like this and wonder why I ever washed my underwear in the sink. I want to send you letters, but the post office post-V-Day was never quite as romantic, and I feel guilty always wishing you'd join the Navy. There's a theater near my house that shows old-timey films. I would like to take you there someday because of that time we tried kissing like they do in *To Have and Have Not*. I was a terrible Lauren Bacall, but I've been whistling ever since. It's okay that you keep me up at night, that you don't always choose the right movie.

Maybe you'll let me marry you. Let's start collecting the phonebooks now. There is no time to stop and wonder why they wore lipstick in black and white movies.

Norma Jeane
(Marilyn Monroe)

America, we have wronged you, hanged you
lovely like a centerfold
made you change your name

*learned to walk as a baby
haven't had a lesson since*

as the story goes, we found you
sexing radio plane propellers
mama didn't covet brunette babies
so we bleached you, bought your
beauty: *a thousand dollars for a kiss
and fifty cents for your soul*

Hollywood (be)longs for you
penning golden IOUs
flash bulbs drench you
teeth and cleavage
clinging yellow to filament hands
light
makes a point to find you
hold you
loyal to the face it has made

but how to face faces
fingertips know
better on the page
we just want you how we want you
without bathrobes and orange bottles
so we dress you in desire
America
all we wanted was you

They never catch you sleeping
so you make a point to stay there

(I am dreaming the hardest)

They never caught you sleeping
so I guess they'll never know
how America does its sweeping
when it tires of the broken show

Back to Black
(*Amy Winehouse*)

I died a hundred times: Cleopatra
prints on used pillows in Miami, “Fuck
offs” behind every door. I wait for hip
bone slam and find cobwebs in my beehive;
hollow as a gin bottle, but I’m not
thirsty anymore. Blake takes phone calls from
the future tense. I wanna sing Ronettes
and sew more pockets to my chest. Leopard
bra. One hand, denim-deep. I will learn to
cook a roast, if it takes a hundred tries.

The box is only temporary
(*Sylvia Plath*)

That was the summer I knew it was dead.
Poured out the milk. It was hotter than hell.
The buzzing that was inhabits my head.

We fought on the beach and your nails turned red.
The roses too, but I chose not to tell.
That was the summer I knew it was dead.

Chalk drawing dusted on my asphalt bed.
Sun like a shock, I have curls full of bells:
the buzzing that was inhabits my head.

A heroine speaks; the orchestra fades.
My final words were like dimes in a well.
That was the summer I knew it was dead.

“A quiet hive, there’s nothing worse,” he said.
Broken bees quiver in their flaxen cells.
(The buzzing that was inhabits my head.)

Always a hope I could make pie instead.
This porcelain sick just blackens and swells.
That was the summer I knew it was dead.
The buzzing that was inhabits my head.

Ricochet
(*Echo*)

Echo says echo,
her habitual habit, spun
on the spokes of his spoken
word. "You smell like new furniture
built from old furniture."
Mouth taller than cake and her
golden hair whistles.
"You smell like a hotel
built in a bank."

Saint-Maur

kicked a nail once
down Rue Bosquet.

i never found the holes in my shoe

or red-ink postcards to the American Dream.

he is five hours lazy

and built no waiting room.

i eat with a friend
who is beautiful like centuries.
she tells me her American yells
and walks to taxi stands.

i want to say,

“it’s cause he’s afraid

of your french door lovely.”

but all she hears is, “i fear my soup’s gone cold.”

she has a habit of looking out windows,

of laughing into her sleeves.

on the metro that night, feet fall

for a floor that fools them

and the girl with no eyes

gets

looks.

i think of my pretty

friend’s apartment:

the broken fingers out her window

were just houses in the lamplight.

her hair grew restless.

I swallowed the pause.

i wanted to say, “your place

smells like a runway.”

but only, “the night is

so young”

it’s before us.

Mistaken for Galatea
(*Camille Claudel*)

The Start

dirt road bend to summer house, my Papa punching numbers
Catholic Sunday priest makes sermon hands, I find saltbloom ghosts in calcite
in the backyard, in the tool shed I am knuckle deep in cheekbone

The Art

filled suitcases with city clay: will be ligaments and the tugging skin
of a man who loves me, posing, but I care only for the cavernous slump of his
lips against my fingers, of curtains hollowed out with breeze

The Affair

when I am dissected by the grand artiste, an empty vase weighs on the table
he is eyes that linger on each lace draped curve mouthing “inspiration does not exist”
he works hands against my ribcage; he mistakes me for Galatea

The Farewell

in an unfurnished flat under muddied tarps he keeps faces of me and us
the woman he should marry spies sadly on our dance when he goes, I sleep naked
and roll out of bed to pretend he is there, that the baby is still kicking

The Waltz

art paces the floor in an off-white cell, I’m put away for the wasting
of my intellect, crushing limbs against the oak planks, screaming at the stairs, my heart
all pink and paranoia was a hope you’d be coming by today

Self Portrait With Cropped Hair
(Frida Kahlo)

In a

room full
of faces,

I sleep

with myself.

