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THE DAY THE DAY FELL ASLEEP

By

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B. A. (Hons) University of Bristol, 2015

M. A. King's College, London, 2020

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2023

Advisory Committee:

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By Christopher Thomas

Thesis Advisor: Professor Jennifer Moxley

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
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The poems of *The Day the Day Fell Asleep* were written across 2020-22 in Oxford, England, and Orono, Maine, in consultation with and under the advisement of the poet Jennifer Moxley. The primary themes of the collection are the language of dreams, and the language of reality, and the possibilities of meeting places between the two. This thesis is prefaced by an introduction, *Statements Toward a Poetics*, that draws on ideas from poets including May Sarton, Yves Bonnefoy, and Wallace Stevens, to begin outlining a poetic state of awareness that informs the concerns of many of the poems in the collection. “If they are more awake than the day is,” as my *Statements* suggests, “poets can pierce through the veil that seems to separate sleep from reality.”

DEDICATION

For my mother, Louise.
My first and foremost poetic influence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am more than indebted to Jennifer Moxley, my wonderful advisor and mentor, for helping me to bring this collection of poems together. Thank you for being such an encouraging, wise, and close reader of my work. It is a beautiful thing to work alongside you. Thank you, James, for being remarkable, and for inspiring and believing in my poems. To borrow Auden's words: you are the kind of reader (and partner) every poet dreams of finding. And thank you, to my beautiful mother, Louise, for sharing life's poetry with me. It is because of you that I write it down.

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THE DAY THE DAY FELL ASLEEP

Statements Toward a Poetics

I.

The first poem in the collection, “Uhtceare,” takes its name from an Old English *hapax legomenon* meaning “dawn-care,” which concerns the elusive, sometimes ambiguous kind of worry we have in the early hours on first waking. The heart of the mind is racing at night, and it is the language of morning which interrupts the mind’s love affair with sleep. And yet, paradoxically, sleep comes and suspends us for a time, forcing us to “practice our death / and sleep in / its pictures,” as I say in my poem “At Night.” The awareness of this suspension is complicated and soothed by the possibility of dreaming. When we sleep, we hope. When we dream, we distill the drama of everyday life into a language that is beyond reality. Indeed, without the dream, I think it would be quite disquieting to go to sleep. I wonder, then, “Why on earth do we forget our dreams?”

Sleep presents certain problems, absences, and lacunae to the poet who hopes to make sense of such things. Of course, I am not the first poet to wrestle with this concern. As Octavio Paz suggests, the fact of “jump[ing] from morning to night, sleep to waking” can produce an uncanny kind of clarity, one which troubles the very essence of our being (14). “From when I first opened my eyes,” he writes, “I’ve known that my place isn’t here where I am, but where I’m not and never have been” (15). Through sleep, we are exposed to the knowledge of these different “place[s].” The poet attempts to balance them, to better understand the true nature of the reality of “where I am.” Therefore, I think of sleep as both the “place” to which we belong and yet the “place” to which we, strangely, “never have been.” And so, I write, in “Uhtceare,” that “To escape sleep would be

one thing,” but to “reconcile its immortal cinema / with creation, another.” I trust that poetry will always help us to reconcile.

It might be that the worry experienced at dawn is the result of the sudden flood of reality as it enters sleep, as it punctures the dream, as it replaces that phantastic darkness with the normal apathy of daylight. There is a reason poems and dreams often reside in the same, shadowy part of the mind; unfortunately, of course, dreams leave hardly anything in their wake. It is through poetry, then, that the spectral or the “immortal cinema” of our sleep and dreams can be brought into closer contact, and reunited, with the “creation,” or the waking reality, of our conscious lives.

*

The poet wakes up to a day filled with poetry. Or, rather, it could be said that the poet wakes up and chooses poetry over reality. Perhaps, I should say, *before* reality, which at some point the poet will have to contend with. As the day begins to open, the poet may struggle to decide whether to *live*, or whether to think and therefore *write* about yesterday, today, or tomorrow – or, possibly, to return for inspiration to the enigmatic space of those overnight “pictures” in order to “surrender to the colour of the recent dream,” as I say in my poem “Future Reference.”

It would seem, for now at least, that life *intimidates* art, in the way that sleep undermines reality. And yet, because the poet’s waking life is continually charged with its brief, overnight death, which it must relegate to “the business / of knowing” on waking, as I say in “At Night,” the poet turns to art, to the poem, to intimidate *life* into something resembling the record of the experience of being

more awake than at any other moment. Indeed, the poet must be *awake* to write, to receive the poem and, importantly, to capture it. “No one,” writes May Sarton, “could be asked to be ‘quite awake’ all the time, but it is what the poet must ask himself more of the time than most people ask it of themselves” (40).

