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Tiger God

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TIGER GOD

By

Aubrey Ryan

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

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ABSTRACT

TIGER GOD

By

Aubrey Jane Ryan

This thesis is a manuscript of poems divided into three sections: Deluge, The Holy Body, and How to Make a Beginning.

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Kicking Up a Fuss to be Born: Creation Stories in Poetry

1. Deluge

I've been terrified of this world. I've felt that we are careening toward the end. This thesis is an attempt at a creation story, because terror is a state that can't be maintained without great strain. I would warn anyone to quickly lose interest in it. The thing that can be maintained—the thing that is effortless and constant—is creation. The world will create itself again and again, with us or without us. If it is to be with us, then we must turn our minds away from endings and toward beginnings.

When the Irish poet Louis MacNeice wrote his book-length poem, *Autumn Journal*, he chronicled the similar dread and instability of living during the tail end of the 1930's—what he dubs as “the uneasy camber/ of the nightmare way”(MacNeice 29). Though his bewilderment and guilt is clear throughout the poem, there are moments when his faith (however hobbled) in human goodness peeks through:

None of our hearts are pure, we always have mixed motives,
Are self deceivers, but the worst of all
Deceits is to murmur ‘Lord, I am not worthy’
And, lying easy, turn your face to the wall.
But may I cure that habit, look up and outwards
And may my feet follow my wider glance
First no doubt to stumble, then to walk with the others
And in the end—with time and luck—to dance. (10)

I too share MacNeice's hobbled faith. It is my hope that this thesis expresses some of that faith. Though we have blundered and trampled and warred ourselves into the "nightmare way," we are still worthy of God. We are worthy of a fresh world.

Many of the poems in this thesis are creation stories. The first section, *Deluge*, features characters on the brink of a new world—on the brink of their own creations. These poems come from my desire for a shift in the world's consciousness: a turning away from broken ways. We need a new narrative, a new creation story. If we allow ourselves to begin in a place of humility, a new myth will emerge. I think that poets know instinctively, however miniscule the inkling might be, that guilt does not get the last word—whether we are guilty of eating the apple or guilty because Christ died for our sins. What does have the last word is creation itself, and creation is absolutely separate from sin. Where in an atom will you find sin? Nowhere—it's utterly crowded out by the miraculous.

In his poem, "The Creation Story," Eduardo Galeano shows us a God who creates man and woman with a reckless, casual joy:

In their dream about God's dream, the woman and the man were inside a great shining egg, singing and dancing and kicking up a fuss because they were crazy to be born. In God's dream happiness was stronger than doubt and mystery. So dreaming, God created them with a song:

"I break this egg and the woman is born and the man is born. And together they will live and die. But they will be born again. They will be born again and die again and be born again. Because there is no death. They will never stop being born. (67)

The Christian mystic poet Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote her own creation story in the thirteenth century. In her version:

Everything was enclosed in God just as in a cell without lock or door. The lower part of the cell is a bottomless prison below every abyss. The upper part of the cell is a height above all other heights. The circumference of the cell is inconceivable. God had not yet become the creator. (Flinders 67)

In God's inchoate state, the Holy Spirit contains all love and desires to create the world. In Mechthild's version of the story, Love must convince God to break himself (the cell) open. God agrees, saying: "I will make myself a Bride who shall greet Me with her mouth and wound Me with her glance. Then first will love begin" (Flinders 67). God in all his might chooses to be in awe; he chooses to be wounded. For Mechthild, this is the true spark of creation: not the prison of a static god, but the creative force of love.

In Rumi's prose poem, "Praise to Early-Waking Grievers," the Sufi poet hints at the hope-filled newness of a genesis:

A full moon and an inheritance you thought you had lost are now returned to you. More hope for the hopeful, lucky finds for foragers, wonderful things thought of to do. Anticipation after depression, expanding after contraction. The sun comes out, and that light is what we give, in this book.(xvi)

Though the science would come centuries later, we can read it into both Mechthild and Rumi. Mechthild writes of the infinity inside of a single "cell." Rumi writes of "expanding after contraction," just as our universe expands and expands and expands and will someday contract into itself. We can read hope in Rumi's "Praise"—expansion will always come again after contraction. There is always a beginning which leads to an ending—with a new beginning following after. The universe is constantly creating itself, just as Galeano's couple "will never stop being born."

