

Bitter Drink

For my sister, Nancy, and in gratitude for Vermont's Death with Dignity laws

I

She knew it never could be right
no chemical or pill could bring a cure
explained how she'd prefer delight
in each day's passing pleasures, endure
until pain grew too strong, then say goodnight
find some path to death, a road that would be sure.

Together we explored the choices, bad and worse
our conversations looped and sliced--
stepsisters, we veered from voluble to terse
kitchen spats--you cook eggs, no, I'll check rice,
no, you make salad, we'd laugh, we'd curse
she settled into our routines, refused advice
the visiting nurse doled out her weekly meds.

One day we sat outside, cows nearby, meadow lush,
stepsisters cleaning garlic cloves for storage
I said, someday I can't believe I get to live in this beautiful place.
She said, and I get to die in this beautiful place.

Our state allows a self-inflicted death
with potion bitter, protocol exact.
She knew she could not last,
no better days ahead.

II

Her son is here, they've shared a lobster feast,
a weekend full of last plans, memories,
time draws near and only now we note the date,
September 11—day of horror, pain, death, grief.

The hours stretch, heavy,
despite gilded sun and blaring sky
no one speaks their fears

medicine and her own will
all depends on these

she'll face certain death or back away

and take on cancer's tightening embrace
body's unceasing decay, pain of having to
always ask for help

III

She changes clothes—
sun dips and shadows
of our neighbor's apple trees
stretch dark across the field

Our kisses are brief, she forbids tears
we leave her room—her son
now sole companion,
we sit, stand,
pick up books, but eyes won't focus,
wander,
wait for sky to darken

She sips the bitter drink
and one quick shot of vodka
turns onto her right side
as she'd learned was best
head on pillow
restless sleep, murmur,
restless sleep, sudden startle, calls out,
tries to rise, falls back,
sleeps again, breath uneven until
breath slows
slower
fainter
until--
Has she?
Is she?
Her son calls us in,
and there's no doubting that stillness
we listen as he tells each step and
now his body slumps but no tears

Necessary steps--
the visiting nurse must
declare the obvious,
complete paperwork
the funeral home sends
two men at midnight
easing her corpse onto a gurney

and out under a million stars and
do you want a last moment with her
they ask and yes, he does

We stand in the night, watch the tail lights fade
watch the stars, hug, step back inside
for shots of single malt,
words jumbled like sand in ocean
tears like autumn's first tenuous
falling leaves

Dark Beam

My flashlight
needs no batteries
throws a dark beam
turns on automatically
day or night, at home, with
friends, alone, on a walk, at the
stove, in library, music hall, others
clapping, I'm clapping, violinist bows,
pianist bows, soprano bows, we're putting
on coats, gloves, hats, we're crowding toward
the church's tall white doors, sun streaming in tho'
it's five below zero, our cars will be cold, and across
all those bodies, all that space, all that made music, all
the light shaped by others' ancestors with wood and stone
and glass more than a century ago, my flashlight's dark beam
shadows forth—brings sharp focus to my companion's shredded
mind, she can't even figure out how to button her coat; I too could
forget the name of the concerto, forget this beauty. Hello regret: why
didn't I learn to make music? Piano or guitar, even recorder, or how to
raise my voice, let it forth full, eager, clear, loud enough to undo shadows
cast by this blasted flashlight I want to name realism or skepticism but know
is more likely just pessimism, or an inherited tendency to minor depression, or
I comfort myself, saying—it's being aware in this world where joy's always mixed
with knowledge of those who lack joy, they're hungry and need jobs or work underpaid,
need clean air, better housing, schools, safe open space, lack the pure luck that's brought me
in full health, money to spare, bitching about this dark beam my hands-free flashlight projects

Hostess Gift

*In response to the exhibit "Welcome?" curated by Susette Min, at
the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, UC-Davis, 2018*

I

Never come empty handed I was taught
But dears, my hands hold nothing.
No wine, flowers, roasted cashews,
no loaf of bread, no bag of rice,
no book, not even a card.
No true wisdom nor brilliant insights.
Simply gratitude for your welcome,
arms to embrace you
willingness to listen,
to know you better
here where, for now,
you live.

II

Enter, enter
welcome to our tent, cave, this studio apartment,
this house, this compound,
Come meet my family--
the living, the dead, the disappeared,
we embrace your freedom,
wish it ours,
here is my sister, my father,
here, yes that photo's my mother,
that embroidery was my daughter's
our cookpots are empty,
our hands are empty,
but tell us your stories,
we'll tell ours,
we'll try not to cry out,
keep our fists to ourselves
keep our voices low.
You believe your presence
speaks hope,
we clasp hands
hope in hope.

North Pacific Gyre

The beauty of circles, completeness, communion,
a rolling wheel of continuous motion, the way a song
fugues out and around, chorus encircling, voices rising together

At the shore wind and waves circle and spiral and we all see it
we all do it, shed bits of our lives—some with a flip of the hand, some
with tidy tuck of cup or bottle, bag or straw into overstuffed bin

Or we carry our garbage to the curb
or truck it to the dump
or let it slide down into that craggy, bramble strewn ravine where
grandpa too heard the clatter, watched the fall, walked home empty-handed

But nothing stays where we drop it,
around and around it goes,
detritus of our lives, *restos*,
and now we know--

Plastic of every description--

bags and bottles and wheels and pipes and boxes and cups and toys and nets and styrofoam,
bubble pack

Swirling gyre of everlasting stuff that light breaks into smaller and smaller pieces, bits that fish,
pelicans, dolphins, gulls, albatross, whales, sharks, terns, turtles, jellyfish, rays, shellfish take
for food

And in their guts the chemicals of plastic mock life's true forces destroy each creature from
inside,

unless, the plastic's smooth grip has already killed--gagging, entrapping, torn, puncturing,
smothering

Here in the wide ocean, the green-blue mother of us all—the circling grows,
round and round, thick and wide, the growing waste pushed and pulled forever, endless spin,
poison to all,
currents and winds, circling, spiraling out and around, returning and spreading,
reaching, reaching

Crossing Guard

Bright lime green vest over thick jacket
neon mittens
heavy insulated boots--
the elementary school's
crossing guard holds us back,
her face obscured as she watches her charges
cross east to west
in their thick coats, back packs jostling
the school's yard and doors familiar
its playground still mucked with slush
then waves us north and south.

Far south of here the guards patrol--
frontera force in hot dry air
if only they'd care for those children
their thirst, their hunger, darker skin,
slack backpacks.
Does pain clench the guards' holstered
bodies as kids cry out from behind fences
as parents are lost to sight
or does satisfaction swell their chests,
laughter shake their bodies
as they drink cokes and joke at day's end?