To be “awake” is to be receptive, alert, alive to the poem. “The poet,” as I remember Jennifer Moxley once describing to me, “is someone who does not take lightly the atmosphere of their life.” Indeed, the poet must be awake for this, “more of the time” than not. But does the poet, as Sarton has it, have to “ask” themselves to be awake? I think this often happens without question. Instead, maybe the poet must ask for *permission*.

On the other hand, sometimes *the poem* might be the tired one: sleepy, or half-awake, when it offers itself to the poet. Among the poet’s duties, then, is to be awake—alive—enough to rouse the poem into better focus, when it comes.

I do not sleepwalk, but I feel like some of my poems might.

*

The French poet Yves Bonnefoy considers how poetry may help us to unite the “‘I’ which is and the ‘me’ which dreams.” This union is the reconciliation I speak of above. If we are able to do it, he says: “[W]hat unexpected richness for hope all at once! At the moment when so much night is gathering, could we be on the verge of the true light?” (172). The “me” which sleeps is fixed

between yesterday and tomorrow in quite the same way as the dream is. On the other hand, it is the “‘I’ which is” which is awake: awake to the awareness of the departing “unexpected richness” of the dream, which thereafter seduces the poet with its startling logic and strange images. This is the “true light” with which the poet seeks to illuminate reality.

Sometimes I notice that the day itself falls asleep. I think this happens when I am most awake, in Sarton’s sense, to an awareness beyond what daylight can show me. If they are more awake than the day is, poets can pierce through the veil that seems to separate sleep from reality. “The Day the Day Fell Asleep,” the poem that gives its title to the volume, was written one afternoon after a walk in the ancient Bagley Wood, which surrounds my home in Oxfordshire. A sudden cover of cloud evacuated the sunlight from the forest, and everything around me seemed washed out and uncanny; it suddenly felt like a world similar to the one “pressed between / my sleeps”.

When the day *wakes up*, by contrast, it can be a reminder that, one day, the poet won’t. “The End of the Experience” is a poem which delivered itself to me on one such morning. Consciousness mingling with lingering sleep, I looked to the uncovered bedroom window in Maine and found myself to be somehow reflected in the gradient blue-to-white of the spectacular winter view: “After it all, I will be / A distance akin to a wintry scene / Fading whitely // Toward the landscape between / Two heavy curtains.” Like some half-dream of death, this all arrived so suddenly. As I say in “Poem After Cooking,” it can feel like “eternity comes in whispers” – or, indeed, in poems.

I suspect there is an inevitable and insistently elegiac quality to the kind of poetry I am speaking of. Perhaps there are days or occasions when *too much* night has gathered, to use Bonnefoy’s

formulation, where sleep remembers itself as the death that it is, and which sometimes “The clock stays up at night / to warn us of,” as I write in “Yesterday Poem Today.” In bringing my poems together and hazarding an order for them, I realize just how many of them contemplate—directly or subtly—the death of the poet. In my poem, “I Think My Resting Place Should be at Sea,” I speculate that, “One night, one dream, could reveal everything.” The same is true of a poem. One day, one poem might reveal everything. I am conscious that this dream of completeness is also akin to a dream of death. As it stands, “I have little proof of my own afterlife,” except, I hope, through my own poems, which though they may contemplate death, hopefully themselves will not die.

II.

It has been said that being a poet is the same as having a sort of “condition,” in contrast to thinking of the poetic disposition either as profession or occupation. My sense is that this claim to a “condition” has something in common with Sartre’s statement that “the writing of poetry is first of all a way of life, and only secondarily a means of expression,” by which I think she means that the poem, more than any other form of art, can carry this type of individual closest to the sort of clarity they long for (40).

In the grand but daily scheme of things, it is the possibility of the poem which occupies more space in the psyche than it would for someone without the poet’s “condition.” It might mean, then, that the poem is one of the only things in the scheme that can reveal just how grand it all really is. To think of the bigger picture, and to think it somehow might involve words, marks the mind of the poet as it reads and writes; as it looks outward, and inward.

At any moment, the poem could arrive unexpectedly from an (un)expected place. Everything in the poem, too, may feel expected yet uncanny. Indeed, “it may be an incident, a feeling, an intuition that wells up from the subconscious without volition, sometimes taking the form of a single line” or, possibly, several lines, right up to the shape of an entire poem or, at least, the unshakeable impression of one (Sarton 41). The Muse stands ever-present (unsure, sometimes, exactly what to do for the poet), armed with the raw materials, the lines, and the images, enlivening first this particular mind, and then the hand, the pen, and the page of the poem.

My poem “Rah, Punzel!” is one example of the kind of poem which rose “up from the subconscious without volition,” as Sarton puts it. I only half-know exactly where this poem came from. I remember writing it in the summer of 2020, which makes it one of the oldest poems in the collection. It carries a dedication to my brother, who at the time of writing it I had not seen for many months, owing to the same Covid-19 restrictions which inspired him to shave off all his hair: “*At the request of my brother, who clipped all his locks.*” One afternoon, before my journey from England to Maine, he surprised me with a visit. We were sitting together in the garden, I with my notebook and pen, when suddenly he challenged me in a mischievous way to write a poem about his newly “shaved head.” Quite automatically, I did. The well-known fairy-tale name “Rapunzel” arrived in halves in my mind as an outright exclamation.

