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ON THE SHOULDERS OF THE BEAR

By

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APPROVAL PAGE

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How I Found The Bear

Reared back on his legs
the sun blocked out so nothing
marked the horizon from land
but the blue light
bleeding into snow.
And the village
beside me, still as stone
by the river.
The water's light flashed
on the bricks of the house.
And the bear.
It was not yet winter
but he carried his shaggy coat
across his back.
And the flowers in the field flared
gold where his paws touched
and dropped back
when the snow flew up around them.
And then the bear's breath
against my skin.
Then darkness
closing in the distance.

Heart Museum

You are a dragon in a sea of glass,
I'm dressed like a lion by the painted cave wall.

You stand without arms
center-lit by the fountain.

I am the figure of a woman
holding her stone still child.

At the top of the stairs
light reflects off your armored shape.

Nobody comes to the museum but us.
The smooth stairs echo under our feet.

You're turning into a sculpture the shape of a bear,
gold leaf flaking on your velvet stand.

I'm coming home from the woods,
water splashing up, my dogs at my side.

The sun is rising,
the animals are laying down,
our bodies heavy with sleep.

Burrow

It's impossible to say
until closer inspection, if the creatures
are partly pig or shrew.
See each tooth,
cup shaped, graceful in the mouth
resting open as an untipped brush,
similar to a wild dog's.
They can sleep in an ant hill.
The termites bite, the stinging attack,
it knows the lions in the bush at dusk,
how the leopards follow them in the trees.
Pythons direct their coils downward
to the roots where the large eared twins sleep
They run fast on a diagonal route.
Their arched backs raised up above four shovel-clawed feet.
Small tooth bite, they forage for things too small for us to see
from here, where we watch in our beds. At night
we look like a thousand eyes.

Flying the Back Side of the Clock

This late, the plane's almost all asleep.
In the cabin, the passengers doze, unaware
that below them, in the belly,
stabled horses cough with sleep.
There is quiet among the shipping pallets.
The plane and I are alone
with the tall wind of the sky reaching
past our face. Past the night
past the blinking lights of the panels
at my seat. We bank left,
pass through airspace barely lit
the land so dark, when the headlights
hit, they ricochet back to my eyes.
I can see everything in bright relief,
the spinning land, the earth below us
smooth as a wave, the clouds
churning with the rising sun.

She Makes the Universe

On Thursday night she started to make
her drawing of the universe.
She looks out, and there are stars
against her window.
She watches them, their auric glow
and she writes it down.

All the way down
through the aether, she makes
the night sky glow.
The azimuth between the universe
visible from the window,
and the stars

(and the shadows between the stars)
shows darkness looking down.
Outside the window
something's shining bright. She makes
the heliocentric universe,
she makes its golden glow

so that the galaxies might glow,
and all the stars
light up this universe,
and space dust can feel soft as down.
The darkness of the outside makes
a mirror of her window.

While looking out her window
she maps the firmament. Beneath the air-glow
of the sky, this astral map she makes:
blue stragglers and bright rings, and shell stars
dwarfed by solar bursts. And brightness shifting down,
those light-beads of the universe.

The declination in the sky is universal.
She looks out the window
and the dust is streaming down.
Everything in the sky glows -
a celestial sphere of stars.
At night it makes

the sky bright. It makes the window
of her room a universe, glowing
while all the stars are pouring down.

Survive Winter

In the land where we all go to die – where the soil under calloused feet meets bones dried white by sun – where you come with your shadow (a shadow's heat: the temperature of skin; the temperature of clay taken too soon from the kiln) with your baby strapped to a board – where the pale grooved tooth, the whale tooth carved down palm size, is palmed in sequence of your prayers – where you stood on the cliffed crag of ice where even plankton freeze – the sun blinds when you run, we can't prove the snow will stop.

After the Revolution

The swimming pool went up quickly
where the church once stood
cold marble against the snowy sky.
We swam there, shoulders slicing water,
the spray we made lit up the air.
The splash on tile of wet feet
against stone echoing along the corridor. And bathing suits
where icons once were hung. But there,
in the bright lit swimming pool,
in the quiet between push
and kick, some swimmers found
a kind of water god
to take the place of the god pulled down.

Trestle Walking

I am awake in this empty night. Sound splays
out like water across the trestle when the trains pass. I woke
this evening and the bushes were heavy with berries.
I went to them, my lips black, my arms scratched as I pushed through
to those last dark ones. There used to be animals here,
used to be brightness casting off the leaves of the bushes,
and silence that cut through you in the night. Now the trains moan past
the chainlink constantly. You're on one, somewhere, and the house is still rattling
with your voice. I can count the cars as they tick past. On my hands
the color left from the late season fruit. And the trains
carried the color of the flat blue sky away.

Snow Burial – Piano

Buried deep below the frost
the keys hanging loose

snow coating the frame, the warped wood still held the pattern of the sun.