In his essay "Tell Me How It Was in the Old Days: In Search of the Poet," David Citino also hints at the *void* before creation when he explores the idea of poet as seer:

We speak of a poet's *vision*, of the *focus* of a particular poem. So much depends on our being able to see....Rather than 20-20 vision, I mean the willingness to employ—to push—the senses in order to become nothing long enough to become something or someone else....It isn't easy to open the eyes fully to what exists around us. (179)

I'm interested in Citino's idea of the vulnerability of the poet: to open often means to be wounded. Similar to Mechthild and Rumi, many of the poems in the first section of this thesis address the wound which comes from loving the world. In particular, "Tiger God" is an attempt at describing the journey from terror to elation following this opening. "Sam and Lulu at the Very End of the World" deals with two lovers who are discovering how to live a life that is petering out. They notice everything, and Sam's best defense is to become childlike. Children are always at the center of a creation story.

Robert Hass gives us the image of a baffled God in his poem "The Beginning of September:" He writes: "The child approaches the mirror very fast/then stops/and watches himself/gravely"(41). And Maurice Manning's character of Lawrence Booth is another child creator in the poem "Seven Chimeras." He reminds me of Sam:

The way Booth makes an orchid:
Combine one bluebird with nine fencerow
Pokeberries; crush together and hang
Thirty yards away in half-light.

The way Booth makes a story:
Never know the beginning (50)

2. The Holy Body

We can worship God in the body. The poems in the second section of this thesis explore this idea. Sister Nora in particular struggles with guilt as she moves away from

an abstract and clinical version of god toward a more earthly experience of the divine. Many of the poems in this section are sexual; others feature mothers and children. Mothers are the first Gods. After birth, we constantly struggle towards the divine, finding our own bodies in the dark. We mourn out of separation from God, but our greatest cry is not one of longing. Rather, it is the roar of joy that comes when we arrive at the understanding that we are part of God. Lawrence Booth can illustrate that joy:

Sheepish as a far off echo, Lawrence Booth wades
Into the Great Field and the wide-yawning night,
and swallows down a river of firefly light, which illuminates
the cave in his chest, as if he is one big barn-dance and it is
Saturday night and the kinfolks are coming over with cold
Beer and sawdust to make a real party of it.[...]
All of which leaves Booth dizzy,
And he whirls through the Great Field with his lighthouse
Head, a crazed silhouette hee-hawing and slapping his thighs. (Manning 4)

Lawrence's "lighthouse head" is the likeness of the halo in Christian imagery or the lit-up crown chakra of Indian tradition. His firefly-lit chest is as burning-bright as Mechthild's when she writes of her soul toward the end of her life: "See there within the flesh/ like a bright wick, englazed/the soul God's finger lit"(Flinders 75). Similarly, John Rybicki writes of his dying wife in his poem "Me and My Lass, We Are a Poem":

The wind is what wakes me,

blowing so hard I watch my love's skin
flake off: a whole storm of her

flutters away from me until all that's left
inside her is a tired old woman

holding her spine like a candle. (9)

The halo, or a bright flame in the body, is an image of the soul lit up with the realization of God. My poem "Cloister" addresses the heaviness of a heart disconnected from God.

Sister Nora, the poem's subject, returns in several of the second section's poems. She becomes more and more open to an earthly God: a God in the body. In the final Sister Nora Poem, "Sister Nora Prays for Visions," Nora admits to being empty. In this way, she is waiting to be filled. She has "become nothing in order to become something"(Citino 179). She has emptied herself in order to be filled with God.

But surely the greatest illustration of our divinity is our ability to create life, and then to love our creation—to be wounded with love for our creation. The contractions of a laboring mother are akin to the contraction and expansion of the universe (and isn't it a universe that comes forth in childbirth?). St. John of the Cross explores childbirth as an act of the divine, writing that "if / you want,/the Virgin will come walking down the road/pregnant with the holy,/and [...] she grasps your hand for help, for each of us/ is the midwife of God, each of us"(306).

The poems in this second section address the relationship between women, be it sexual or maternal/child. The women in these poems are finding God through the body—here in the wilderness. The women are learning God on Earth, not a God separate in heaven.

3. How to Make a Beginning

Poetry helps us to praise the world. Carol Muske tells us that "a poem requires at least two silences: the silence that precedes it and the silence following it. If a poem is bordered by silence then what is in between those silences insists on momentousness, makes us *attend*" (36). Muske's silence is similar to David Citino's "nothing [that exists]

long enough to become something”(179). This silence of a poem is the same silence created by prayer and meditation. And as Muske points out, this silence allows us to “attend.”