The idea that being a poet is a sort of “condition” may also be understood in terms offered by Wallace Stevens, who claims that even “The body is the great poem” (194). For Stevens, “A poem should be a part of one’s sense of life” (191). Indeed, not only is the body a great poem, but the body converts experience into poetry, archiving its elements in an organic way, through the

inorganic medium of language. “The poet,” he claims, “feels *abundantly* the poetry of everything” (190. Emphasis original). These remarks come from his “Adagia,” aphorisms about poetry, which Stevens wrote between 1934 and 1940 across three notebooks. These aphorisms were published in several selections, the most complete being in *Opus Posthumous* (1989). I have attempted my own adages about poetry in §V.

III.

It’s difficult to know what comes first. In the poem entitled “Cupid,” for example, I remember receiving certain elements, even if I am unsure how they cohered. Sometimes image and language arrive at the same time. The set phrase, “Of course,” misheard (or twice heard) as “of coarse,” was one seed of this poem. “Coarse” invited for me—I can’t remember, or never knew, why—“Grey hair,” which led me to the image of a river “surging / Purely in loose knots.” There was also the desire to capture a figure—historical or mythical—by capturing the scene that surrounds him, like capturing the atmosphere of a dream: Cupid, this shorthand for love, standing alone “on a bridge / Made of arrows.” As in a surrealist image, Cupid occupies a Cupidian dreamscape. It is a portrait that does not mention the physical attributes of its subject but captures them instead through the scene in which Cupid stands. It is perhaps an ekphrasis of a painting that does not exist. “The Truth About Comets,” on the other hand, is an ekphrasis of a painting that does exist.

According to Stevens, the poem “is a meteor” (185). The truth is that the poem is a *comet*. To be seen for what they are, comets require the intervention of an instrument; meteors apparently do not. The poem is both the comet, and the instrument to view it. Its halo of gas prevents it from

burning up. Importantly, unlike a poem, the meteor self-destructs on arrival. The comet recurs indefinitely.

In Dorothea Tanning's surrealist painting "The Truth About Comets" (1945), two unearthly creatures, who have the long tails of snakes or mermaids, stand under a sky filled by the light of two comets with their own matching tails. The truth about comets seems to be in the way we identify with the natural world, indeed how we see ourselves reflected in its mirror. Do Tanning's creatures wish to return to some mythic origin in the sky? One "sister," wearing a hat decorated with fruit, places her hand firmly on a staircase which grows into a tree. She has made her home out here far from the city or town beneath, not so alien despite her reptilian appearance. But, we must wonder, how can she climb the staircase? It leads straight to tomorrow. Some revelations keep us where we are.

Another ekphrasis in this collection emphasizes the surreality in the most innocuous of places: "There is a horse-race at the filmic heart of *Mary Poppins*." All around "the Nanny," nature is "hand-drawn" in the way such Disney musicals sometimes were. And in this moment, she is dressed elegantly as if for boat race, "Wearing red belt and bonnet of cloud," as she rides in her memorably cloud-like hat and crimson-sinched corset. My usual method of composition involves a notebook and a pen; those notes eventually may or may not become refined into a poem that is finalized with the keyboard and the screen. This poem was an exception, though; I wrote, while watching the film, the poem more or less as it is, directly on my laptop. I think the longer length of its lines owes something to this method.

IV.

I have suggested that many of the poems in this collection take their start from the dream that in one way or another is at odds with reality. The dream *adds* its surreality; in a few cases, though, experience seems surreal enough on its own. The experience of shopping at the supermarket, for example, provided the poem “Fish Counter,” which attempts to wrest the image of the fish counter from its mundanity: the putridity and pink of these “sea-trinkets / With membranes” on display. This supermarket poem was a kind of experiment for me, and in some ways, it stands alone in the collection. In other ways, not. When placing poems together in new configurations to create the body of a collection, resonances abound in both small and profound ways. In small ways, for example, an unusual word may reappear, as the “membranes” of “Fish Counter” return with a difference as the “membrane of night” in the poem entitled “Cell.” In a more profound way, the sea life here is transformed, and its value is redefined in death (or near death) — “priceless. / Their new value announced”. The various items of seafood on display, I suggest, were each caught in the “immobilized / reds of the sunset” and “at different points / of remembering.”