I remember
my bones

without
you.

I gave up dance to tiptoe around us

(Zelda Fitzgerald)

Who knew I'd be the kind of girl to cinch
her days with shoelace, when my youth was drunk
in Georgia flu, blue boys made sick with lust.
Scott says nostalgia wears me out. Tonight
that's all I love of him: his smell I've smelled
away from here, one leg out the window,
his tan hands winked, the sort of June you keep
in jars. He's begun to lock doors. I court
the stairs. I test revolving hotel doors,
buy a room, and wait to come back around.

how to spend a summer alone, but not too far

two-channel tv
a book about bees

Marge's hyacinths
"when I was nineteen"

The Bell Jar
bunny-hop

Route 6A
"Meet Me By the Garden"

cemetery
Chatham band

that dream again
shoulders bare

voicemail
stamp

French-speaking tourist
the word for whale

Audubon
lonely

Dewey heart
Decimal

That Rosemary Clooney

My Grandma likes Guinness. She drinks it in the too-early dusk of an Irish pub in Chatham. I played guitar there once, in the corner of the room. Grandma couldn't make out any of the words I sang. Something about cellophane. I'd written it a few days before and practiced on the bathroom floor. Grandma doesn't know I write songs while she sleeps in television blue. She only knows you like her food, that she thinks you're a nice young man.

Anyway, she can't make out a word now. She just lifts each pint, two palms pressed to caramel filled glass. The truth is, her fingers stopped working a long time ago, but no one's sure when. Maybe 1985: two years before her daughter got married, five years before her first grandchild was born, nine years before they sold the house on Sunrise Avenue, eleven years before her husband died. She can't open jars like she used to, so she sits for hours in lamplight fuzz, dragging hands across paperback pages.

Grandma met Grandpa at a dance. He was beaming like the Air Force taught him and she was his blue-eyed dandy. A year rolled by, then he asked for her hand. She was twenty-one and it's funny because these days she'd never stand for anything so wonderfully unthinking. When you came to visit, we didn't tell her about the guest bed left empty, or the sheets kicked down to the corners of mine.

I took Grandma to see a snappy-dressed man sing Irving Berlin classics in a chapel with red velvet cushions. We got home and talked about jazz. For me, jazz was something I grew fond of through books and PBS specials, but Grandma knew Swing like muscle memory. "I just love that Rosemary Clooney!" she would say, her hand jumping like resurrection.

Before he died, Grandpa started losing his mind and Grandma started getting mean. Mom says it's because she missed the way things used to be. Once, when you came to visit, our feet touched under the sheets and I wanted to tell you how I'm afraid of becoming an island. Now I sleep on one side of the bed because you left weeks ago to study in some country far away. I worry that you don't think of me when your feet get cold in the middle of the night.

Grandma doesn't photograph well. She never smiles full enough, or looks at the camera long enough. But we'd sit together at the kitchen table eating cherries and playing Rummy and I could tell how blue her eyes really were and I could see why Grandpa asked her to dance. Grandpa's gone now and Grandma never yells. She only shakes her head. "Oh well," is all I ever hear her say.

I thought about loving you for a long time because that's what people do when they like someone a lot. But once, when you came to visit, I *decided*, because you'd make me so happy, I'd get sad. My Grandma and Grandpa used to go dancing all the time. Nowadays, Grandma's knee hurts her, but all the songs sound perfectly the same. "Can you play it one more time?" she says to me, "I just *love* that Rosemary Clooney." Grandma never sheds tears over Grandpa. She cried them all out being happy with him.

I think you're perfect for me because we foxtrotted badly around a July bandstand. But there are questions I'll always be too scared to ask you. Like, is there something to be learned from the hands that stopped working? How oceans get small in the scheme of things. How feet shouldn't touch when they're dancing.

Let Me Down
(*Amy Winehouse*)

Where was I before I knew ya?
Strung out, uptown, but no black-and-bluer.
Now I swing and shout and lie about the ways that I'm no truer,
But I seen the way her lips tattoo ya.

I was always a shadow in this town.
The sun's coming up, I'm still hanging 'round.
My bed is never empty, I'm sleeping on the ground,
But boy, it wasn't you who let me down.