In his poem “The Great Wagon,” Rumi writes:

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
And frightened. Don’t open the door to the study
And begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground. (36)

Rumi acknowledges the wobbliness of the human condition, just as Louis MacNeice does in *Autumn Journal* when he writes that “none of our hearts are pure”(10). But we give praise despite all of that, because praise is our great defense. We know that our world is a wounded world—as I write this, the Gulf of Mexico is clotted with oil. We know that resources are dwindling and wars are raging, and somewhere a Wal-Mart is squatting over a forest. But we are not only a part of destruction. We are a part of the creation which began with the first contraction and expansion of the universe. In this sense, we can take part in our own creation story and refuse the notion that we are headed for the end of the world; we can begin again.

The poems in this thesis are praise poems, because all poems are praise poems. In the final section, the poems deal with praise of the broken and praise of the wound. Just as Methchild’s God was wounded by his love for creation, we are wounded by the world when we “open our eyes fully to what exists around us”(Citino 179). We are wounded by the world because our eyes are open—because we love the world. We love fiercely the forests and the waters and our own bodies, and this is why we continue to praise. David Citino writes that “to say to another or to the world, ‘Yes I see,’ is to grant that person or

thing the right to exist; it is, in a very real sense, a declaration of the love a poet needs to have for the world”(179). As witnesses, we are creating. It is plainly devastating to “open our eyes fully” to our present situation, but it’s also part of the process: it’s dilation. By fully “attending” the world, we are opening ourselves in a great wound. We fear that we’ll die a bit in the face of reality; we fear that the wound will kill us. But it’s in the darkness that something says: *let there be*. And this time, we will be the ones who say it. This time, we’ll not only eat the apple; we will grow the tree.

This is why we continue to “kneel and kiss the ground,” though we have run the ground ragged. This is why we continue to write poems and theses and why we continue to step into the sun each morning. We will not mend our world by fearing it. Neither will we mend our world by hating ourselves and each other for devastation caused in the name of greed and often in the mistaken name of god. We will heal, always, by being awe-struck—by being madly in love with all the world.

Deluge

Sam and Lulu at the Very End of the World

They talk in lowered voices about ash. Lulu says it falls like lashes on her face; she comes in from the yard all streaked

with grey. Sam jokes: *snowday*. Every morning he trips from their bed and peeks out the curtain and fakes a gasp: *O Lu-*

lu-lu—I'll bet you a snowday. At the end of the world, every bet is a good one. Lulu's hair in the morning is a lazy, blow-dried

tiger. She used to run her hair down Sam's belly, and his cock would bob and bob. She'd lay down her body. She'd lay

between his legs, and he'd take her hair in his fist and spread it all across his chest and neck and mouth. He thought it was a crop

of something gathered from the ground, and something threshed. At the end of the world, the sky is a pot of dishwater. The sun

is so tired. Sam dares Lulu to blow the sun out—just the breeze from her whistle would do it. He nuzzles her neck and says: *you*

could whistle down the sun, O Baby Lu. They go out for a Sunday Morning Walk. In the dark, the ash looks blue-jean blue; they wade

up to their thighs. Sam lists Lulu's face to her: one little freckled nose. One curly eyebrow hair, twanging in the wind. Two cheeks

with gold beneath. He says: *your eyes are blue-jean blue*. She says: *O Sam. If I had fire, I'd light myself up*.

A Guide to Eve

She can't remember everything. Ask about the loamy smell
of her own skin. Ask about the rowdy nest
behind her ribs. There's a field in the garden. She thinks, always,
there will be someone. She walks into the clearing
and the person will stand still, like a deer testing
the air. She believes this person made her.
She will blink, and the person will blink. She'll reach forward
for a sprig of wheat, and the person will pull wheat
from the ground. She steps forward. She can't remember
taste, or the color of the sky. But the snap
of a branch. Like the spark of *yes*, like the spark of all
creation. She thinks there is a prayer
to say. Our father. Our father. She can't remember.

