

## Crisis Hotline and Other Poems

### **Crisis Hotline**

In the tiny room where we answered calls,  
big binders full of instructions lined the shelves.  
Lists of numbers for support groups, meeting times  
scratched out and never rewritten. I loved people  
in a very simple way at 22, listening with wide eyes,  
pizza getting cold. A man called with AIDS.  
A woman was beaten and had her child taken away.  
The rain slid down the dark windows for them  
as I crawled in through the holes of the heavy phone,  
armed with attention and raw trust.

If you ever try it you should know  
that most people expect not to cry when they call,  
and it's the shame they feel from this that needs  
pulling out like a poison, then washed down  
with a voice warm as tea. Some kind of space opens,  
if you're lucky, that you sit in together.  
It blocks out everything else and locks doors  
until you open them. When the work is done for now  
you will know. It's time for a makeshift gauze  
on the wound, a plan for a hot bath or a walk.

The strangest thing is going out to the Sunday night street,  
dark and wet, the empty cars. Making the connection that just happened  
impossible. How quickly you forget how to do it again.

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### **Aficionado**

There was just one man  
at the bluegrass chorale concert  
who let everyone know  
he was touched.

He waved his hands in front of his face  
to stop from crying, but his face never moved.  
He clapped when they said it was ok.  
The rest of the time  
he rocked in his pew  
like a chair occupied by a ghost.

His gestures were practiced, repetitive;  
he knew what was difficult,  
listened for the difficult all the time.  
He let people know  
what he knew. But he also enjoyed,  
felt, believed. Could barely be held  
by the gravity gluing the rest of us  
to our seats. At any moment  
he would levitate, his face coaxing  
still more beauty  
from the choir  
with his coach-like nods  
contained in a tractor beam of light,  
rapturing through  
the new-exposed-on-purpose frame  
of the Central United Methodist Church.

But still I sat, cold hands in my lap,  
he alone clapped when they said we could  
the toe of my boot tapping air  
one leg strangling the other.

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### **Waited it Out**

Stacked stones big to small  
cairns at forks in the trail

marked the way back  
to happy, but it got dark,

so dark, there was no  
moon, and I in my mania

thought there would always  
be light, had thought

my very eyes were candles,  
so now so slowly I am crawling,

feeling, there are scorpions,  
cholla needles, snakes,

I am fear and I am choking  
on myself and what might not happen

until I understand that night  
is made of minutes, I can stop

by stopping, I can lie down,  
face the stars who also waited it out,

lived to tell, so I begin to study  
night until its souls make a map,

until I know what the snake's belly knows.

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**The Gift of Reverend Thomas**

God moves in  
to the hollow  
of one lung  
and settles. Moistens  
breath. Tells  
the shapes of organs—

plump kidney,  
center and branch,  
pituitary eye—  
with voiceless heat.  
Surplus fuel  
takes the form  
of tears.

Then God leaves  
the body. No longer  
soluble in skin,  
the Gases  
congeal and exit,  
hot atmospheres  
that crackle into sermon  
cooled by the page.

The rest of him  
naps. Weeks pass before  
one straight thought  
stands at attention,  
waits for orders.  
Lined up, others  
will themselves to copy,  
the brain an audience after  
a long intermission.

But this time God is sucked in  
like a fly up the nose,  
humming in frenzied  
notes. Tissue shrinks  
into corners, unable  
to absorb. The limbs act out  
the message instead  
like a fitful dream.

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### Static

This river is crooked  
and makes a fine mirror. I will bend  
for a minute. I've never seen  
myself. Striking. That's  
what I normally do. I look good  
in these charcoal clouds. This tree  
won't be missed, will it? Shazam!  
And by the way, the other day  
when you left in a hurry, you didn't bolt.  
You don't know from bolting. I alone!

They only knew I was gone, not that I had  
ever been. I make them ask one another  
if they saw me. I make them guess  
how safe they are, I make them listen  
and count. My sisters in the Texas panhandle  
can be seen from Oklahoma.  
They are the legs of flamenco dancers,  
the stage of the earth pounded beneath them,  
their silver petticoats are guillotines,  
they are the end and the only way in.

Are you a bison or a billionaire? We don't care.  
Every morning the sun sends itself  
to you in the mail,  
rising at the speed of bread.  
I am your birth and death,  
I am over and you are still afraid.