I got into you and the hurt begun.
Bloody my hands on a stupid man and my mascara run.
I keep cool and tell you, love, "It's just for fun,"
But your name's on my lips each time my ex-boy comes.

I was always a shadow in this town.
The sun's coming up, I'm still hanging 'round.
My bed is never empty, I'm sleeping on the ground,
But boy, it wasn't you who let me down.

Where were you before you knew me?
Passed out, downtown, but no more gloomy.
Take me back, take me back, take me back to the height where you threw me.
I'm so sick of loves that run right through me.

I was always a shadow in this town.
The sun's coming up, I'm still hanging round.
My bed is never empty, I'm sleeping on the ground,
But boy, it wasn't you who let me down.

Fine and Mellow
(*Billie Holiday*)

Mama got mad when I sung the blues
slammed doors she smacked sense
into my starving behind
(the sense that maybe
I liked living
for something to lose)

Bessie showed me how to sing
in the parlor of an uptown brothel
I saved pennies sweeping
floorboards and got taught
by the crackle
of a spinning Victrola
all those things
they threw stones at in school

I learned hungry people
want sex and sad songs
and love me mad for the catch
in my throat
when I caught the taste
of that golden stuff
I never made it
back home

but I guess it's just as well
'cause I ain't got no mind for housework
just nights hunched
over hotel sinks scrubbing
the lipstick out
the collar of my
baby's white shirts

See, I've been fucked
a thousand times
by a hundred men
who push themselves in
like a blessing
smack
and slam
doors with my pay
in their pockets
and I ain't got no mind for housework

but I've got a bag of needles
and a raggedy-ann heart
so I spend my nights sewin'
til my blood's not my own
'cause I'm not my own
so god bless the child who is

I know I am
my blues
 blue veins
 blue lips

(when they cut me open and see
roots full of gold I hope
they don't think I'm any less
of a lady)

Paris Without Title

i have a friend
who knits Tuesdays
and cuts her own hair
with kitchen shears.

i brought her
the face i found
in the photobooth.
she said,
“It’s not one of mine”
so i followed
the sound of my feet
down the stairs.
the rest of the night
i spent pinballed
from porch lights
because i only ever
knock on your door.

at the market someone
asks, “why do they call
this the city of love?”
the french girls laugh
and don’t answer the question.
i paid for the figs i thought
were pears and kissed
goodbye poorly, left
to right.

in the morning the hearts
of St. Valentin read,
“un cavalier...”
Cécile says the buildings are romantic
i can’t make out the gothic
from your room

lips part to the crusade
that i could let you
believe in:
 (a city of lights
 a face on the stairs)

but it was nine and our blind arms starved shirt sleeves
even the dressing
felt bare

Rose
(*Édith Piaf*)

As a girl, I saw half things in Belleville.
Hot water in a Whore House. Prayer to Saint
Theresa. Acrobat father returns for
“Marseillaise.” Hot water in a Whore House.
Roses. Buried roses.

I dress in black for the West side of Paris.
A patriot’s song. A fresh coat of paint.
Drawn open in front of a thousand seats,
the piano’s a ring on my finger.
Sing. Once more, sing.

Marcel in bed. A flight from New York.
He kisses me and I take off his hat.
“Je veux que tu sois à moi pour la vie.”
Plane crash around two. A gift for the ghost.
Watch, it was just here, the watch.

Life isn’t fair: she’s a rouged brunette with
blood on her elbows, a cross at her breast.
Little sparrow, no flight. A pink-colored
dream. We’re in the middle of the ocean.
Regrets, no
regrets.

Narcissus
(Echo)

My hidden heart knocks
on your banjo chest.
I don't want to be an inkling,
the thump you must have dreamt.

Ten toes slip into my footless
prints. Leaves were pawing at
your knee caps. I heard the arrow
hush.

Who's here?
Here.
What do you want?
Want.

An unpronounceable sigh
bore a branchless blue.

Your bitten lips bobbed
like apples in the pond.
There were stars in your lashes
each time you gasped
for air.

A mirror in between us.
We watched each other drown.

I was choking
on the quiet
words you didn't
say.

on being apart

our contemporary fiction was.

several rooms in lamplight.
one subatlantic daydream.

a so on and so forth, halfway to Connecticut. I stop only for a toll booth and the honey songs you made. the headlights coming towards me were electric bees swarming.

blue note Patsy Cline. the garden was right, but the apiary was closed for the season. an oh well box of clementines. my tea in a clear glass: the milk whirled like slow-motion laundry and I remember drinking orange juice at the Laundromat. the dress you liked spun.

coffee for empty chairs. a museum of natural history. there are butterflies in glass cases that do not move or touch each other. I remember standing in the shower, on the escalator, up. I crossed my legs and courted a used Agatha Christie.