Deep winter, the leaves left on the trees so brittle they dusted in the wind,
frost on the branches when I opened the lid.

Chiming the sounds carried through still air at such a volume

when I touched a chord
the icicles hammered down.

Against Love

At any minute the satellites circling in the air above us could plunge into the earth. You can't tell me that the stars still shine, when even the lights from the highway are brighter. Every morning I wake up and the finches return. The camellia in the yard blooms red, winter after winter, with no sign of stopping. Outside the grass is lethal. Today the river could flood over the road. The electric chair could come to town wearing your name. The fires could spread past the houses. Tonight could be over before we even began.

Bear Skin

I walked the world in fur.
Bared teeth in the streets.
Overturned a car.
Heaved a brick
through clear plate glass.

Collected the whirr of bugs
on the riverbank.
Scented kerosene, before it lit.
Moved through woods
the color of tar.

It was late summer then.
Now my body sleeps on.

The pine trees rustle alone.
I hear nothing but the stars.

Ode to Thomas Beatie

Love, this is no hoax
between the sheets
the fallopian slip of egg
through tube
the estrogen that rises in
his stomach swell, well, swollen now
is this the future of our life?
child bought and incubated
penguin baby in a bloodcell cradle
you said seahorses – I saw fish
with their mouths open
eggs pouring out
it could have been parthenogenic,
but you're no dragon,
multi-celled though you are
our embryonic daughter soon
c-sectioned into this world
what else do you hold
the stretchmarks that you grow pull
and soon release.

Bovary

In my hands: 1 book, missing 3 pages:
The page where she eats ice at the party;
the page where her hair is dark on red silk;
the page where her mouth tastes like ink.

There is someone in the garden.
I saw her footsteps this morning.
She must be tired, pacing all night,
climbing the attic stairs.

Let the priest come with his book today,
let them clear the dust from her fingers –

the man with the mechanical leg
has no words for this pain,
but I do.

Bring me to the desk, Doctor,
where those letters are.

Let that basket of fruit rot
where it falls.

Heartbreak will come soon enough.

Like leeches on your chest,
his leather boots.

Alligator God

When the children died
I brought them to you
wearing a hood made of scales,

the river light reflecting the bright
carpet of your eyes. When the water rises,
our memories float through town.

Their shoes beneath the table,
the bracelets they will never wear,
her little eye, closed in the mud.

Elegant tooth in an elegant jaw,
your rattle of reeds is a rattle of bone.
I bring them all to the river.

Before you lay the skins of our families
their bodies moving in the shallows,
their pale skin echoing your glow.

Fire Bird

A flash of feathers in the corner of your eye.
Like a woman in the snow
the firebird floats, illuminated.
hangs like a globe. Bursts into flame.

Under the tree, it's night as well.
The man planting spoons pauses
squinting in the light
of the bird like a knife, like fire across the sky.

In the corner of the garden,
something burns. The plated carriage,
the lights melting before her eyes,
like the sun gathering into pools of gold.

Above us the plants are in bloom.
Everything in this place, the firebird singing
flowers you wear like jewels,
I have built for you.

Pressure spreads outward like something spilled.

It's the paveless road
where the machine shop stoops,
metal piling up in the corner
of the yard, the dog driving at the leash
when you cycle past, where the storm first hits.

A swarm the wind picked up,
packing slips slapped on concrete.
The wind runs hair in your eyes. Grease on your leg,
the pressure dropping by the minute.
Rain pounds a blast beat on the window.

The sky comes in low over the tusset grass.
The first drops change the color on the rusted metal lathes.

First Question

The rain is pouring now, but it isn't enough.
The buckets collecting water, can they hold enough?

A woman's necklace glitters, enough
to blind you. The glare of diamonds is enough.

For the birds outside, there is seed enough.
They gather on the trees. There are trees enough.

In some distant time this was enough.
Your hand on my shoulder, and closeness enough.

"Will this writing ever be enough?"
I ask myself. I close the book. Enough.

Audubon

I take my thoughts for birds.
I watch them fly back to their nests,
count them quickly,
then all are gone.
I knock them down, still
their voices rise through the leaves.
The others have flown back to the high branched woods
but these two, Tanagers, red feathers against the rough bark,
look how their lines curve against the pallor of the painted sky.
All around the trees are budding into green again.
The birds make song in the shadowed air,
their feathers spreading across the branches.
I am two dark footprints coming down the path
past the drainage ditch,
an injured wing flapping in the corner of my bag.

View From Summer

The rain turned the road
by the tracks to mud.
the fields were a smear of wet
green -- blue when we crossed the river.
The trestle shaking under
the engine's weight.
The air clear and hot. The wind and
your arm, I didn't notice, how it
stretched through the light
between the boxcar slats.
The wet in our faces
when the storm kicked up.