The Book of Little Hope

You will want to own flashlights and many rows
of canned tomatoes in your cupboards. You will want
a wall of guns. A field in untracked woods. So build
a deep basement. Build a bomb-proof basement.
You will be bomb-proof. From your place in the house,
you hear the night crackle like a tarp. In the forest,
there are many howls. Something very small
shrieks, and you think: that is my heart
in its horrible yell. You imagine the smallest bones
you can and think of what they'd look like
in your palm. The world is a mallet. The world
is a palm. The world doesn't know where you are.

Lulu Goes to Heaven

In heaven, Lulu's eyelashes grow long like a tangle of spider legs, and in them she catches gravel crumbs that God kicks up and fluffs of cottonwood in spring. In summer, she catches fireflies in the sweet pools of her sweat and winks a glowy eye at the whole wide world. God likes Lulu very much. He wants to tell her about cottonwoods and fireflies and sweat. One day, Lulu catches a wasp on her tongue. The sting makes her dance. She wriggles her hips like a lasso because she's thinking about Sam and home and their bed humming like a hive. That wasp took all God's love to make, and afterward, with all his love in the wasp, God felt scooped out. He felt his chest billow, then cool, then empty, and his ribs were wind chimes. God watched the wasp on his fingertip: a little open and a little rise of wings, and thought: *I'm small*, and smiled, and filled to the brim again: the breaking love, the skin stretched too far, the crushing fist of the whole wide world. He wants to teach Lulu how he made her—he wants her to know—imagines her little gasp, her little tan hand against her lips, her lips making a perfect O.

The Seal Wife

Let me be a quiet bird. Let me
flit. Once I was broad as the span
of her palm: a bloom like the lake at night:

Celia curled on water. I leave
the screens unlatched, a clatter
in the dark. A mark at my return:

wet footprints on floorboards: the size
of rain. Lying down on the lake
is lying down against him, quiet

pooled at my throat. Alone, the clamor
of things: night birds and tide.
My hands at night say Celia.

Cannon in the Key of D

Wedding gowns are hard to sink
in creeks. They float downstream
like bloated geese. They sag

in knuckled reeds along the bank.
Pretend that it's a skin. Pretend
that it's the slitted belly of a wolf

and lay the boulder in. Then tie the sleeves
and tie the hem, and let the good weight
take it down. Be naked as a fish

when you return to town, and take
the thick cathedral steps
two at a time. It's true:

the guests will gawk. But you are day
and peonies. You curl like lichen: fierce
and tight and singing alleluias

to the dirt. They say a bride
can see the next tornado
in her dreams. They say

we let the creek loose in our blood. To wash
us new, they say we'll have to wait for flood.

Adam and Eve Compose a Hymn

He calls her bird—of field, of prairie dirt
and wheat. She calls him

antlered, pelt, the press two bodies leave
in grass. She calls him horn and rut;

he answers *flesh* and names her
flesh; he pulls apart his side

and snaps a rib to build his nest. His flesh is twig,
is clay, but she says *body—mine*,

of mine, a finger's span: a palm to measure
roof and walls of mine. He names her

bread, beginning, salt and wine; he parts
the center of her skin and calls it sea

to which she only sings. His open throat
is filled with reeds.

An Introduction to Sam and Lulu

Sam's Version of Heaven:

His dad sets him on a llama
and the lama is a cradle. It rocks him
right to the edge of the wide field.

Sam's Version of Hell:

The llamas grow voices. They scream his name in the fire.

Lulu's Version of Heaven:

The lake is a mouth, and first it licks her feet.
It licks the pebbles and the hemlocks
and everything in the valley.

Lulu's Version of Hell:

She grows so big. She is a great
mountain. She is a majesty,
and she takes it all
inside her, and it's all quiet.

Furrow and Plow

She likes that he watches her in class, then follows her
home down the farm road and all the way
outside of town. He acts like he's got the bit in his mouth
and she likes that too. She surprises herself
by screaming as he pushes her down, surprises herself
and stops. Birds settle back on their posts;
he lifts her skirt by the side of the road. There is gravel
between her back and the ground, and later
she will find tiny bruises like seeds where rock fixed to skin
and she didn't feel it, was thinking of changing
into jeans, of her mother in the fields and how the plow
cuts through dirt. On her way home
it's dark. The neighbor woman on her porch
watches under the light, moths in a reckless halo
above her head. She sees the girl's legs, bare against
black fields, shakes her head *no, no*
and makes a chirp with her tongue. She wants to tell the girl
to comb her hair and stand up straight.
It's so much nicer to look pretty—stop walking
like something's pinning you down, plowing you under.

