

After Hiking the Coast

with my first love and his wife

We've been three days, touching
the tide pools: her body a silhouette of mine;
Leo just a little higher in the sky, his paw over
Jupiter; our profiles, nearly one
in the reflected light.

Between the citrus scented needles
we've bound to bouquet, and the pine nuts
wrested from the cone, she holds me
in that common space, laughs how little you've bent
your fate in our exchange.

A rest on the rocks, our feet sinking
into the sleek and marbled pebbles. Translucent
like them, we glow under a millennium of waves,
watch you watching the horizon. She pushes the curls
from my face, grasps my hand against falling,
tells me I am for you
a bit of grace
and healing.

With the wind, I say
*There's nothing left in him
of me. With your eyes, she says
he is the wild, uplifted sea.*

The decade we've come to breach
has you layered out like so many old leaves
over yourself: faded sketches
for the use of roots, weeds.

My Achilles attachment sings this; one
moment you are a grey-haired stranger
in that song. The next, my young, and lonely love.

Over the shoals, I try to speak of it: a tenderness:
your hand to each of us in turn, feet braced across a puddle;
that moment arm in arm, after you've caught the final
shimmer of sun, reckless and fleeting
off the crest of my cheek; your hand
securing me to the footholds of the cliff.

You will spend an hour rubbing menthol and eucalyptus
into this ache.

For the short drive to the airport
you wrap me in your gear, and I can think
only of your father, speechless
with this fear for you, pulling this same hat
down over the edges

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of your ears, against the winter
and the rain.

It's all there, in that small holding:
the shared exhale, the pause before turning
to the curbside, grasping at the luggage
tipping into our feet.

A Year In Family Housing

1.

We pulled our bicycles
tangled and scratching
out of the rain
the bag of oranges,
raw from the wheel tread,
tumbling just ahead of us
into the mattress
on the studio floor

2.

A bridesmaid dress, so cobalt
my shoulders hold up
the parking lot behind me, you
from the door
snap the shot

3.

I sanded down the end
table from the community
exchange, breathing
in the dust, alone, without
a mask, offering it
to the Massachusetts sun,
for three days
the other students
nodded as they passed
with their young children,
small wives glancing down
and away

4.

Spring, and so many blossoms I never
understood how I managed
to pull you from the bed, wheezing,
spattering twenty minutes
a block to the bus stop
empty streets we needed
just one, just one hand
how we climbed the hill, stumbling
every step, I carried you
dear god don't let him die

5.

More than the crunch of
your boots, heel-to-toe
shaping out my name
in the snow, and the low lamps
catching the back of a raccoon,
I remember wearing nothing
but a long coat in the moonlight

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digging out the Toyota, our rent
spent on this

6.

We awoke, the greyhound two
hours out, boxes taped and stacked
your arm draped over me
one last time, I'd see you
like this for years
framed by the window
as the breaks released and the bus
rolled away, your hand still
reaching toward your own face
as if to cup mine, there

7.

The bangle bracelets were a gift
from the couple before us:
for my kindness, she said,
for your beauty
and in our turn, only
a bit of aquarium: a bowl,
some rocks, a pair
of shimmery and silent swimmers—
we gave all that was left

The Hermit (IX)

from the Tarot of the Timekeepers

The pool is easy to fall into
when you're fourteen. You're
riding the late bus home
from school scribbling song
lyrics into your homework
caught up in the rough
play of the day. Out
the window, the desert works
its slow desiccation. The Rockies
say they don't mind the solitude
but you wonder how much longer
they can take it.

At your feet, a discarded flyer
intrudes. It is stomped and wet
and torn. Warped as it is, and unruly,
it grabs you by the arm, leans in
close and secret. The print, blurry
from the sweat of emotion,
tells you that in a few years
you'll slip into a love so deep
that you'll swim for the comfort
of drowning. In the fine print,
like an afterthought, is the abstract
of your dissertation, and the last word
you'll ever utter aloud.

Two weeks later you're standing
under a tarped dome, on the slippery
edge of a watery field, where concrete
and chlorine come to kiss, wearing
less than you will the first time
you touch her, shivering and sweating
and beating your heart
into movement. In a splash

your college years are gone. In twenty
seconds the entirety of your life.
In the dense mist you can't distinguish
your own voice from the rhythmic
slap and glide of time. You
can no longer think
without the muffled
harmonics of the deep. And you
marvel at how beautiful
the clock is, with its solitary hand
in that easy sweep of her face.
And you keep coming back to
the bulkhead in the lane, how it
lies. How it promises you a safe

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place to turn in to. How it says
one more time will be enough
and you can rest.