There are no outrightly political poems in this collection, but the poem which comes the closest is “An Occasion in November,” which carries the epigraph, “*Written in anticipation of an American Election.*” This poem is dated 3 November 2020, making it another of the oldest poems in my collection. It began with an interest with the word “occasion” and the etymologically linked idea that events in our life can *fall*—an event “falls” on a particular day, for instance—and with an interest in the word “bound,” in the sense that our lives can become bound up with the weather, or in the way that an occasion might be “bound to happen.” The falling snow, the first snow of the year, was bound up with the occasion of the election, which, as with the snowstorm, I was a part

of immutably. In a strange way, these two poems, “Fish Counter” and “An Occasion,” *feel* quietly autobiographical (even though they contain very few specific details about me), because I remain more conscious of the kind of perception which led me to them.

The poem “Queen Substance” is another such quietly autobiographical poem. It is also a poem that tries to speak specifically to the generative, and uncanny, meeting point between poetic perception and reality. I think it speaks to the collection as a whole, and to what it means to take something (the moment) from reality and “Affix it / to a page made // for memory / in a notebook full / of things I missed.” Written while visiting my mother in England last summer, the first instance of “missed” was in my having missed her voice, which in the poem is “floating through / the telephone,” while she speaks to a friend, rearranging the date on which to take a “walk” together. While doing so, a “bee came in / on a frail string,” quite mundanely, to tap at the window and leave. In the second instance, then, the poem ponders the paradox of being privy to an experience which feels particularly transient and yet “indelib[le]” at the same time, such that to *want* to capture it means, somehow, also, missing it.

V.

Let the object reappoint the shadow. The sun should refuse to rise. Let us stay away from it. Let sleep prevail.

With Harry Crosby, I also “drink to the Sun who lies concealed in his bed under the sheets of the night” (147). But I would much rather drink to the Moon.

The poem invented, and is therefore responsible for, itself.

Antithetical to memory, the poem is *complacent* about its objecthood. Memory, on the other hand, knows it can never become therefore only ever attaches itself to things it can't replace.

The poem is an obituary in reverse, giving form to a character of life which existed beforehand only in memory.

Apparently, even death offers zero privacy.

The poem holds hands with memory, chance, experience, and disaster. The poet is the table and the spirit of their séance. Between them on the poet glows the candle of desire. Chance is first to break their circle. Memory, the last to leave the room.

I hope my last poem wants to be well-received.

When the poem wakes up, the flowers of language around it are shaken into song by the light of art. A petal from a tongue marks the poem's parting from the great mouth of the sun.

A clever word one day is a can of worms the next.

"Language" is the name given to what the mind hears when looking in a mirror. Mirrors reflect more about the imagination than they do about the world.

The poem can never be fully explained by the poet, even when both are pressed for the answer. One ought not to press; the poem becomes just as disappointed as the poet, because the poet can never be fully explained by the poem.

Language cannot reconcile itself so easily with painting.

Another poem! Another flake of all this psychic snow.

“The inventor of lamps freed us from the tyranny of the sun”

—Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*.

“Uhtceare” *

To escape sleep would be one thing.
To reconcile its immortal cinema
with creation, another.

A portable eternity, the head.
Imagine pouring its dreams into day!
and the mind of daytime laid to rest.

Why on earth do we forget our dreams?
It must be a choice to ignore the stone of sleep,
the seed of sleep, the reason for night!

Where a glimpsed thing turns around
and seems so unlike itself, and yet
seems so sure of itself, and yet
seems so full of itself, like a yesterday.

My dreams bleed with colour and sound,
but they heal over in alarm—
the more-open wound of morning.

If I fade into sleep at the knock of death,
where is that same crash of morale
when the dream dies, too?

* *n.* (Old English.) [**oot-kay-are-uh**] The peculiar kind
of worry one experiences on waking early at dawn.

Cell

Late morning.

I have acquired certain methods
to make it to evening
in spite of this eerie
washing-stone weather.

Alone in my field,
at the membrane of night,
under the cell
of the moon, being still
didn't feel
so important.

Sometimes, as an organism,
I'm sad.
Other times, I think
I am wild. I must be
the flesh of old god
or else

my moon-
mindedness reflects
only the memory
of the sun.

Yesterday Poem Today

The clock stays up at night
to warn us of morning. I am light
just moving in. This sleep
is still

and heavy to leave.
We break open into shadows
and turn into plans. I miss you so much,
I miss you twice.

Once,
before I knew it. Then again
when I was nearer to you. Another
day begins close
to the end.

Calendar

Any living thing by Spring becomes religious.
Winter will have walked over our warm lives
And calmed our hearts into lamps of quiet hope.
Cold or dead, we gathered faithfully 'round trees.

The plain poetic scent of April flowers
Justifies the many practices of memory.
I linger in that Spring where things become,
In pictures only I will ever carry.

When will Summer's ornaments arrive?
The sun dial? Tournaments of light?
The long clean cricket gardens
I have left so far behind?

Autumn—and cupboards of pumpkins,
Coming onto cinnamon-scented fields—
Quickens those berry-coloured leaves
We shall watch with annual incaution.