Valentine's day, full-bloom and very far. your face plugged into the wall, frozen half-happy. I filled a paper bag with dead flowers and small change and left it under a park bench where I had seen the tulips blossom. I bought you a Christmas sweater.

the windows out my window (on the sill, the jam spoils). unlatched, I press record. today sounds like this, I wrote you unconvincingly. I remember many twilights. the trees then were actors in black and white movies and the sky was a bandwidth or a watercolor shoeshine. I remember wishing our planes would collide. I dreamt somewhere over Iceland, electric bees storming.

corporeal happenstance was.
our hands not moving or touching.

I remember the airport in Paris.
you were my favorite stranger.

We are on the line 157 337
(*Amelia Earhart*)

Why do they smash champagne
on the brink of navigation
or wave toothless at the end
of a runway? Would you give
anything to find a zipper on the seafloor?
You know I'm dying to follow the sky.

My eyes are fitted for the dark blue,
my ears, accustomed to the rustling,
but when I met you I fell in
many textbook spirals. Out here
they measure minutes
in flashes of bulb.
I keep flipping the switch
til it's morning.

I think I prefer you
kite-years away:
a single snapping string
pulls me back down
to earth.

Skip ahead to the funnies, dear,
don't miss me black-and-white.

Let them wed me to a theory.
I will meet you at the crash.

Joan 1430
(Joan of Arc)

In that dream, my hair was long
and Michael had come down for the summer.
I heard a thousand metal feet on a beach.

Father said heaven
is a light we can't touch. I dreamt
I'd swallowed the stained glass,
in the morning when the red
falls through.

I cut off my hair.
I stripped down in the stable.

When the English fell,
I pulled the arrow from my breast.
Thought I felt the lips
of someone mighty.

To awake, at last, but not from the dream:
Was it a Saint in the garden?

House of the Good Shepherd
(*Billie Holiday*)

Swear I heard the second coming,
saw the blood wink
on the nightstand. Nun says
kneel beside your dying
so you learn that God
is fair.

Doctors told my granny
staying 'live meant sitting still,
but she begged me baby
I want to sleep,
let me die with
the horizon.

I spilt her like an accident,
let her murmur hail marys
to the kitchen floor.

(every time I get in bed
it feels like practice for the grave)

Locked inside, a sacrament.
Lesson: God
is fear.

(a handkerchief sewn with
strawberries
the blues is on her lips)

I scratch ribbons
on the woodwork
because
I cannot die
like this.

7 weeks to live

the body is a boxer :
 strung like a frequency
 dyed like a coral reef
i sleep under the mattress
i wake up every nerve

one topographic handprint
on the downside of your back
 (this is the body that won't let me
 near you)

i pick up the phone to see if you're calling
there's a line in the bathtub
where your books used to be

the skin is a messenger
that speaks yellow
to the brain
you say, "my ligaments
treat me like tapeworms"
 i can't say where the blood goes

i know you are there on the other side
but the doorknob just spins ghostly
these are the hands inside you, love
our hippocampus blue

the city is a tomb tonight
your gloves won't ever fit me

Armature
(*Camille Claudel*)

all scarlet – through every fragile vein;
the fall inks out in winebruised maple hands.
Leaves wave at my suitcases, packed with clay,
dug from the boulevards, draped around stands

of nail-bitten wood, an Old World spinal stem.
Ah, there goes the tap of remembering's ache:
your thumbs on my cheekbones and shaking nerves send
love notes to pink folds. The whole mess is awake.

Except one ghost-white foot—your phantom limb
(the likeness is true though the scarlet is still).
Mistook for Galatea; I'm all flesh within,
scratching at marble, propped up on the sill.

It was hot in the bath when your peach dropped dead.
I want back the faces you stole from my head.

Better Things Can Fall Together
(*Marilyn Monroe*)

in the window i kept bottles :
Coca-cola mannequins chewing on
the sunshine turning all our hands
whitegold.

(that was the beating heart of anonymity)

when i thought Clark Gable was my father
and dreams were things you had
and California never stopped to stare
at the parachute of a
brunette skirt.

on the boulevard they keep prints :
the worry of old hands, stranger
to cement heyday, i carry
a copy of Abe Lincoln's biography
to convince me that some
things are true.

(that was the creeping smile of fame)

behind the mirror i keep bottles :
dull orange and half empty like
the streetlamps in my hometown.

