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These poems concern the entangled relationships people have with landscapes, images, and histories. They explore, in part, how seemingly unimportant experiences continue to provoke perceptions over time.

CASTOFFS

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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I.

September

A tropical storm grows in the Atlantic with your name.
We listen to warnings on the radio as we drive to the shore,
passing boarded up houses and closed storefronts.
The tourists head west, crowding the highways out of town,
and we move through the empty streets faster than
we have all summer arriving at an abandoned beach.
I watch you smoke a cigarette without using your hands,
your lips holding it in the corner of your mouth, the same way
your father smokes. You wait for what the storm brings in,
schools of baitfish and the bigger fish that eat them,
while I walk the tide line looking for unbroken shells.
When I stop and look back I've wandered so far away from you
that I wonder if you have noticed. I am so far away
that it looks like the waves will eat you before I can get back,
but with each step you are still there, your hair tangled with sand.
The heron we feed returns, but the hermit, who lived
in the army bunker back in the estuaries, is dead, killed
by a group of drunks. We can see his boat from here,
tied to the dock, resting in the bay. I don't know if anyone
will bring it in before the winds come. The same hounds
always ghost on my corner, but I can't tell the difference
between instinct and anxiety. I find salvation in these mornings,
waking with you on threadbare sheets, returning to the water,
but we drift away from each other. I think it is a problem.

With Respect for Hiroo Onoda

For thirty years you survived on coconuts
and bananas, waiting for orders and supplies
as you rationed bullets and tried to keep
your rifle from rusting in the tropical rain.
If there were signs the war was over
you dismissed them or thought they were
enemy tricks to pull you out of hiding.
A true officer, you stayed in the woods,
fighting a war lost decades ago.
And when a student finally found you
living in the mountains, you refused to
come out of the forest until you received
official word from your commander.
Only then did you surrender, emptying
out your bullets for the last time, letting go
of a gun you hadn't needed for half your life.
Suddenly, you were a man that could
lay down at night without the fear of attack,
only to be mocked by your nightmares.
Enemies finding weapons you hid long ago
in the crevices of rocks. The horrified face
of a farmer you killed, thinking him a threat.
Every night waking up in a cold sweat
and instinctively raising your hand
to swat away the jungle insects.

Full

A man and woman bow
their heads in prayer
before eating at the table
beside me. They hold hands,
whisper so low I can't hear
them above the other diners.
Watching them I feel like
I lack what they have.
Something that allows them
to leave and return better than
before, mouthing the word
amen. They smile before
they release hands, picking
up their silverware, laying
their napkins in their laps,
full before they take a single bite.

I Could Show You a High Time, Living the Good Life

In the restaurant, the older diners don't want to take their eyes off us. They watch your hand touching me beneath the clothless table and even the waitress blushes when she brings the check. When we leave you put your jacket around my shoulders, open my car door. On the highway, gunning past every car, we are laughing, until that song comes on the radio. A song that always makes me think about someone else, a man who will never come home to me no matter how many times I call him, drunk again. I turn my head, worried that you've noticed me drifting in thought. But you are staring ahead, your mind already miles away, your lips mouthing the words to the chorus and I know that you are not singing those words to me. But we play the parts. You running fingers through my hair at every stoplight, then taking me home, where we spread triangles of legs and arms across the bed. And when I wake in the morning, you have already left. I make coffee, spend the next hours washing the sheets.

Misplaced

When we moved out of downtown, the addict from next door watched. He stood by our truck as we dragged our bed out of the house and said, *what you got there is a boxtress and a matspring*. And then, as if to correct himself, he repeated it, *boxtress, matspring, what I mean is, a matspring, no a boxtress*. But we couldn't correct him because he was only talking to himself, pulling the hair behind his ear and shaking his head while mumbling his cadence of misplaced syllables, as if he said it enough times he could remember something he had known a long time ago, a place he'd been once, a sound he'd heard.

Boy of Poverty

When asked what he wanted,
anything in the world,
his only reply was
a house with curtains

as though curtains could be
a sign of someone
who had enough time
to clean and press the lace,

then hang the drapes
in the window, to show
somebody was home,
a family behind the covered glass.

Pieces

After a drunk driver killed their son,
it took them months before they could
clean out his closet. There were yellow
jerseys from baseball, tattered blue jeans,
plaid button-downs, tie-dye t-shirts
he'd worn to concerts, a small collection
of ties and dress slacks. All of the clothes
still smelled like him. From the garments
they took patches, pieced together a quilt.
It hangs in their new house, in a room
nobody goes in and uses. While they drink
bottles of wine every night and avoid each other
by staying in separate places, look forward to
going to work in the morning. Has it been
ten years? The quilt looks like it was sewn
together yesterday, hanging on their wall,
the most colorful thing in the house.