Tiger God

You are almost always very sad. You wake
with the day in your throat like a log, and your house
is a heap of grout. The bunnies stole your celery.
So marigolds are pointless. Marigolds

are tiny, pointless suns. You think too much
of Yellowstone: how something's blowing
in the deep rock and someday the blowing
will burst and the blue sky will catch it. The blue sky

will be ash for something like 50 years. No one
will eat celery anymore, and bunnies will grow
long claws in the dark of the sky. You want
to live, so you put on pants and lock the door

and walk around the block, and your fear
clanks and clatters by your side. You kick a twig,
you kick a piece of gravel, then you look up
from your feet and maybe half a block away

there's a tiger, sitting. Its paws are big. You wish
you dressed nicer; you wish you weren't wearing
a wonky sweater and your mom's old corduroys,
because the tiger looks ravishing: like a commercial

for hair dye: all gloss and flounce and tiger breath
bursting in the air. And so the tiger levels cities.
And so the tiger makes you silent as it sneaks forward
in the street, your knees kneeling on their own, so the street

is an altar as the tiger comes. You feel the tiger
coming in your skin: a rip of heat: you're a stove
and you're raging, and your eyes are lowered. You don't
look. From that moment on you'll be beautiful:

your skin a perfect blaze: red and open to the sky.

The Holy Body

Bluebeard

There's a book about it: when the virgin
marries, he's rich; he bends her neck
with rubies. On the wedding night,

she's naked with a red rimmed throat. He splits her,
and hangs his sheet against the window pane
to prove it. There's blood

all through this story. It's when he takes
a business trip and leaves his ring
of keys and hundred doors to her

that she begins to look for what she knows
is there; a key for a lock, a key for a lock,
and one last key until the room

that's left. Pretty girls know how
to hurt themselves. In his version of hell, his face
is a wide open door. In hers, he's taking her

apart then building her with bones
from other wives: a sweet click
of spine: a hand he chooses as her hand.

Cloister

The angels come to Nora in the chapel. Their voices
are like mushrooms popping up. Nora kneels
in the grey light on the wet, grey stone, and God
is a hanging stone above her—arms outstretched
and looking hawk-eyed to heaven. The angels stand
at the back of the chapel, and they speak to her back
with their muddy tongues. They ask her: *come*—and it sounds
like the roll of a stone into water. Her heart
is a stone. Her heart is a ripple on water.

Devotions

In dark, the angel smells like fallen logs. In day,
she smells like tin and my mouth is full of her taste
and I taste her the way I taste a split lip. The way
to heaven sounds like bare feet and a fast, fast
creek. Ask the way to heaven and the angel digs
holes in the backyard dirt and her wings crack
through leaf piles and she sings and sings.
I ask the way to earth and she spreads her fingers
like a rake on my chest. She plants my hips like bulbs
into the ground. I ask the way, and in dark I knead
the last light from me. I'm black dirt and blacker seed.

Adorations

A tooth in His head, all day gnawing. You're loose bone. Say *God* and He snaps to attention and sets his jaw and crouches down. Just to be ready. So should you be crouched down low. You're rooted in with a nerve at your base. Be very still for your God. Let him gnash you. Let him rend the world in two.

Sister Nora Prays for Visions

Nora thinks of clapping mud into cakes and filling her throat. She worries that her body is stark white inside, and the angels will get bored because they're made of knotted roots and sap. In the chapel, the stones seep, and Nora thinks of cold and dark and fish. She feels something finning through her. She thinks of round, white eyes. She stumbles past the garden, and there are feathers in the dirt. She stumbles past the compost heap and its oven center, and in the tall grass the angel is cross-legged and naked. Her wings are curled around her. She looks like a milkweed pod. Nora says: I'm empty, and the angel opens her pink mouth, and Nora's cheeks go pink. The angel opens her wings, and Nora thinks: make me an instrument. Father, make me.

Lara Has Pretty Perfect Breasts

She puts a drop of clove oil in her beer, so it bites more.

And now she loves a carpenter. Sometimes she looks at me
like she sees me in her bed, and when she does that

her eyes are the best grey ever. We're the first girls
God ever made and our skin is dirt with the sun on it. She finds
sawdust in her clothes. And he smells like cedar,
not pine. Once, she said that all the pretty girls

look funny when they come, so I hid my face in her neck
and the skin there, and I hid my face in her wettest hair.