(this is me turning into myself)

swallowing a dialtone
spun the room
whitegold.

seven [20] eight

A teaspoon contains 120 drops of water.

Thought you said something about getting older.

(sat in bathtub while you napped. did not check if you were leaving.)

I like when you wear that shirt I like
Daytime TV and the how-can-you-tells
Sound travels quicker in water than in air.
we are young because we're stupid

(I know I know you've got to go, when the sky and I turn blue. Tuck me in, sweetheart, I
want to get tired of you.)

there is something to be said
for Peach Snapple factology and the number of miles
we got out of those lovesongs

Real Fact # 728

The planet Saturn has a density lower than water.

It would float if placed in water.

(we did not touch the ocean. the fireworks found us.)

I have heard you can bulletproof a car with phonebooks
I wish you would call me on the landline

Oh boy.

I think I think
about you two times
too many but then I
think ().
again

I'm still your girl.

He has a funny way of showing it:
I love you, darling, he says to me
but I'd leave you for the you with long hair.

Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna, 1793

The people watch the balancing act, the sickening fall from grace
where they'd hope to see a circus or a sad look on her face,
at least a shiver in her dull fists, but she's used to the trap-door
(when the city took the castle). She has been barefoot before.

She's not sure if she's unlucky, to have been young, to have to die
before a hundred spitting peasants whom she can't look in the eye,
before one last game of Quadrille, before a lover begged to stay,
all whispered, "I wish this could be," none said, "Let's run away."

She used to play the harpsichord and wonder at the Incan.
She saw them launch the air balloon and remembered she was sinking.
They built a second palace for the hours still left to fill, where she
locked out the king, slipped off her rings, made love to daffodils.

Her son goes to the cobbler when the revolution takes her.
She lets them cut her hair short and drag her back to nature.
The people want a purge, they want to kill the city clean.
An untidy hope for recompense, red-soaked collar of a queen,

but stumbling up the scaffold, she only begs her pardon.
She hopes that she's forgiven, that they give her to the garden.
Before, she'd wave and curtsy, but she doesn't think on that –
just the one voice in the crowd say: "Where's the Lady left her hat?"

Fall River
(*Lizzie Borden*)

members of the jury,
you're told murder looks like this:
black stain on velvet in a black
and white photo, his rotten boots,
her carpet teeth, and their loveless,
grey-eyed daughter waits
and sets her dress
on fire.

on the stand, i don't mention
the pigeons i kept in the
eaves of the barn where they'd coo
and flutter. with closed eyes
i remember they'd sound
like a train whistle through
a tunnel.

murder's not hard to picture:
the first blood-choked grin
above a wordless mouth, petals
of bone that scratch runs in
silk hair, the way an eye
swells before it splits
in two.
red freckles on your face,
several curls twisted loose.

my father slit the throats of every
pigeon in that barn. i remember how
their small necks puckered at the soil
and a quiet that pushed
back like the force of
bodies passing. i call it an embrace, though
i never was touched. that's the
tunnel and the train of it. the hatchet
in between us.

a scream will scratch
at your neck. arms will go numb
at the eighty-third stroke.
outside, who could tell
this house was
a casket

members of the jury,
murder's not hard:
eighty-three strokes and
the hands won't be yours.

eight-three strokes

i counted.

you were asleep when the world didn't end

The boy sleeps without me.
A theater of shadows
is the only unrest
of a sun turning into
a comma.

Floral sheets gather
like my too-thinking brain.
This boy is a stitch
in the daisy patch.

I consider our geography
and the cup on the table,
which multiplies on the floor
in Pangaea slits.
One blames the trembling
and the passage
of time.

Clocks press fingers
to wartime windows,
smearing our faces
like pirouette heat. We
are just fossils
in the dawn.

But I could watch over you
and we could stay

black flies of antiquity,
undressing
in amber.

The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde
(*Bonnie Parker*)

I'd leave home at sunrise in Texas,
hand pressed to the screen door.
 Mama slept in her room,
 I could smell her perfume,
buckled shoe and a creak in the floor.

Dirt licked my silk stockings on main street.
I spit lead into town.
 Empty diner made noise,
 filled my apron with coins,
and thought hard 'bout not sticking around.

I remember you first in the kitchen,
the curtains laced in sun.
 You talked loud with your teeth
 and stood close like a thief.
I smiled silly til the dishes were done.

You promised me shoes for running, a
home of wood and crystal.
 Traded bodies for cash,
 kept our eyes on the crash;
sandman with a hand on a pistol.