Redeye Flight

In one of those blisters of lights
I know you're there, below,
downtown in one of those clusters
of bars and apartments. Out
on a Friday night drinking
with your friends, your arm
around a woman you know.
From here, I only recognize
the lit banks of the river.
Somewhere is the cove
where we used to go when we
skipped school. Smoking joints
before we took off our clothes,
made a bed with them
on top of the leaves and twigs.

Why do I think staring down
at this place is somehow like
seeing you again. Who are you
now? Still the troubled guy
I left, or someone else.
I want to know. But it is easier
to sit by the cabin window
covering the city with my thumbprint.
There it is, then it disappears again.

Comfort Woman

The soldiers laughed at her the first time she pulled her knees close to her collarbone, trying to cover her body. She soon learned it was more dangerous to fight them off, that soldiers would split the face of a woman who refused. She tried to ignore the splintered bed beneath her, the hunger that made her weak. When the soldiers forced her down she wasn't afraid to look into their eyes, black and hollow as the caves she visited with her family as a child. She had stopped counting the days since she'd been taken from her father. But she thought about him often, remembered the mornings they spent working in rice fields, shuffling between the long green rows. There were moments that made her hopeful, when the sky dried up and the air became so quiet she could hear a dog barking houses away. Moments always overshadowed by her shame. The knowledge that her body was a bombed out building, inhabitable, destroyed.

Rolling Gray

Pulling his truck up to the construction site, he'd watch the sky, rolling gray. Hours later, when he was up there, nailing roofs on buildings, he'd wait for the first drop of rain that would send the men down from their scaffolding, back into their warm vehicles. For ten years he had worked this job, balancing on wood beams, always trying not to look down. It made him tired to think about it. Where would he go if it started to pour and the supervisor came out, told the men to go home early. He hated his house, the peeling vinyl floors, the wallpaper, the noises the walls made when they settled at night. He'd rather go to the bar where the wood paneled walls and the sound of clinking glasses comforted him. And the waitress who worked there in the afternoons. How delicate the curve of her arm was as she balanced trays, the placement of her fingers so deliberate.

Bonsai: Roots Over Rock

Roots grow around rock, in the dark,
under the weight of soil. Tender
in the damp dirt, yellow without
light. A man forces the process,
takes a sapling, weaves the roots
around a stone he finds in his fields.
He lets the tree mature for years
in a small pot, clipping back leaves
every spring, before he begins to pull
the earth away, a thin layer every few
days. He exposes the roots slowly.
They harden in the moving air,
forced to reveal what should be
in the dark. Shroud of dirt removed,
their outer coat becomes thick
like bark, their color turns dull gray.

Castoffs

1.

In the suburbs where I live teens mark their territory
by throwing pairs of sneakers over the power lines.
The city has stopped trying to cut them down.
More appear every day, some of them look
brand new. I don't know where the kids find
so many shoes, whether they steal them at night
or if they take them from home in an act of rebellion,
thinking their parents won't notice, knowing
that it is easy to go to the store and buy another pair.

2.

A thousand miles away, in the sepia landscape
of the desert, my sister is fighting in a war.
She sends me photos of dunes, soldiers posing
with their guns, and pictures of shoes, lost
or abandoned by fleeing civilians. She finds them
everywhere in places where there is nothing,
scattered along the dry packed sand like seeds.
She never sees a matching pair, bleaching in the sun,
it is always one shoe, alone, as though whoever lost it
kept running, didn't have enough time to turn around.

II.

Family Portrait

It has hung in my house since my grandmother died
and my parents found it in her attic: a wide-angle picture
of my grandfather's side of the family, maybe sixty people,
standing in front of their old homestead. Four rows of faces,
colorless women in white dresses, with dark bobbed haircuts,
men in starched shirts, holding straw hats in their hands.
I do not know who anyone is, except for my grandfather.
He is the tallest man in the back row, his head towering
above the rest. I never met him, he died before I was born.
My older sister once told me he was tough on my father,
could always find something to criticize. I have studied
photographs wanting to know why he was that man.
In them he poses with his four brothers, races a boat he built
across a lake, stands beside a hanging sailfish that's as tall
as he is, a sign on the pier behind him reads Miami, Florida.
None of them tell me what I want to know. Was he quiet
like my father, did he ever talk about his family to his son?
I cannot see his eyes behind his glasses. I've never seen
a photo of him and my father together. My grandfather smiles
in the family portrait. He is a young man. He looks like my father.
Behind him there is a window reflecting the tops of pine trees.