Setting Up House

Between everything, down
crack after crack, and these old headaches,
we cover their damage with our furniture.

Outside, the stars shake their heads
and erupt. We stare at the anger
down telescopes, and laugh

at those who use words
like “foil” and “forgiveness.”
. . . They make my mind sore.

And then there is the milder laughter.
Laughter like they’ve stopped adding
to the television I like.

I will do more reading nowadays!
I will seek things out that make me gasp!
Like apt imitations of gifted writers.

Future Reference

After David Gascoyne

Crowded round a set of common illustrations,
The language of the people had a novel sort of *jus*.
Just what they saw would bring rain to fall.
Just what they heard was too tiresome to trap
In an archive too expensive to remember it by.
And suppose if the trees stayed this way for forever,
Blackened and vacant as feasted-on wishbones,
And spent as on the winter of a body you've yet
To taste and savour as though it were mine—
Spring-like and plentiful, the wilderness ventriloquized.
Would you then surrender to the colour of the recent dream?
Would you then applaud the mirage of the home?
O we've yet to set eyes on the season of figs,
Whatever it is or could mean for its leaf.
Bring us whatever it grows down there with!
I have had ample time with my quixotic mind,
Bragging me forward with a flagellant treason,
While the juices move silent in pipes underneath
And the purloined jams continue to season . . .
Gosh. And when the sounds of the steady plague return
As they are apt to do in the bundles of years ahead,
Round the white table wiped clean, and in a hurry,
For a sudden crowd who have heard this story, and yet
Want more to always remember you by—
When the shadows muse on slow frottage,
And when the pillars talk of sitting down—
The story will stiffen beside you in the unfilled land
Like the opposite of a portrayal.

Knock at the Door

I come to you with a small, unburied sound.

I carry it like a knock at the door.

The noise is no good without people around.

What else would I use it for?

The Ventriloquist

Lost within his own anatomy of sound,
the outdated individual
wanders heretically,

door to door,
along the corridors
of humanism.

Mockingly, he will try
to clear away the walls
of a simple sound barrier

the walls of uncanniness
composed entirely of nothingness
mixed with eternity,

to transfix all life
on one immortal mouth.
In the presence of a quack triumph,

we open up like doors would
to this pair of poor, puckish strangers;
and we wonder to ourselves, then—

who could have left this voice alone
without wanting first to collect,
to observe, and then discard it as one's own?

Cupid

Cupid stood on a bridge
Made of arrows.

Silver the river beneath
Him made of coarse

Grey hair, surging
Purely in loose knots

Under a lost moon
Above the city of hearts.

Beautiful Accidents

*I asked the wind the time
it brought me bells
such are our miracles*
—James Schuyler.

The tangled purpose
Of the beaten flower
Curled in your broken palm.

Beautiful accidents, both of them.

The open knot
Surrenders to the touch of calm,
Quill-like fingers.

Some days feel quintessential—
Impossible
Without an image.

I gazed upon the stem of it,
My hand embracing
An idea for one. Holding

Uprooted in Spring
This exquisite decoration.
A flourish of a lyric from the sun

Presented chime-like to the wind.

Of course, it could not ring.
It spoke inside the mind
Instead, saying, “God is busy sleeping.”

Poem After Cooking

My lover is my sword.
I love our rustic, silver life.
I will not borrow portions of my adoration for him.
There is to be no hurt involved. We cook and sleep
together, although I do all of the dreaming (for us).

His visions are practical,
and earthly. He prefers to work with prose
and money, and I can't help
but think like the moon.
I like sharp beginnings, bright, full middles,
and endings which resemble sleep.
(Does he know
about my empty nights?)

We must forgive all forms of lust,
or hide them from each other. That sort of thing
is not allowed in the kitchen. It should not mingle
with the patterns on our plates.
(We both know
cutlery comes from the starry place.)

After all, we have tall windows
in good places, revealing
recent visions of the world against which
our days crash in waves of light
and deep sensation.

Don't shut this up in some coffin!
I'll leave, smiling into the same night
as always—quite restless
and still laughing,
dipping into new and old reflections
even as I wait—stirring
in the glare
of the inevitable.

“You alright?” I'll ask, or he will ask,

or we will ask
the night. And eternity comes
in whispers. And eternity comes in whispers.

He is coming home now, full of money
and empty of prose,
expended as something giant is setting,
and the heat is leaving us.

I have made us a yellow supper
with your favorite meat.
I have saved some red wine
for you.
You use only a fork to eat!

My darling.
Oh, my sword.

Fish Counter

Putrid lure,
you take me

to a smell.
Ocean-spray foul

no seaweed just ice
over ice and glass,

coffin-empty. Pink
things pulled

from some current—priceless.
Their new value announced

as I look at them
passing—wonderful

old sea-trinkets
with membranes

all what's left on
small cuts, immobilized

reds of the sunset
at different points

of remembering.
But the smell . . .