I sleep with my lips on your shoulder
and lick your red wounds clean.
 I am holding tight to you
 in the dream where I drew you,
where my skin is still shiny and green.

I still think about talking pictures
and leaving you one day.
 Have you wanted me more
 than the signs on shop doors?
Are you running to see if I stay?

You said you'd be no-one without me.
I guess i'll never know.
 The snap of witch hazel,
 horses stir in the stable.
At least you're not killing me slow.

Vicious
(Nancy Spungen)

“mom tried to fucking kill me”
umbilical cord clasped like a string of pearls
birthday gift for daughter rotten, still
twitching at Pennsylvania lullabies

by the backdoor of bars she plays
captain to the riptide
 [tug on your tights
 lean in for the light]
it’s 3 a.m. and she’s smokestacked
pouting like a New York doll

the music is crucial he says
to the movement, itching
like a witch-hunt in her bones
they all want to know what she’s running from
 [the traveling salesman
 her secondguess brain]
she only sees chairs
in electric

i guess he taught her how to sleep
 and anarchy and fusion

 she says, “whaddya think, huh?”
they are tourists in their home at the Chelsea Hotel
 she says, “put that shit down and listen to me”
the 100th room is a loaded rubber band
 she says, “I said whaddya think, huh?”
the boy on the bed is a lighthouse and dark
 she says “ain’t we got a pretty life?”
he turns to her
he turns on her

on the bathroom floor she is
noah to the flood
 [reach for the doorknob
 give in to the light]
they all want to know what she’s running from
“Sid, I want you to stop it
 here.”

Equinox
(*Persephone*)

All this when the world turned in upon itself:
a chariot lusting and cornflower blue.
Betrothed to the darkening, this picture of life,
leaves a trail of crushed daisies, a withering hue.

Unraveled my mother knits one hundred winters
and Olympus grows skin in the shivering cold.
Hellfire and poppies, he keeps my bed warm and
makes me a gardener in a kingdom of souls,

where boughs sprout lanterns in pyrophilic brush
and peeled pomegranates grow ruby chandeliers.
The faces of heroes make an echo of home.
This God is a dancer, it's the lone waltz he fears.

Husband wants to know if I'm daughter or wife.
When the search party stomps the frost from their boots,
my green thumbs grasp the arms of this throne.
I've got a handful of seeds and feet full of roots.

All this when the world turned in upon itself:
Pluto points to the fruit and shows me his teeth.
By the seventh the guilt was crimson and mine,
but, oh, such awful sweet.

When my Love Goes Away
(Emily Dickinson)

In the half-bath – a Fly,
Nearly Drowned in the Sink.
Hands are stained to my side,
Bleeding half-hearted ink.

I wonder at death, how
it spins like a Top when
Eyes are through blinking,
but the World doesn't stop.

Afraid of double beds,
of the Letters I don't send,
I threw away the Mirrors
to Lose my body's end.

Shadows soon remind me –
I am no veil for Dawn.
Light does not pass through Me.
I can't tell where it's gone.

So I wilt like a Fly
When my Love goes away –
I blush with the Sky
at this Startling Day.

The Things We Never Say – *A Short Story*
(for my Mama)

There are things I never say.

Seven. Butter. Demolition. Split. Fossil. Donald Duck. Cistern. Wuthering.

I know a lot about words. I make lists of them: penciled between the blue lines of my composition notebook. I write down words I read in books for school, in books for vacation, in books at the library, in magazines in the bathroom, in magazines about food, in magazines my Uncle doesn't know I know about. If I hear a new word, walking down Sunrise Drive or on the bus to Sweet Home High School or on that episode of Mannix with the helicopter and the penthouse, I write that down too.

I think a lot about words. But I guess I never finish. I read that in a magazine once: that right language is all about thinking first and talking second. I wrote down the words the article used: "Plan" and "Execute." My problem is, my mouth executes before my brain's through planning. It's like getting in the car and driving to the store without ever knowing where it is. You might get there, if you're lucky. Or you might come home with no milk.

It's been a decade since my grandmother asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Instead, she relies on the intuition of her change purse, wrapping five-cent church sale trinkets in last year's Christmas paper. Honestly, I don't mind so much. I keep bottle caps in the strawberry-tinted dessert dish and I can appreciate the mystery of an incomplete Country Music puzzle. I can tell Hank Williams by his ears and Dolly Parton by her cleavage. I have no idea who that faceless cowgirl is next to Johnny Cash, but I'm sure she's been "lonesome" at least once in her life.

Lonesome: lonely, forlorn, friendless.