Symbology

1.
Pisces, two fish
swimming away
in opposite
directions:

if my mind
was a body
each limb
would be pulled
by a hook,
away from
the torso,
and each limb
would refuse
to let go first.

2.
Water sign:

Warning
of dullness
and invisibility.
Ability to be
life-giving
and lifeless.
Containable,
yet unstable.

Ferry

When the northern beaches were only accessible by boat everyone would ferry over there on summer holidays, spend the night drinking until the sun rose. One Fourth of July, my friends and I forgot to bring tents. When it started to rain late in the night, we searched for someone sober enough to take us home. The only one we found was a thirteen year old boy. As we took off the rain became so thick that the spotlight to steer by glared against it, blinding us, and the boy was forced to turn it off. Motoring through darkness, before I could panic, the boy pointed to a porch light glowing from the mainland and said, that's my father's house, we can dock there. Navigating through the shallow channel, he recognized his course by the shadow of land in front of him. When we made it to his pier, the boy told us every male who grew up in that town knew where that channel was. It was the first thing fathers taught their sons, a path from shore to shore.

Proportions

My grandmother's body is shrinking with cancer. She has lost so much weight that I am afraid to hug her the way I used to. Too weak to take care of herself, my mother bathes her, helps her put on her clothes and shoes. When I visit her everything seems different: the empty chair where my grandfather used to sit, the furniture I have seen since a child suddenly larger and more gothic than before. The space at the foot of my grandparent's bed, where as girls my cousin and I slept on holidays, seems unfamiliar, too little to have ever fit us. Everything is out of proportion. For the first time in my life I am truly scared of my body, of the things it can do without me knowing, realizing, cells that turn black as you sleep. I want to save my grandmother. I want to be small enough to crawl into my mother's lap, have her wrap her arms around me, to be able to fit in the spaces I remember.

To the Guy who Called from Michigan

I thought about calling you back the night you left
a message on my machine and telling you that I wasn't
the Ashley you were looking for. But you forgot
to leave your name and I didn't know who to ask for,
or for that matter, what to say when you picked up expecting
to talk to a girl you had probably spent a lot of time
trying to find, searching the internet for days, chasing a name.
I went to bed thinking of you, how only a few years ago
I was you, a teenager sitting on my bed, trying to build up
the nerve to call a guy, punching in six digits of the number
before hanging up. Staring at my postered walls trying to decide
what I would say. The truth is, I still bite my nails all night,
look at paintings hanging on my wall, places that don't exist,
wanting to do something. I've never been as brave as you.

Climax

After my shoulders
sink into it, there is
the horrible realization
that coming with you
would never be as good
as coming while thinking
about you, my back against
the porcelain tub. Maybe
the first time, but after that
the same routine. You
just like anybody else.

Birdhouse

Today a sparrow was loose inside the discount store and as I walked the aisles of cosmetics I saw it land on the highest shelf and crack a seed in its mouth. A seed—the bird had probably foraged it from the pet department, where birdseed was sold beside the bird houses. I looked above me, there was a whole sky full of branching steel and I thought that for a bird this store must feel like a permanent spring, where garden displays bloomed everyday, and fresh fruit could always be found in the grocery area, where the temperature never changed. The kind of place where nobody noticed a bird, or if they did, didn't stay long, even me, would keep going about their business of shopping, gathering more things in their baskets.

Manners

A stranger paid for my dinner once
because he heard me say *thank you*
and *yes mam* to my waitress. I was
eating with a group of friends who
were drunk and belligerent. When
the waitress walked back to our table
to explain that my dinner was paid for,
all my friends snickered or laughed,
and even the waitress made a face
when she pointed the guy out to me,
like she was saying, *what a creep*.
The stranger had his back to me
but he looked like a rough character,
an old man with scraggly long hair,
a full beard, wearing muddy steel toed
boots and a faded flannel shirt that
barely stretched across his large back.
But he also just looked lonely, sitting
at the bar alone. In the ashtray beside him,
a burning cigarette that he wasn't
even smoking. I tried to quiet my friends
down, but it was helpless, they were too
fucked up, convinced the man was
hitting on me instead of being sincere.
The man got up to leave, walking past
our booth. His skin looked tired beneath
his wrinkles and facial hair. I don't know
why I didn't thank him for my meal.
Or tell him how much it meant to me
that he noticed what I said, something
my friends would've never paid attention to.
I have always felt impolite for it,
watching him walk out the glass doors
of the diner to his truck outside.
License plates from a faraway state,
just another man miles from home.