Does it not
Does it simply not shock you?

At Night

We practice our death
and sleep in
its pictures.

Too stunned to know
quite what to
do with this

we sacrifice our dreams
to the business
of knowing.

An Occasion in November

Written in anticipation of an American Election

Some rituals relate only to themselves,
such that their self-contained joy
bears no responsibility to anything beyond
their very promise of a promise.

To watch the first falling snow is one example,
now pressing down an always novel sort of silence
into ground I could have sworn
was speaking only yesterday. Muffled

and unbound to the greying quiet sky,
and readying the trees for a wedding to a memory,
while the birds look orange in a deeper disarray,
the snow arranges itself in majesty

and solitude. Each flake, falling
with the occasion and falling into place
once occasioned from the other side,
settles neatly in between our things.

Everything is bound as though
whisked through with egg-whites.

The serendipity of a single color
unites the disparate pleasures
of a people in an instance not too
far removed from a childhood realm:

snowfall, in falling, creates nothing
beyond a recourse to silence,
nothing but its own occasion,
immutable as the calendar on which

only the illusion of time's realm plays
dutifully across the days without this weather,
to bring all things together, as though
nothing else were bound to happen.

3 November 2020

Warp and Woof

These moments are made up
—fabric and voices
—woven in a way
that's almost predetermined.

That's what they'll say.

Laced with laughter,
the room at the heart of the furniture
has been left open by
the strangest one.

Their belongings are starting to fray.

The sweet lamp
knocks about the darkness
a kind of thin shadow—a black dress
flung across the ceiling.

I suffer an interruption.

Which moment stands
at the periphery
of the mind as a piece
of almost-knowledge?

the thread of which begins
and ends impossibly
close to something
worth remembering?

The feeling of an upstairs grave.

A candle glimmers
near imprints or photographs
held tightly in glass sheets,
or little old windows.

No one knows who we are.
Not even them.

First Ekphrasis for Mary Poppins

There is a horse-race at the filmic heart of *Mary Poppins*
(Nineteen sixty-four) where the trees are pink
And the sun is white and rosy, and the Nanny,
Wearing red belt and bonnet of cloud, gallops only
According to the golden soul
Of her yellowing, hand-drawn steed.
Even the pastel flowers along the bridge
Fall behind in the ephemeral hand of Monet,
And the derby horses tumble delicately
Into heaps of colour, and friendly competition.
Once settled, children share spoonfuls of medicine.
Speaking of sugar, mature “Alice”
Speaks also of the wind, while the cook
In the white cap opens the window
And shrieks at the black birds perched
In the orange tree.
Knitting brown stockings, Mary’s voice
Sings with the dreamy insomnia
Of freshly smelling, yellow wallpaper.
The black swords of the gates on the edges of London
Follow the biscuity road to the nautical house,
To its wind-blown rows of pink blossom trees,
To its pale floating boat.
There is moonlight to admire on this
Edwardian afternoon, falling gently
In little squares, where the street winds
Follow the red cherry daisies on Nanny’s black hat,
Her dusky blue coats, and her never-ending carpet bag,
From which she tugs an impossible lamp

And her mirror shaped like an egg.
And the eye of Big Ben gazes out
Ceaselessly, facing the waste land
As a tall lighthouse would, still waiting
For those city winds
To bring him her song.

Three Coins

The wind has the structure of a face.
All we see is the stone through the breeze.
We worry about the storm without an eye.

You and I toss ourselves at each other
While we try to outrun God's breath.
I should say "are," but can't.

Green moss grows on the backs of three coins.
It will be difficult to say anything of their value.
I am glad someone finally sketched this out.

Queen Substance

As though
it might learn a thing
or two

about its own
strength of wing
from her voice,

floating through
the telephone
while she makes a call

to move a walk,
the bee came in
on a frail string

and, famished
for glass,
sipped softly

on its own
reflection.
Considering

how indelibly
this took place, why
would I think

to do this
with it? Affix it
to a page made

for memory
in a notebook full
of things I missed.

The Gift of Daybreak

Mother
always
said

“Do not
give to
receive.”

I do not
give to
receive.

What I give
and what
I receive

will always be
two different
things.

I cannot
give you
this sunrise.

I cannot
give you
the sundown.

I can only
ever give you
this poem.

Dramatic Monologue

For James

I am still enchanted
by houses that have
more than one main staircase.

I still believe the ocean
is speaking to me from
the inside of a shell.

I can still recall discovering
that sometimes, men
like men.

Yet I have never found
somebody who likes
a staircase or a shell

quite as much
as I like
a man.

The Human World

Aspiring to arise early
doesn't always realize
the beauty born of the sunrise
you'll see
once you bear the morning fog
of that decision.