Once my grandmother gave me an old *Roget's Thesaurus*, bound in red with gold writing. She found it in the basement of a Methodist Church near Chatham, Massachusetts.

"I just thought you might like that," she said. "It's got a nice smell to it."

She was right, and it's the best gift she's ever given me. I sit up in bed with a flashlight and a glass of Ovaltine and study synonyms until my eyes hurt (ache, throb,

burn). When you stammer, conversation is all about knowing what you have to say in place of the thing you want to say. Speech becomes a series of back-up plans and second-bests. So I keep a thesaurus on my bedside table and make lists of words to remember when I want to say everything wrong.

I still think Syracuse is my favorite word, though I'll never be able to say it: my eyes close, my mouth twitches, and all that comes out is a dull hiss, like air rushing out of a car tire. But there's no other way to say Syracuse, because it's not a word; it's a city in New York.

But I know to say "town" instead.

There is a girl I like and she is the sweetest girl in school. I've written her name a hundred times and sometimes when I write her first name with my last name it's like I can see the Christmas cards floating red and gold and white-teethed in my head. I sit in class and wonder if Ms. Walden ever felt like this. Probably not, not even about Geometry, which she teaches like Latin, like it's dying and she'll never get back again. She looks like an obtuse angle, hunched over like a shrubbery, hidden in sweaters. No she probably never felt like this, never asked a boy to dance. But I've never asked a girl. And that's what gets me scared.

Evelyn St. Francis sits in the desk closest to the window. Sometimes she answers questions in class.

"The hypotenuse is the square root of two."

I like her voice.

When Mom cuts coupons, she plays Burt Bacharach records. When she does, I think about dancing with Evelyn. Dionne Warwick sounds like falling in love to me. Evelyn sounds like that too.

Dr. Porter made me read a study on stuttering because he thought it would make me feel better and then maybe I'd talk more and then maybe I'd have friends. The study said that the more people know about a disability, the less likely they are to have negative feelings about it.

I know everyone in school must think I'm a psychopath. Because I don't speak when spoken to. Because I leave in the middle of fourth period to talk with the speech

therapist. But I guess Dr. Porter's point is that that's because they don't know a thing about it. They think stuttering is what happens to pigs in bow ties and Roger Daltrey of The Who. They think I'm mute because I'm brain-dead. I know they're brain-dead because all I do is listen.

I only care about Evelyn. Because. Because she smells like an antique store. I guess that's the best way I can describe it.

Dr. Porter asks me if there are any big projects coming up that we can work on together. I want to say, Yes, I'd like to tell Evelyn that she makes me feel like a Sunday drive does: warm and nostalgic and fine, but all I can get out is "Today, your hair is best." But I won't say that. No, I haven't ever said that.

Sometimes I wonder if it's because I stammer or if it's because I'm fourteen and sick to my stomach just thinking about her hips in my hands that I don't bother to tell her good morning in first period. The study didn't question participants on their firsthand experience with stutterers. Maybe they'd never had any.

I've been told that many famous actors are stutterers, but no one knows because these actors are able to fall so deeply into character, that their real self's stutter can't follow.

I wish it could be like that for me. If my stutter were to melt away, like a bad cough, the moment I dressed up in drag, like Tony Curtis in *Some Like it Hot*, to escape the mob and then to woo the sweet Marilyn Monroe, who in my case is the very sweet Evelyn. She'd trust me because I'd share my lipstick with her and listen to all her problems and when I'd tell her I'd always be there for her, I wouldn't stumble once and I'd mean every word.

But I could never be like Tony Curtis in *Some Like it Hot* because the second I'd take off that wig in the white motorboat at the end of the movie, the reality of me would come stuttering back. The credits would be rolling before I could twitch out an explanation. By the time I managed to spit out, "I love you," Marilyn would already be swimming home.

I heard once that Marilyn Monroe stuttered. That's why her voice was so breathy and drawn out. I guess in a way, disguising the stutter is part of what made her famous.

I heard she died with her hand on the telephone.

I think about that a lot.

Stuttering's always worse on the telephone.

In class, we're learning about mythology.

Mr. Fredericks tells us the story of Echo, a nymph who was cursed by the vengeful Hera, after lying about seeing Zeus in the forest. As part of her punishment, Hera rendered Echo invisible and effectively mute, as she was only able to repeat the words of others. In this way she roamed silently about her sylvan home, occasionally whistling after a songbird or moaning along with the wind. Until one day a hunter, handsome and healthy, lost his way in the verdant brush.

"Where am I?" He spoke aloud to himself.

"I, I!" Echo repeated, for she loved this hunter the moment she saw him and longed to make her nearness known.

