

American Hexagon: Poems

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American Hexagon: Nighttime Meditation

Someone has spray-painted a hexagon on the sidewalk outside my building. I feel the points rise and take shape inside my body, meaning that has no meaning. Every day I turn on the news and then turn it off. I want to do something and we want to do something but what do we do? Women on the other side of the planet remove cloth, opening their mouths to speak and then men jam guns deep in their throats. Other men suck hookahs pat bricks in the sun pray with open hands. And of course the flyblown children die, they always die, and I am disgusted by myself, that I must *use* others' pain to write this poem in my safe bed, safe because I am American, the sacred word canopy, sheep enclosure, my tongue brutal and free in my mouth, equality is my mistress, and tomorrow I could buy a gun. I know my rights. The hexagon fades, its gray painted points mean nothing, but I gaze at it when I go out to smoke, tossing my butts into the gutter, making the world a dirtier place, complicit. Every action is incomplete, until we know both the maker and the made, the shooter and the shot, the lighter and match. There are six points of knowledge on this path, but a hexagon is not a map. I sent a gardenia to a bereaved friend, but when it arrived, it had no blossoms, just green leaves with no points. You, me, us, and him, her, them: We all live in some corner of our world, but the world is not a hexagon, it is round, and we cannot see around the edges, it almost like blindness, a man without eyes attempting to climb down a sheer cliff. A mountain in the shape of madness, a hexagon in the shape of madness, a blinded mountain, gone mad with trying.

Tinder

Everyone is alone. I call my friends, we speak, we hang up, we call other friends, the night grows long, the smell of jasmine hangs in the air along with exhaust and bad cooking. I walk to 7-11 to buy cat food and cigarettes. I am afraid of being alone forever. I am afraid of my pain and myself. There is a car often parked on Franklin spray-painted with the words *Everything is Horrible*. A store on Vermont begins selling T-Shirts with pictures of the car, proving that you can always make money from misery, which we knew already, but is proven every day over and over, when we turn on our little screens, and look into them, like a fortune teller reading her crystal ball. They say the screens are interrupting our sleep; I would not possibly know, I have never had an uninterrupted sleep. There it is: the self-pity. My closest ally, my dearest friend. She smells of jasmine, sweet, cloying. On the screen are the pictures of men, you swipe to the right for yes, you swipe to the left for no. There is nothing poetic about it, you worry that you may have missed out on your true love in your hurry to get through all the men. There are so many men, and when you meet them, they want to put their parts inside you, even if you do not want them to. It is the same battle, the same fight men and women have been fighting since the dawn of time, sex and refusal, loneliness and longing. The men leave before the night has even begun. We circle like gladiators in the ring, we know the stakes, we know the steps to the dance, and we revolve like automatons, little figures rolling along a track. The man and the woman play out their roles, it is historical, it is as if by rote. This night is no different, all the nights are the same, somewhere a fire of love many be burning, but there is no kindling here, no flint or tinder. So when the man whose name I have already forgotten leaves my apartment, I walk to 7/11 to buy cat food and cigarettes, the night smells of jasmine and yes, everything is horrible, but I walk back home, I light a cigarette, and inhale, and exhale, knowing that I will change the sheets and go to bed, and inside myself, I have not changed, I place my hand over my own heart, it is enough, I am enough, it is sufficient unto to the day.

Getting Sober

I was at Gretchen's house, which sat in the middle of the Pacific Coast Highway. Cars raced by glass walls, both ways. On the table lay a saddle of beef. Gretchen told me, "We do not eat meat, but we can eat this meat. The Maharaja has blessed it." I took the meat and read the label. It said, "blessed beef." The house was full of Art Deco sofas and armchairs and blue Chinese vases. A deep peach carpet covered the floor. Gretchen said, "I am going to tell your fortune now. You feel like you are going to die, but you will be all right."

Discontinuity vs. Continuity

A lady at a party tells me she is *face blind*. I do not know what she is talking about. I turn my head all the way around like an owl. But it is useless: she says she can only recognize people by the sound of a voice, and she swears we have never spoken. *There is no consensus on the origin of language. Most scholars believe it evolved over time and centuries, just as we did, accreting slowly, starting out small and undeveloped and ending up as we are now: vast and highly complex.* My first word was *Dada*. I uttered it in my high chair, in the old house, while being fed sweet potatoes for breakfast. My mother says I loved sweet potatoes. I do not believe her. *Kids start with simple words that have various meanings,*” Sandra Disner, PhD, a professor of linguistics at the University of Southern California, tells Yahoo Parenting. *“The word ‘up’ could mean ‘pick me up’ or ‘the moon in the sky.’”* Even when you speak the same language as the other person, understanding is not easy. Last year, my sister told me, *I figured you never had kids because they annoyed you. I thought you had no interest.* We were cooking Thanksgiving dinner. My sister had read somewhere that basting is bad, and when the bird was done, it tasted like salted dirt. *Language disguises thought,* Wittgenstein asserts in the *Tractatus*. *The limits of my language means the limits of my world.* Words are all we’ve got, but how can words portray the exact shade of striped shale blue and slate grey sky that could be seen between the hills and the clouds tonight? It looked like...what? It looked like nothing I can describe. You had to see it for yourself. The lady with face blindness had met me before, and we had spoken. Her name was Amy.

A Knight's Tale

In Istanbul I had a fire in my apartment. Against all advice I had purchased an electric blanket, because I was cold all the time, *soguk*, even though my Turkish friends told me such blankets were unsafe. But they told me everything was dangerous, haircuts, taxicabs, restaurants, open windows, men— So it was hard to decipher what presented an actual danger, and what was just fear, their fear for me, a lone woman, a lone blond woman in a strange place, a woman who smiled too much and did not know how to barter and could not understand that gypsies were not people. A woman without family, living by herself, the worst thing for a Turk—many of them feared for my sanity. As did I, on some occasions, when the buildings looked more brutal than usual, and covered women's eyes refused me, and I felt that I was like an unsmooth nap in a piece of fabric, just wrong. I was late for work one day, having overslept, and I had left the blanket switched on, and it smoldered, and smoldered, cheap wires laced in cheap floral polyester. Until it began to smoke, and then, well, that is how I had a fire in my apartment on Bitter Almond Street. And somehow the kitten had been locked in the bedroom, and the apartment manager, Bahrei Bey, had no key to my apartment, so he had to break the door down. They threw my dead kitten—named Geoffrey because I had been made to teach a master's course in Chaucer—in the driveway, but kept telling me over and over that I was so lucky that they had saved my computer. Also my sleeping pills were saved, a fact for which I was extremely grateful, because the only thing harder to get than peanut butter in Istanbul is a sleeping pill. Afterwards, I could not stop crying and Murat said to me *come on now it's not that bad a lot was saved. You could have lost so much more*. Some said the better translation for the name of my street—*Acibadem Caddesi*—was *Spicy Almond Street*, but I always preferred bitter, not being in a position to know which was correct. That day I had been preparing to teach *A Knight's Tale* and as Murat and I sat in a café, drinking tea and smoking—Murat never smoked, but he did, that day—I kept thinking of these lines:

*But I that am exiled, and barren
Of alle grace, and in so great despair,
That there n'is earthe, water, fire, nor air,
Nor creature, that of them maked is,
That may me helpe nor comfort in this,
Well ought I sterve in wanhope and distress
And thus could not be comforted*