See, at the window,
how this tool of observation
with no prior expectation
is but one breath away
from saving itself
until tomorrow to do this again.

Does this happen
every morning? you ask,
and slowly return
to what you got up for, carrying
the dilemma of turning away
back into the human world
of forgetting it.

A Walk

The road leads
To a single candle.

Confusion takes turns
In the feet with joy.

We are walking—again
And again. The sun

Is stuck
To the wick. Two leaves

Pretend to fall. This light
Could never fail me.

We are two roots
Of the same road—

Flowers of ourselves
When we get there.

Facsimile

“You are cold,”
said the flame to the wind.
“I am leaving.”

“You are still,”
said the wind to the flame.
“You must stay.”

Bewitched

For Agnes Moorehead

You'd be one hundred
and twenty-one, Agnes Moorehead.
You're a Sagittarius,
like me. Born into the chestnuts
of an early winter, and cherished
against the ginger stars. . .
Come, collect me when you can?
And fold me into your porous robes
of confectionary green
and purple. —Show me how
to twitch my nose,
to learn to be a witch, from scratch.
Like you, Endora. Just like you. Teach me
your red kind of witchcraft?

6 December 2021

Attuning

I place my ear to the Ouija board.
No one would show or teach me
how to use it. Suddenly

I am listening
to the waves of the sea
or a river that is grey. Above,
it is a cold day.

I can hear
handfuls of song
and voices

then the utter
wistfulness
in every gentle
patting noise the water
makes against the pillar
of the temple of the day.

There's no
sun there, of course,
because I am listening to a Ouija board.

The End of the Experience

After it all, I will be
A distance akin to a wintry scene
Fading whitely

Toward the landscape between
Two heavy curtains. Some might say
This is how it's meant to be.

After it all, I shall be,
In the shady land of eternity,
Purer than love or memory . . .

Look at these day stars! My eyes.
Look at this day fade to blue.
My epiphany to you.

Down-stairs, the light from
The sun will absorb me
In its proper form—

Life-giving! Now, folding me
Back into the kitchen
Of everything.

After it all, I will be
Extinct and therefore finally
Alone, at last, with history.

After it all, please—
Do not weep for me. For this,
After all, is how it's meant to be.

I Think My Resting Place Should be at Sea

I think my resting place should be at sea,
But the ocean never sleeps. They tell me, or they
Used to say, that death is not the end, it seems.

When I do go, open all the doors in the kitchen
For your floral chores: one stone for the Aries,
One heaven full of willow trees. It seems

I circumnavigated the religion of my childhood.
I crammed it heavy with pagan meanings.
I deliberately put myself out there. I tried on
The television and bright, long sleeps.

I took art instead of science.
I forgot the names of lunar peaks.
I fear I am beginning to conclude now,
My memories resonate so differently.

I never really enjoyed eating eggs.
I never learned how to poach one.
I still pretend I don't like thumping insects.
One night, one dream, could reveal everything.

I record them all, at least sometimes.
I keep the door of sleep ajar in case
You, or even I, come with answers.

So far, the dead have ignored my sleep.
I have little proof of my own afterlife.
Still, I think my resting place should be at sea.

Spring

It looks like God has tidied
Up out here. The neat shadows
Fall crisp and heaviest to Earth. The
Midday zephyr has alerted the tulips.

The Orognomic Verses

1

Frost shall freeze

Fire eat wood

The poem shall

Make time eat.

Where, supposedly,

“Shall” means

Always does or should.

2

Thought-fire shall

Surprise the

Unspent leaf,

Spending seasons

After precious times

Spun summer into:

Something perfected.

3

Bright that

Very foil, fantastic

Verisimilitude, anonymous

In attitude,

Enigma swollen.

“Little plight.”

Dry ivy pleases

No poetic bride

Who earns herself

Mandella beads.

Running horse from Utah,

Utah!

Or a feather from

The moon.

4

Bring grey sickly

Muse with hush,

The moon is world
Beyond “clutterance.”

Beyond the cold
Cola threshold,
Moles dream of
Amending form.
Down vanilla-colored
Catacombs now Hamlin

5

Bury the aesthetics to
Thin uncanny light.

“The Truth About Comets”

After the painting by Dorothea Tanning

Sister. Let’s return to us.
If my hand is cold, what are you staring at?

I should have combed my hair.
The comets understand themselves.

I take their claim boldly.
Oh, up there, no shredded

Golden song
Needs polish on its tail.

Stand with me a while longer.
Why does one burn brighter than the other?

...

Sister. You must not go back.
I will go alone.

The comet lingers in your head,
You have seen yourself—you must stay.

I will leave you my beret.
Make your home the change you grasp

And hang your hat’s cold fruit
On its branches for the winter.

Curfew of the Star

The dark meets me
as if a museum
ransacked of light.

Everything
is labelled
by the night.