Prayer

Let there be just enough time for another spring where he wakes again, brews coffee, and waits to hear her footsteps coming down the hall, reading the paper as birds gather in the treetops. Let there be nothing bad in the news as they eat breakfast by the window, feeding leftover biscuits to their dog. Let him spend the day in his garden, cutting back the dead growth of winter, staking up vines, tilling, looking for green shoots that have punctured the ground reaching for light. There should be just enough sun to warm his skin as he works, to see the shadow of her moving in the kitchen preparing lunch and dinner. Just enough of a breeze in the afternoon to dry his sweat, for her to join him outside, to watch the neighborhood children playing in the streets, enjoying the freedom granted by extra daylight. Let there be letters to open, calls to receive, friends to see, let there be heavy sleep, tired bodies embracing, and more than anything, over everything, just another morning, where his eyes open, his lips speak again.

Impression

When you were outside I looked inside your sketchbook filled with scribbled drawings you never wanted me to see, and I saw the charcoal image of my body, those penciled shorts you once stuck your hand down. I was kneeling. There was a figure of a man behind me, his hand pulling at my face. My skin stretched thin, like an elastic mask that would not release.

You must have hated me for only holding your hand in the dark, for telling my boyfriend you were only a friend. Maybe I should have been upset to see it, my outlined arms laid down in surrender, my face peeled off like a thief removing his disguise. But it gave me some kind of power, myself on paper. The thought of you drawing the shapes of my legs. Walking out to meet you my knees felt strong and outside the droning insects made the summer feel so conquerable, ready to be eaten to the rind.

Better from the Outside

I've always wanted a lake house, the kind you see in movies, a cape cod with hundred year old trees in the yard, a big porch facing the water, a screen door that let the breeze in. I tell myself that I would paddle in the mornings, watch the mist rise with the sun, that something in that landscape would fulfill me, ease me. I am not sure that it would. I do not know why some images lodge inside us, those places that make us believe in a kind of life we do not live. Since I was a child, when I rode through neighborhoods in the backseat of my parent's car, I would try to look into people's lit windows at night. There was always something interesting in those homes, the way the light looked orange, a hall or door leading to other rooms, sometimes a person sitting in their chair, once, a girl and her friend playing at a vanity. It only looked better because I was looking from the outside. Still, decades later, I find myself doing it. Like last year, during the worst winter in my life, when it felt like my family was falling apart, I ended every night by staring at the windows of an apartment across the parking lot from me. Whoever lived there had red curtains, and the place always looked warm, glowing between the bare limbed trees. Sometimes the curtains would be cracked just enough for me to see the flame of a candle flickering on a table inside. I almost lived there during those cold months, trying to imagine the people who lived inside, the music they would listen to after the sun set. I had nowhere else to go. And when whoever lived there moved away, months later, during a summer heat wave, it seemed like a sign for my real life, telling me to move on.

I'd Rather be the Muse

Sometimes I'd rather be the muse than the writer, the kind of girl who likes to listen to her doorbell ring, the shuffling feet of someone waiting for her in the hall outside. If I were her I would stand in front of my window with my nightgown on, go out late at night and have drinks with strangers. I'd wear sunglasses inside and though there would never be enough hours in the day, I'd fall asleep minutes after I crawled in bed. I'm sure a muse is never scared of herself or her loneliness, she never feels doomed to a life of predictability. For her, there is no obligation to stay, she could leave anytime, never turning back. But she never has the chance to be unimportant, the kind of woman people don't remember meeting.

The Girl with a Camera

I probably only saw her three or four times,
but in my mind it feels like I saw her every afternoon
that summer, my last summer living in that town.
I had just gotten my driver's license, started working
my first job and when I got off work I rushed home,
eager to spend every free moment with my friends before
I moved away. On my way home I would pass her house,
a small place made of brick that had broken shutters
and weeds growing in the yard. The times I did see her,
she'd be standing on her porch, barefoot and holding
a camera in her hand. I didn't recognize her from school.
I wasn't sure who she was and I didn't really care.
I was more concerned with two guys, boys I would have
to say goodbye to when the summer ended. One,
who loved me, was willing to follow me. And the other
who I loved, someone I would never have the chance
to be with because I was leaving. The girl with a camera
almost looked like me with her long brown hair and lanky
body dressed in a tanktop and jean cutoffs. Sometimes
when I saw her I would think that maybe she would be
my replacement when I left, another girl to fill my spot
in my group of friends. The last time I saw her she waved
at me, motioned for me to turn in her driveway, pulled
her arm towards her as if she were saying *come here*.
I didn't stop. Many times since then I have thought
I should've stopped. When I think about her,
her presence feels like an omen. It is the same way I feel
when a streetlight goes dark as I'm driving under it,
making me wonder if it is a warning to turn around and
head back home. But mostly I think about how, that summer,
we both must have wanted the same thing, something
permanent, an image to hold onto when the season changed.