

## Spills

*After Night Rain by John Hodgen*

The news tells me, as I flick across the screen, that things keep spilling -- the ocean up onto the shores, secrets from thin lips, oil from below ground. And I realize that so many things can be described as a spill, not just the water jug the cat knocks over onto the carpet, but also the rain that the clouds finally release, with a heavy sigh, like falling asleep. And the burbling language from my family's mouths on summer nights of childhood, when they stand in my uncle's backyard, all of them gathered. And I am in the attic bedroom, sitting on the blue windowsill, listening through the screen window as their voices rise up to me, *heat always rises* is the saying, and it must be true, their words feel balmy and warm as sunlight though I have no idea what they mean, though it is late and night has brushed the last remains of daylight from the fields, and on that windowsill I think to myself that this could be a form of loneliness but isn't, my cousins who talk so quickly, dropping only snippets that I can translate, like "home" and "remember," and the ways I try, alone, the youngest, to gather what my family spills on the cobblestones, stories slipping away like rainwater, memories of those dead before I was born, images of some long ago time that spill out and out and out over these green fields, waiting for me to pick them up, clean them off, and understand.

## **Mourning, Grand Canyon, 1993**

I know the story --  
twenty-five years old, a rainstorm, her rust red pickup.  
She found herself on highways  
that scarred themselves  
through the dried-blood canyons. 5  
The rain had slicked off dust and small,  
scarlet blots of insects  
from the windshield.  
Clouds rushed in from the north, heavy,  
bursting, peeling the earth apart 10  
until it was just her truck and an endless  
rift at the side of the road.  
She was mourning him,  
aware that like her,  
like the canyon, 15  
his body was made of soft,  
red clay,  
too easy to mold and press and return  
to the earth,  
too easy to melt and disappear 20  
into the silty Colorado  
in all this rain.  
Hand chasing hand  
on the steering wheel, she kept herself  
from running off the road 25  
into all that earth,  
that river  
that rushed red and unforgiving  
a mile below.

## **bay area creation story (4/27/2020)**

the water there was no need for creating. it just was.

bottomless and topless the color of sea glass the color of coke bottles.

it did not slosh. there was no breeze, no tide.

they built the coast from their own bodies scooping the softness  
of each others stomachs and thighs placing it in fat heaps which they molded  
with the gentleness of their fingers until there was a dripping arch of coast.

they let it bake for many years under the sun the sun they made  
with the hot of their breaths pressed together into pure light and tossed  
into a sky they sucked free of water.

they made red rock from the blood they found in their veins the iron  
under their nails. it sits like a clot in the bay and you sail there kneel in it  
press the earth to your palms feel the rush of their arteries on your skin their pulse.

they found a scar on the hip of the sea they chose it carved it out  
they called it coast. they built it from their bones the bleached sand  
the ribcage arching driftwood the char from bonfires the marrow they ground into seafoam.

all this they did for us. they used the wet pulse of their breath the glow  
buried in their chests. we pave them over in tar in asphalt we don't want to see their bodies  
anymore we just don't care for their blood and how it sticks to our cheeks in summer,  
a reminder.

## Sestina for Leaving Home (5/6/2020)

When I close my eyes in the summer darkness I see  
home like a mirage: the mountain resting her heavy muscles  
with heat burning off of them in threads of orange,  
the silty canals, pregnant with green scum, that snake  
down through the hills, then along the flats I wanted so badly to leave,  
as though I could separate myself from it all, put childhood in a dark corner.

Now I wish I could fold home up like a map  
gather all the velvet waves that leave  
the shore in grooves and muscle  
them into the paper which I would keep in a pocket and snake  
out onto my wall in homesickness, let it spread as a sunrise, a blaze of orange.

And then with a finger I'd trace the streets, remember the cloy of rotting orange  
and melting jasmine flowers and chlorine from the house on the corner.  
I'd remember the ribbons of cigarette smoke that snaked  
up over the neighbor's fences, where I could just see  
them from the old trampoline, which drew charcoal along my small muscles  
and, as I grew up, sagged to breaking with rotting leaves.

When, younger, I so desperately wanted to leave  
this place, all I thought of it was the orange  
rust caked on the refineries out by the Carquinez, and the aching muscles  
of the construction workers whose heads lilt when BART rounds a corner.  
One piece at a time was all I could see,  
and I let the discomfort wrench through my stomach, settling, snaking.

I kept reliving the memory of running over the poor garden snake  
with my bike tires, not realizing how it had snuck out from beneath the leaves,  
and for so long after on that trail all I could see  
was cruelty: the husk of its body sun-bleached orange,  
dragged off by a raccoon into some shadowed corner,  
sharp teeth dissolving the work of its muscles.

Now I see something more in this, how its muscles  
are, like mine, like this place, built from more than just pain: how veins snake  
through our bodies like the canals wind from the corners

of my childhood to the places I will soon leave  
it for. Many things can be 1: the hills both singeing and glowing orange,  
the saltwater out west both eroding and softening us, like seaglass.

The murky canals are filled with the same water as the sea.  
The mountain purples so fully yet cars can still cut her with wedges of orange light.  
Home is both a coming and a leaving.

## **Motion, Always Motion (6/7/2020)**

Home is sitting on the carpet in front of the fan with my little sister, pooling together our fingers to count all our past lives, losing track from the heat swimming thick in our heads, starting over. Home is finding kinship in movement, my sister lacing her fingers into a plane engine, skipping to its thrumming push and pull, home is ripping stitches, how I'm always unraveling myself from my surroundings, tearing each strand of hair from the sticky blue sky over the valley, peeling the city off of my chest at night and folding it in the corner. Home is picturing family and just seeing motion, always motion: mom shifting gears deeper into the mountains, uncle like the shadow cast by an empty building, always spreading and disappearing into the sidewalk, great-grandma flitting away from danger, her hummingbird wings in my chest, dad chasing thunderstorms, walking, walking, walking as the rain pools purple in his ears, home is my own guilty thrill when I memorize the highways beaming out of here like rays from the sun, when I forget a home on the list, put my fingers to the carpet, start my count over.