I wait for the lane
of the moon
beneath the tree

to unswallow itself.
This little path
to the eclipse

takes me home
through my field
to the shadow

of a house
hidden only
from the sun,

to the window
I wait at, to see
what's to come.

Fatigue

Fatigue deadens
both eyes. Ringed
with significance, sleep
floods the skull
from afar, while
the house reflects only its
doubtful clock.

My senses
are already
dreaming. The black
hearts of my eyes
are beating, end
to end. "Enough" they say,
and flutter to bed.

Going to Bed

It is not fatigue so much
As confusion with experience

In those hours
Of existence

Putting my clothes
In a certain place

Startling even God
Out of his hat

Exposing my body
To the night—

Dusk's only opportunity
To navel-gaze!—

Stomach to the moon
Shadow to the day

Body to the clock
I am going to bed.

Screaming Backwards

I am as patient as your dead face
during this dark period
in the history of letters.
My features come and go like rage.

Since my body is numbed
by the simple thought of winter,
a foolish god has shown his foolish hand.
Soon the earth
will suck me up like a thumb.

Feeding an old circle,
my flesh will be spared
by a cold epiphany

which will discharge
itself as with the open
arms of poison
at the foot of my round heart,
with dark trouble round its dark mouth.

My soul is stuck
in that everlasting night.

Fixed to shadow, beneath the moon,
I could not even learn to howl
only but scream
backwards
at the ground you're in.

The Next Sentence

In a cage, language
 in the tongue-form becomes
unknowably still
 as the bird in doubt.

The swallow brings a taste
 just short of the void, and tongue
like a moon moves
 a wave of no language.

Such a small and superstitious
 muscle—large enough to know itself
well enough in reticence.
 A precipice of language,

the tongue is the gatekept
 shadow of the thought.
A precipice of language,
 over which the substance

of the self gathers force,
 the tongue is lifted into action
by the swallow of
 an idea into time

and it resists the death
 of vocabulary before which
it elects the companionship
 of certain words.

The tongue travels from one
side of the red canyon to the other.

Silence between, but a voice—
distinctive as the color of sand—

moves among her shades of grey: tree-roots
of once-moonlight, rising
in the daylit soil of
the next sentence.

The Periphery Speaks

“Easy!”

says the white grass
recently shaved, knowing
why
the green stones cry
beneath the heartache
of the orange butterfly.

“This is the cake-day
of Babylon,
and the butterfly
knows no one.”

“Simple!”

says the blue tit
recently saved, knowing
why
the hurricane
of white roses
dismantles her own perfume.

“These are the late days
of Mesopotamia, and everyone
keeps losing the power
of their noses.”

Rah, Punzel!

At the request of my brother, who clipped all his locks.

Rah, punzel!

The shaved head requires a subject.

Rah, punzel!

Blond is the god of this blond poem.

Rah, punzel!

Cold the scalp the avenging thumb.

Rah, punzel!

Night takes his eye out of day.

Scalp,

Soft guillotine—

How palatial!

Only the Dawn Cares

Is this how the rings
of all the others will wither?
The mist has never been thicker!

Altogether,
it's a scholarly mist. There's an
edge-of-time-ness about its look.

A mist that knows
perhaps far too much.
Or a fog of the finest illusion.

Only the dawn cares
to lay out such a mist, breathing about
in search of its planet.

One thinks, on such a day as this,
it is the fog of our logic
dislodges our bliss.

Desk Hearted

Come see this storyteller's desk.
It rolls with vowels and oak-breath

and haystacks rich with paper needles.
It resides in the light from the windows

of the Soul in a room that's as round
as the urn of the Earth.

Desk hearted, I picture the future
as bundles of letters. I know of one room

still smelling of ink,
lavender pressed upon

paper, only
birdsong entering in

to convince you that
here lived one's lyrical mind.

My name travels
everywhere and my loved ones are safe.

Mother and Father belong
to themselves.

At the cradle of questions, my pen,
and the library of everything

I will have
written.

The Day the Day Fell Asleep

Weeds leaves and flowers
thriving successfully

bunches of the purest money
in a world
in love with itself
like the one
pressed between
my sleeps

Last Lyrics

These could be the last
lyrics I'll ever taste.

No one saw the truth
as regularly as I did.

My words are dead
songs in pieces.

I promise eternity
on both our heads.

The Houses Are Nude to a Candle

For Jennifer Moxley

*you were so kind
when you showed me light at its quick source
— James Schuyler.*

The sky has closed on an epigram.
A gone thing the night has erased.
The soil (so cold, neglected even)
registers the zero. The houses
are nude to a candle.

The windows display revelation,
candle after candle, pared
back to a tooth of light

now mouthing from the inside
of “always,” forever and now,
calling out:

—The light,
the light,
the candles!
—saying

The core of things is cold.
Yet we move, we think,
we feel, the shells of what
we love into singular kinds
of heat.

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