Love Poem for a Doppelganger

You're a gloss I gather: oil or ink—a stain
I carry on my palms. Every night, I rinse
you down the drain, and still I find your print
between my sheets. Let's start again—

let's say that you're a guardian; let's call
you mine. The doctors say you're like a limb
that's died. But no. My fetch, my twin,
my box I can't hinge shut. I'm going dull

from use. You play at games—you play
me as a tracker, as a ripper-up of rooms
to find your shape. I drag the lodestone
of your hips, your wrists; I make my way

by scent. I make my way in dark; I shed
you—still and open-eyed against the bed.

Tether

I sleep in your old socks and miss
our two old rooms. I miss

your thrift-store slips and black mascara
ground into my sheets. This far up north,

I miss my skin. I wear it like a guardrail
clanging through the wreck; I wear it

like it's scales. But every night I'm sticky
as a cherry drop and deep, deep red

between my layers. You'd blush
to see. I'm sure you're nearer

than I think. I think your hips still follow me
down hallways, and your belly is a kite

tied to my wrist. Come here. I'll wear you out
against the last gray stretch of March.

History of Sex

You walk barefoot over charcoal dust. Your feet cake black, so you smudge the sheets when they sprawl you out—and your stomach is gold in the light. The Iowa plain of your stomach is gold, and someone draws a hip, and someone draws a rib. A girl with long red braids draws your nipple. Her fingers move—like she’s winding a tiny clock. Under a rasp of charcoal, someone draws your mother. You’ll find the easel near the edge of the room: your mother’s back curved in the first half moon of the world. You’ll fall asleep in the light, and no one will know you left.

I am Telling You Stories

Believe me. From home
the letters come in droves: the barn is up, the cows
sound like a barge's beat-up horn
and fix you with their pretty eyes. I'm asking how

to make a home. My mother told
a story about gravel: the city: the road is one long
river. She says my father plowed
them both an ocean, that no one sees it; that alone

we're fish with sand in our mouths. The tale
of my mother: blue gingham and bone. I'm plowing bone
from every field. I'm keeping all
the bits in mason jars. I shake her like a rattle, so home

is the sound in my ear: the story of silt in a ring
around ankles. Her dress was blue, or green.

Seal Wife

Celia is a pewter bowl. The sea is a pewter bowl behind her.
I sing a hymn to Celia, and she fills up. She pushes my spine
in the sand, and I make a mark like a row of beads. I curl myself
against her collarbone. We're only made of bone
and ocean. So she goes back and back and back to shore.

The Sea Was the Span of My Lips

All November, the gales
blow old barns down. The fine cups
break with the weight of cold. Before

and once, I threw my *aves*
to the black rocks by the sea; before
and once, I first saw Celia

crest the tide, the whole sky
opening behind her. She raked the sea
with her fingers. She held my hips

like an urn. All November,
the chapel bell comes mewling
through my sleep, and the people

are all sparrowing in rows.
Today I found her hair—tangled
in my sweater. So I made a ring

on my finger. I'm bright as a lamp
beneath sheets. I mark my spot above water.

Demeter

At the end of a milkweed
acre, the stream cuts
wood. Each spring the spill
of flood: a rise of breath
over banks. Spring: silt settled
in grass. My toes are still
pale roots. Still,
your ribs line my belly
like the grain of wood.

Coveted

There is a rumor of doves
at the farm outside of town. Just months ago,
their youngest girl was lost. That was December:
the Nativity in the churchyard and fields
bristly with frost. She'd made an ornament
of silver bells and wore a small wool hat, gloves
tethered together with yarn. They found her
in the east field, curved like a wishbone
against a tree. And now the doves—roosting
in milkweed. Now the mother walks
the perimeter of crops with millet dappling
her hands. She thinks her grief is a gathering
of stores for coming winter. Each day
the doves are whiter, lined up in rows
like choral-bells. The doves want the mother's
seeds. They eat the palm from where they came.

Cassandra Bearing

She names her Evie. Last light.
She sings darling songs; she sings

lulls in a crowd and cicada
hum. In the deep drum

of her belly: a water wanderer,
a curl diving cartwheels at night

when she prays. Two years pass
and they have the years: windows

unbarred, quilt forts and pressed
fall leaves. She says: make a life

that houses you. She asks: let there
be, let there be. When it comes, Evie

is still small, hooked
on her mother's shoulders

like a starfish. They follow a path
to a field where Cassandra points

at the sky, its arms thrown wide,
holding the fire like a blossom.