Acting the bear

We rose again the following day
the sun early in the sky
the colors spreading through the trees
to the necklace of claws
I wear around my throat.

We were not born here.
Not rocked by the cradle of the trees
not found sleeping in the gentle rain, we were not born
to track the roots of the trees streaming down through the earth.
At the entrance of the cave we are barely hidden, waiting.
Our arms naked in the slicing light.

Saffron clothes, our faces greased with fat,
our mouths the open maws of a beast forever
looking north. We play the bear all winter
watching the trees drag their fists across the sky.

We know how the skulls rise up around their trunks
how the flowers will grow between them still.
We memorize our faces so we can know him as himself
when he returns to the forests,
returning winter to the caves
and bringing spring on his brown furred back.

Octopus Typewriter

He carries a box with him
he eats sandwiches
outside the sky melts into an entirely different sky
bright buttons
he is dressed all in red
we're both staring
bright wings of a bug on the windowsill
a teacup keeps changing shape
he mimes packing a musket
points his box towards the sky
it's a target in the shape of a star
white rain starts falling
but takes up no space
we keep changing shape
is that him approaching the bicycle?
no, it's Jacques Vache's typewriter
waving 8 arms at me.

The Snake

Electronics, short circuiting
inside my arm. Dead at the shoulder
my hand opening and closing.

It lays on the floor
cold steel sheathed in skin.

It holds nothing,
neither air nor water.

It's the end of summer,
even my body can feel it.

On the stairs last night I found a snake.

Perfect coil of granite,
loosened white belly
dark with blood,
the night wind freezing.

I hold it up to the light,
but no shadow gets through.

The trees die and through them
we see the things
we didn't want to see.

Below the window,
the animal voices raise.

A bloated body in the river: green,
or the color of something fading
from too much heat.

Instead, look out the plane's window
and think of the color of light
flooding the floor,
not the river's shape
or the clay bloodying water,
the snake shedding its skin, when
airborne in the empty sky
we look down,
and realize we're alone.

Haibun

I'm walking up hill. It's evening, the stars are almost out. It stopped raining. There's mist rising from the asphalt. The neighbors are walking their dog. He stops short, lunges after a rabbit. The rabbit disappears in the shadows of their house.

Wet sidewalk at dusk,
rain drops reflect the headlights
of the passing cars.

Figure of a Lion

When first you took me from my box
I begged you to return me.
Everything was darkness and cool air,
then too blue and the world glaring.
My carved face paled and fell apart.
The smallest movement turns me back to sand.

Invocation

Frost-bearded I come on the night the wolves run together.
Iced breath on hollow hair,
the light refracting whiteness in my eyes.
Oh, soft chewed sinew
my hand guide your needle – guide me
arrow straight tonight.
The path I walk rises up,
the branches scratch my skin.
I see before me
in the clearing; muscles tense.

Bright Moon, you look down on us all tonight.
You shine,
reverse iris of the sky,
more brightly now.
Let my muscle memory make silence of the air.
Let them never hear
my footsteps on the fragile snow.

Movies about the Beach

You stand taller than the ocean when it turns on its self by the rocks far out from the shore. The sky's dark and below you the sand's a field of green. The side of a trench filled with oil, empty beer cans, the dogs that came off when the train stopped. When you're caught in the water, the bottom reflects light like the sun. You look like a fist pounding the belly of the air. You look like the sun on the horizon. Day is like this. A whale fins its self onto the beach. Waves against the shore like thunder. A door drawn on the rocks by the water. Stones brought in so far they don't remember tide

Codebreaker

I thought language was branches to be broken,
So I built my translator out of saws.
Even on the clearest day my house was grey with rain.
I could touch something hot, pause,
Watch it blister skin across my hands.
The sky above my house is filled with fog.
The wind won't blow across my lands,
My codebreaker lies silent as a muted dog.
Deeper off, the field, the black flies skim
Towards something still, the dog's hot body in the sun.
The light reflecting off a limb.
What caused these words to slow against my tongue?

Each letter is a shape that can be translated.
There's a numbered quadrant for each word inside my head.

One Way the World Will End

The real death-star is in outer space.
Across the ice, the God Bear already knows.
He's been watching, a long time,
the colors kaleidoscoping outwards,
the colors moving across the sky.
In the winter we called them Light
and they slid across the ice like water could.
We didn't figure what their oily greens
were swirling towards, when the cracks in the ice
mimicked the gears of a clock –
shone bright with electricity, flickered from within.

Looking up at the death-star's night
is like looking into a rifle barrel. If you ask the God Bear
he'll tell you – the snow
and the lights above the snow are more bright than you've ever noticed.
A gamma ray rings out, or a bullet enters in a little puff of air. Either way
he can tell, because the light has changed,
that something's shifted. That the world's no longer really ours.