

## *The Two Hearts Inside Us and Other Poems*

### *Mala\**

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\* a Buddhist meditation bracelet

When Jupiter was out, I slipped  
it on my nightly wrist  
like a ring of stars  
reminding me that pain

isn't suffering if you accept it.  
With each breath I count, in and out,  
I'm snake, sea, wind, and night,  
alive again like blue trumpets

glorying in morning —  
who knows how they hold  
their vibrating shape, their liquid color?  
Silk petals papery as love

or is love the sturdier stalk  
that stands, waiting through winter,  
while beauty dissolves  
into the longing ground.

## *Columbus Goes to the Moon*

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Last night my son told me  
if it weren't for the Dark Ages,  
Columbus would have landed on the moon  
instead of in the New World.

Tonight he says stars are so far away  
we can only guess their size  
by the color of light they emit.

I'm surprised by this and confess  
I always thought stars were the same size as planets,  
so I assumed they were just as close.

He smiles and gently explains we can only have one star  
in our solar system or it couldn't exist —  
another star would wreck havoc,  
and the closest star, besides the sun,  
is four light years away —  
twenty-four trillion miles...

I didn't think our sun a star,  
just as I don't think my son a man,  
yet both are plainly true.

I gaze at him, across the kitchen,  
and realize we are all alone.  
The stars chaperoning us each night  
are impossibly far away  
and we're just eight planets and their elements  
gliding around the one god  
we are all tethered to  
like children fluttering around a maypole.

I lean back against the black granite countertop  
flecked with gold and listen as he tells me  
blue stars are bigger than red ones  
but don't live as long  
because blue stars burn through their fuel faster.

Our sun, he says, will become a red giant,  
but we don't know how long it will last  
because our 14-billion-year-old universe

hasn't outlived red stars yet.

The dishwasher hums its familiar refrain  
while questions spiral my mind.

He says goodnight and hugs me  
with arms tanned by the sun.  
I feel his blue cotton t-shirt, soft on my cheek,  
and wonder where we would be  
if the Dark Ages hadn't happened,  
or if our sun had consumed itself too fast,  
exploding into the vast darkness  
that surrounds us,

and I wonder how on earth  
we ever ended up  
right here.

## *The Duration*

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It's the time of lions and lambs,  
the time to beware the Ides of March,  
but little did we know  
how much we had to fear.

I promise myself I will stop watching the news,  
but tune in to another pandemic press conference.  
I wrestle with distraction  
as I try to write and work from home.  
My family and I take hikes and walk the dog,  
blissfully oblivious to this slow-moving crisis.  
My daughter and I listen to her favorite playlist  
as we drive by packed grocery stores  
and empty downtown sidewalks.

Haven't we all secretly wished  
for the world to slow down?  
But now that it has,  
we can't accept it.  
We want to make a new wish.

It's odd when the way to help  
is to stay home.

My body misses yoga class  
and my head aches from too much  
wine and bad news.  
I'm scared to touch the mail,  
scared to breathe infected air.  
I don't want to be the one  
to make my family sick.

The grocery list grows longer,  
and even if the shelves are stocked,  
I don't want to venture out.  
I find myself repeating  
my mom's and grandmother's sayings —  
*Waste not, want not.*  
*Prepare for the worst, hope for the best.*

I reuse tinfoil and plastic bags,  
bake and freeze banana bread instead

of throwing brown clusters of crescents in the trash.

I think about my grandmother, who saved  
every morsel of food, no matter how meager.  
I think of how, in May 1944, my grandfather  
put her and their two small daughters  
on a train bound for his mother's in Lincoln  
before he shipped out with his unit for England.

The newspaper called my grandmother and her little girls  
the *duration guests* of her mother-in-law,  
a phrase I didn't follow at first,  
but now we find ourselves saying *for the duration*,  
because like World War II, we don't know  
how long this crisis will last.  
We must endure for the duration -  
endure not knowing how it will turn out,  
endure not knowing who will live or die.

Time feels slow and thick, but also like a pinprick  
because we're forced to remain firmly in the present -  
no such thing as making plans.  
With everything on hold,  
the whole world holds its breath.

This pandemic, with well over 100,000 hospitalized,  
44,000 dead, and 22 million unemployed,  
is taking a toll, but seems smaller  
than what the Greatest Generation endured.

The numbers keep rising,  
we won't have a vaccine anytime soon,  
but birds still happily sing the dawn,  
trees haven't changed, except to slowly grow  
and thicken their buds,  
and daffodils bloom bright yellow  
as if they trust the spring.

## *New Year*

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I.

Snow nestles in crooks of branches  
of the bush outside my window.  
It rests on top of pine needles  
that found themselves stuck there, in limbo  
between the higher tree they fell from  
and the ground.

In the distance, a snow shovel scrapes pavement,  
its low growl trying to wake those who are sleeping  
on this foggy morning, the sky disorienting, yet tucking us in  
to this neighborhood, this street, this house.

Even though it's New Year's Eve,  
the snow and needles sit undisturbed,  
patiently waiting for nothing.  
Just being, just waiting.

II.

I start the car and watch snow  
fall like confetti in slow motion  
the way we fall through our lives,  
each flake's brief flight punctuated  
by gusts of delight and perilous dives.

My twelve-year-old daughter emerges from the house,  
clarinet case in hand, backpack over her shoulder.  
Tiny snowflakes sparkle in the headlights  
and mix in the wind with wisps of her long brown hair.  
For a moment it seems as if she's surrounded by bits of magic.

We drive by quiet pastures on unplowed roads  
as the morning flushes towards dawn.  
It is the first day of school in the new year.

III.

I want to protect her from the perfectionism  
that pushed her to tears last night  
when she tried to mend her torn clarinet book.  
I want to shield her from the terrible secrets  
of growing up. I want to fix the slight twist  
of her spine and the cyst on her wrist,

but the only thing I can give her this morning  
is silence, quiet as the snow,  
as she hovers, like the pine needles,  
between her childhood and what's next.

IV.

We turn east towards the sunrise,  
and the blanketed world glows  
in muffled orange light.

We're the first car to venture down this lane  
and we see a trail of tracks on the snowy road.  
I can't help but wonder aloud  
who or what made the haphazard patterns –  
no straight lines when nothing's there to guide them.

She leans forward in her seat like a fledgling  
peering over the nest's edge and says,  
*The snow filling in the tracks  
is like the Buddha Board –  
it erases everything.*

Her words dissolve what was left of time  
and it is just us,  
the snow,  
and the empty road ahead.

## *The Two Hearts Inside Us*

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What is it like to be a root,  
to grow away from light,  
to dive deep into darkness  
hoping to find something good?

Is there any part of us that does the same?  
Some internal hero making it all possible,  
like the stomach, for instance,  
that churns what we give it  
into something useful  
the way a furnace  
creates warmth from coal.

What is it like to be a root,  
opposite of stem,  
helping beauty stand tall from far below,  
never to see the flower it feeds?

Thin, fibrous roots spreading like roads  
on a map through black.

Maybe they're like the two hearts inside us -  
the one that breaks,  
and the one that goes on beating.