How To Make a Beginning

I am Telling You Stories

1. Containing the Seeds of a Discontent

In the beginning, the world was a jaw wide open, calling to make itself.
The whole world roared—and that was the word, and the word was god.

2. God Fails to Differentiate Himself from His Predicate

In the beginning were the bones of god,
cracking themselves into stars and then the waters of the earth. God made of his bones
the earth, the cathedral of a whale, the tracks of a little gray bird. God made of his bones
a wasp, and the wasp chewed earth into pulp and made a nest. God chewed the earth
into clay and made man. Then he crawled inside and curled up his bones and laid down
in the hollow and looked out. And god felt a tumble in his chest when he looked out
at the wide world, and god thought *I'm small*, and all his love was a fist curled around
him. The wide world was a fist, and god was crushed and was filled to the brim and
broken.

1. It Sounds Like Striking a Match

God taps like a beak at the pane; he's been so lonely.

2. The Only Way You Can See Your Eyeball Is By Looking in a Mirror

God names him rib and day of rest. He names her wheat-field and the wheat
blown low in the wind. He is antler and rut, and she rides him under the sun.
Her knees kneel in the dirt. When they sweat, there are a thousand places
for god to look. Once, god felt his chest rage like the sun while the world
waited to be born. Now the world blows through him. When they walk
through the gates of the garden, god is saying: Lover. I had so much more to make.

Collected American Subway Erotica

In Volume Four, Eliza boards
the Belmont train. She watches Jane who's with
professor John. The two are dressed in black,

and Jane is slicked into a skirt, and John
has safety pins along his red rimmed
ears. Eliza likes to watch. Eliza

likes the clutch of fists on safety rails
and knuckles side by side. The sweet Eliza
spies how Jane takes John's free fingers

up her skirt and moves them underneath until
the brakes are clamping down and John is pulling Jane
into the open doors at the next stop. Eliza later lays

along her borrowed couch and thinks of Jane against
Professor John's linoleum: her spine a golden row
of bruises from his weight until he turns her

belly down. Eliza comes with Jane, her jeans
slouched to her knees, a furrow from her nails
plowed in her thighs. We should all

love other lovers. Let's watch them walk,
arms together like a hinge falling open.

Urban Legend

Just like that my uncle picked her up, pulled
his white Toyota to the gravel, to the reedy ditch
and picked her up—he said because her shoulders sagged, because
she looked so sad and she was wearing sequins—
he thought they looked like scales; she looked just like a land-
locked thing there with her hand laid on his hood. He settled her
behind his seat, for safety's sake. I'm most sure she was crying; her dress
was ruined and the road was dusk—it's just like that. The road's
a river. The road's a river and it's full of white-eyed fish; she'll tell
that story. In the dark, the road is following
her pointing hand. Town is resting all those miles away.

Hitchhike

Her dress was blue, or green. Just like that
my uncle picks her up, pulls over to the ditch with headlights
solid through the dark, the windshield wet,
and her in sequins. On the road, a hundred lives

stream past, and then keep on. She talks
about the dance: a broken heel, punch in her lap,
and my uncle, listening, hooks
his eyes against the road, but listens to her voice: slap

of wipers, and her telling him the perfect shade
of gloss, the way it feels to take two dozen
hair-pins out and lay them in a line and shake
your head to the hard beat of trucks. The engines

hollering at her, and a man pulled to the gravel.
She is telling his story now: first, there was a girl.

In Later Days

We'll have a nutshell
of a house. We'll kiss

in the kitchen while the kettle
rattles steam over mismatched

dishes, and one deep pot
for the slowest stews

we know to make. It would be
only ours: the way you hold

the small bowl of my hips,
your beard loped down

my belly, the smell of loam
and flour. Some nights

I'll want to slap the shutters
wide, let neighbors find us

full against the pane: my face
lit: every lamp in the house lit.

Epilogues for Adam

1.

He gets a list of fears: the sky
in flames, a van, a spider barbed
against the sheet hung out
to dry. Isn't the world a gift
she made him? Her skin is always hot,
and every night she twists around him
in her sleep. He thinks a toad
squats in her mouth. Behind her belly
is a swarm of bees. He breathes once,
then twice. He loses count. What he wants
to say is: this is my first breath. This
is how I'm made again.