Alone and covered in that grey cloak
of age, you pull yourself
out of the pool in a single sweeping
stroke and stand in the morning
air, glad they've torn down the tent.
The mountains in the distance
show a bit of ice, and you think
you could swim them. The light
from a single lamp at the top
of the guard tower flares out
like a star. A teen in red shorts
drops the shepherd's staff
and startles himself awake. You
reach to where it is fallen
and lift it up.

In Deep

Above the parking lot, the sun gives her heat
in waves to the asphalt. It's evening in the desert
and we're moving against the current
toward a building with a cheap buffet. Before
we make it to the door, you're holding your
breath, shutting your eyes, because my brother's
children won't walk with you as grandkids do; they move
like a small school, their fins wriggling in unison
and play. They want me to swim with them, but I take
your hand, paying then, as always, with the duty of my skin.

At breakfast, Stevie's wife tells me you snuck off
twice to smoke and lit up again with the baby
in the car on the ride home. My brother
straightens from where he's bent over the boy's
bowl, the cheerios jumping from the cliff of his face
in disbelief and falling in waves over the turquoise flesh
of Aquaman on the plastic table cloth. Wiping the milk
and tamping down a rage, he tells Myriah
how when we were younger—the Lincoln
buoyant in the drag of the Nevada highway—
younger and netted together and trembling,
we'd attempt to roll the window down, gasp
against the crack of glass for the hot air,
the blue-grey smoke weaving itself around the necks
of our penny wishes. He tells her how you wailed
like a siren from the front and we were back
to breathing from our gills, and blind.

So dinner's over and we've split my nephews
between us. You drop M. and the baby
at the door. I'm walking the five-year-old
through the first age of glaciers, past
the continental shift. Before I can hand
him off to the coral and a sandy bed, you've pulled
anchor, you're rolling out of the drive.

From the shore
I signal to you
in the street.
You stop. Don't
pull to the curb. Don't
pull back into
the driveway. But sit
there, transverse

like a line drawn with a straight edge
through blue and green and brown alike
with no regard for the topography
of the map, no attention to where
the sea is passable, and where,

if you're lucky enough, it will call you
and hold you and pull you down
into the deep. You sit there,
angled, cutting the asphalt
with a luxury liner. You crack
the window as little as you can.

This is not you screaming and dragging
me by my yellow shirt, my head striking
the floor, my arm burning against the carpet,
the seams yielding and rent, the Albatross on the front
screeching, me drowning in your voice. This is not you
chanting and profane, writing gibberish on a long yellow
pad, and slapping the knife on the counter as a toll
to the front door and leaving into the red dusk.

You're calm. Like I'm asking for directions
or the weather. Like you'll see me
in the morning. Or you won't
and it won't matter.

My brother wept when I told him. Wept
because he knew how raising him—
how the long bus rides to the dentist,
cavities filled with student loan money—
how the strain on a first and fragile love,
and choosing him— how my love was not
yours no matter what I gave, what I filled—
and I swore, *never, never will the sea fill me.*

He wept because he loves me and pulled me in
and held me in the deep as he hasn't since leaving
our small studio to come back here, to you.

Page Break

But you, sitting in the car, the last hazard
of the evening, you can't see me through
the haze enough to ask me for a light. You
don't reach across the passenger seat for
my hand, my hair. Tonight I am the ebbing
tide, and I obey the moon. I walk away.

Back to Stevie spitting up cereal into
his son's bowl. I'm asking him why, why
you would leave so nonchalant, not asking
him why even now he needs to live
near you, but why you wouldn't wait
two minutes for me, or touch my face,
or ask me what's so important that I drove
all this way, what's so important that I gathered
you all to me, how I'd hoped for a moment—
he says, *she wanted a smoke, and you are the sea.*

The Wheel of Fortune (X)

from the Tarot of Smoke

for you, I forgive
as she never
taught me, blindfolded
again and against

the six of us, clinging to the thick
spokes, pulled and spinning:
one, his bones
a requiem to the desert, another
crumbling to the mountain face

her children of smoke, we rise, rise:
me to the right of the rim,
I've put on a human face

she fills the mandala with our skin
with sands of loneliness
with shards of—

four of us evangelists,
four of us horsemen:
death and famine
joy and rage

not her son
not her daughter
my cousin, he is mercury
my brother, salt

I am water.
I am flame.

a phoenix in the sea

the wheel spins backward,
toward mercy for her
scrubbing ovens
belly so heavy
scars on her knees

I turn my back toward it
toward her braiding
my hair to nets
and ladders, the small plastic
bobbins like colored pearls
against the night sky

of me, saying this
is all she ever dreamed
before dissolving in air

and I am phoenix, with fins

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my kit so small inside me
my creation spinning out,
a fiery and frozen nebula

I am patient.
I am sufficient.

in this chaos, my lily,
my small divine,

can I be for you
other than smoke?