"What? Who is here?"

"Here, here!"

But he could not see her. And did not seek her.

Eventually he found his way out of the forest and Echo was left alone to hum the thumping of her heart.

I watch Evelyn as the teacher speaks. She threads a strand of hair between her fingers and places the knot behind her ear. She stares out the window, at the parking lot, where nothing in particular is happening.

I watch Evelyn and think of Echo. What if all I need is a word from her, the right word to say back? Maybe she's lonesome. I can tell her I'm lonesome.

I can tell her how she's left me so terribly speechless.

I read once about an ancient Greek who stuttered. His name was Demosthenes. He put pebbles in his mouth and yelled at the ocean. I've never even seen the ocean. But sometimes I scream at the YMCA.

I never answer the phone and I never make phone calls. My mother wrings her hands and says, "What if the house were on fire!" But I always remember to turn off the stove.

My speech therapist makes all his patients call each other on fake phones to help us get over our fears. We read from decade-old scripts and sigh often.

“Hello, I am ckk-calling to inquire about the fffferns.”

“Good-evening, Mrs. Wuh-wuh-wuh...Mrs. Walden, is James available?”

I get my younger brother to make calls for me and to answer the phone when it’s been ringing too long and I’m trying to watch *Hawaii 5-0*.

We have a rotary dial telephone that hangs on the wall in our kitchen. The cord is tangled and gets caught in the door when Mom gossips with her sister, Fran, in the living room.

The phone is tan. Like a dessert I saw once in a National Geographic. I count the holes on the receiver. Seven where my ear goes. Thirty-eight where my voice goes.

I’ve been staying up later. I’ve been making new lists.

The phone is ringing now. Her phone is ringing.

My ear clings to all seven of those hollow dots.

“Hello?”

I wait for the thing I want her to say.

Something like love.

Love: like, adore, esteem, respect, care for, think of, dream of.

“Hello?”

My speech therapist says I practice “avoidance” (evasion, escape, elusion), when I should be practicing “openness” or “disavowal.” What he means is I should learn to laugh at myself, or at least pretend that nothing’s wrong.

But there are just some things I’ll never say.

Several hours later, I’m not reading the thesaurus.

I flip through one of Dr. Porter’s scientific journals, where there’s an article about the source of stuttering.

It says it’s in my genes.

But more than that, it says it’s a founder mutation. That means it’s not something that happens again and again in a new way each time, like Christmas dinner. It’s something old and sacred that moves down the lines forever like my great-grandmother’s wedding ring or Christmas Day or certain stories that no one ever forgets.

I read that this mutation is 572 generations old.

That means for 14, 300 years people have been opening their mouths and chewing on rocks and spitting up sounds and making lists and crying at the movies and coming home without any milk. All twitching on the same family tree.

In bed, I think about the ways the earth makes noise.

Wisps and cracks and booms.

I turn off all the lights and lie on my back.

I listen for “hellos” in the pattering night.

[endnotes]

Norma Jeane – The italicized lines are Marilyn Monroe’s own words.

Back to Black – The title of this poem is also the title of Amy Winehouse’s 2006 album. The line “I died a hundred times” comes from a song of the same name.

The box is only temporary – The title of this poem is taken from, “The Arrival of the Bee Box” by Sylvia Plath. The last word in every stanza’s first and third line is taken from her poem “Mad Girl’s Love Song.”

Self Portrait With Cropped Hair – The title of this poem is also the title of a 1940 painting by Frida Kahlo.

how to spend a summer alone, but not too far – “Meet Me By the Garden” is a song by Dent May and His Magnificent Ukulele.

Let Me Down – These are lyrics that were written to an instrumental composition by Chris Hoge.

Fine and Mellow – “Fine and Mellow” is song by Billie Holiday. It was first recorded in 1939.

Rose – “Je veux que tu sois à moi pour la vie” is a line from the 2007 film *La Vie En Rose*.

We Are On Line 157 337 – This title is taken from the transcript of Amelia Earhart’s final words.

Better Things Can Fall Together – The title is a snippet of a Marilyn Monroe quotation.

seven[20]eight – This poem utilizes Snapple Facts, which can be found on the underside of Snapple bottle caps. The facts are italicized in the poem.

The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde – The form of this poem is an exact imitation of the poetry that Bonnie Parker wrote when she was imprisoned. I specifically mimicked her style in “The Trail’s End.”

[the movies i watched]

Ted Talk. "Allison Jackson Looks at Celebrity." (2005)

Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

Camille Claudel (1989)

La Vie en Rose (2007)

Marie Antoinette (2006)

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