2.

It turns out fine. He builds a house with bright white walls and braided rugs. She puts flowers on the counter. In the end they don't think much of any place they've been. He goes for days without remembering to pray, but when he does, it's like he swims; his chest is splitting from his own held breath. He tries to tell her: *home is where the heart is*. She forgets. Some nights, he walks out in the yard alone until the lamp light disappears. They had a patch of land; they had a hundred tiny seeds; and she was tiny too. He could have held her in one hand.

I Was Trying To Love You, Sarah Palin

I kept an apron drawer—plush full
of gingham flowers. I folded everything
in quarters. At night, I deep conditioned
and rolled my hair till it was glossy
as chocolate pudding, then hung my head
between my knees and brushed: I wanted
a household god, standing straight-spined
in the corner. Let's say I offer you the last
dregs of my tea, the lemonmentine in my pajama
pocket. Let's say I blaze a trail of bread crumbs
on a night-hike to your house. In the frost
of a downstairs window, I'll finger
your name. My girl, melt the O of your breath
beneath it. Open from your side of the glass.

Our Cat and a Dead Cowboy

We're reading in bed
and he's crouched on your chest
with a paw in your beard. You say: *but he's my first*

cat. And: but someday
I'll have to keep on going
when he's dead and gone and then you rub his face

with both your palms.
In the book I'm reading, the hero
lives under a bright sun. He saves a saloon from burning

and kicks up dust
and ties up guys who have hooves
for eyes. For the hero, all the girls pop their corsets

and their nipples glow
pink and bronze. I picture him
in plaid. I picture him a redhead because wherever you go

I hear spurs clank like winter stars,
and my life is just as sure as a saloon door
on its swing back from closing.

O Honey, Won't You Marry Me in Michigan

The snow won't stop for days, our road
 trackless— the lamplight
something spilled and left. You're gold
 in wool and overalls; you're a sight

to see, O love. One pear, one pound
 of chestnuts from a paper bag, one kettle set
to burst. I'm smooth and round;
 I'm a shallow bowl of oil, sweet

loaf, sweet leaf. Bring shovel, bring
 salt and light a match to me- my bones
will melt. Honey, ring
 me in garland- I'm a festival. Our home

is in the branches of jack pine; our bedposts
hum like hives. Baby, bless me and I'm blessed.

Zombie Poem

Every night he has his walk
past wrought iron and around the block
of maple trees and lawns

with inch high grass. He doesn't step
on cracks, and thinks *meander* to himself
though god knows zombies just have slow

for gait. He knows slow. He's watched the ivy
stream along the brick of 24 W. Myrtle Drive—
each day's raw growth

rooting in stone. Tonight, her yellow window
stands open to the street. She's not naked there
but nearly: white nightgown like a streetlight

just switched on. He thinks *new*. Then *hand*
then *waist*. She's small; her wrist
flutters like a million moths as she pulls

the curtain closed. After that, he turns
toward home, thinking gray
must be the calmest color and granite

the quietest stone. He can do
without that pulse- the hectic force
of things that grow.

Things to be done at the end

It isn't a question of hands. Row by row, a man buries seed and palms down a furrow. He is silent when he asks: *give us this* day, when he asks: *let me sow*. He has gathered the most wood he can for the night when the quake starts. When the rafters shake, someone is staying where she is, and she kneels in the church until her knees peel like an apple, and soon the rafters will stop. They hold the sky up. A woman lays on her side in the field behind her house, the round globe of her belly tightening like a fist, and she remembers to get to her feet, to stand wide and plant her heels in the dirt, and remembers to make a cathedral of her hips and push down toward the dry grass and toward the dry leaves. It isn't a question of hands. Let the earth take what it needs.

Apocalypse

I'd rather you not come. The lake today is slate
and it's so pretty, my bones hurt. I'm going to sit on pine needles
and little pursed pine cones. The lake is pretty, and people here
love the snow, and I want wrinkles. I want rows and rows of green,
and a compost heap, and I want a porch. I want tea too,
and a blue quilt, and his beard on the cross of my collarbone
at dawn. I'll wake up. I promise to wake up
and check out the cedars and the stars. I think God likes our yard
and our orange cat who's a cowboy and our other cat
who chirps, and he wants to sit in the fist of January.

Leave the farms and the hilltops and the long roads
home. The lake is clapping for us and God.

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