

## **Letter to the World from a Dying Woman**

*for Ron Garson*

Approaching 44, I just feel it's over.  
I lie in a kind of permanent autumn:  
my bones talking back,  
shoulders curled in a parenthesis 'round my heart,  
& any remaining veins of hope tangled in despair.  
Don't ask me how I got here—  
I can't make you understand  
something you don't want to know.

But like the sky I have a story to tell:  
wisdom I might have passed on to a daughter  
if only she had arrived,  
things I would have said to myself  
if only I had listened.

Now, I see it clearly: there are many ways to die—  
some of them don't even involve death.  
You might come to know this later.  
Or you can listen to me now,  
before your song is up & while my urgency to speak  
succeeds my tendency to descend.

The thing is, somewhere to the left of your spine,  
your soul is waiting to tell you  
everything you need to know.  
Stuff like this:  
the best way to deal with regret is to  
do what you want in the first place.  
And, where it is necessary,  
do not give up or give in.  
But also, where it is necessary,  
give up & give in.

The road less traveled isn't always on the map,  
but seek it without waver,  
like a dog pursues his home.  
If you wait too long for the green light,  
you'll spend your life stuck in traffic. Go ahead.  
Mix apples & oranges:  
the world needs more fruit salad.  
At least once a year, check out the way  
pinks collide with orange in the sunrise.

Remember not to give your heart  
to someone you don't trust with your head.  
If you grow the little voice inside of you  
(add plenty of music & moonlight), it will  
take you where you need to go.  
Your skin also has a voice, so listen.  
In fact, let your body do the talking.  
Swim in the air & dance in the water.  
Don't forget to try an ocean on for size:  
no matter who you are it will be a good fit.  
Be sure to bring enough air. Your lungs  
were meant to be filled & emptied, just like your days.

Tend to a living thing as though you're being graded on it.  
And get to know the earth on a first-name basis.  
But don't take the rain personally.  
Life is very, very, very unfair.  
Sex & doughnuts can help,  
but they're not a permanent cure.  
Most of all, find love  
in the answer, the question, & the pause in between.

And when you step outside  
the lines drawn by all of your others (even you),  
treat yourself like the bliss-bound, spring-leaning  
creature you were always meant to be.  
Then come back to tell me all about it,  
before my song is up & while my urgency to speak  
succeeds my tendency to descend.

## **In the Wake of My Father's Orbit**

He was a brilliant star, but  
he was damaged too.  
He gave off an entirely different  
sort of light, and we were transfixed,  
forsaken as the contrails of his angels.  
I see him standing in the corner of our kitchen,  
the distracted mathematician mumbling numbers  
(never realizing that we were growing  
and multiplying in space and time).  
And then the sudden flash of anger, stunning  
in its own way:  
such potential for pain and shadow.

Everything about it was distorted:  
the way we looked up to him—though  
we had no choice, held under nature's sway—  
and how it mattered to us so the way he shone,  
how his brilliance glittered off of us  
and splintered us in a thousand ways.

On Sundays the six of us knelt beside him on the pew,  
our palms pressed together, fingers pointed upwards  
like candles reaching for a flame.  
With every "Amen" came the shame:  
we would always disappoint him.

But his light was a prism  
we could not turn away from,  
even when we knew  
it would grow us crooked,  
break us into dark shards.

## **More Than Candy**

Night. Feels later than darkness.  
Way past a child's bedtime.  
We have no bedtime.  
My younger brother and I climb  
out his bedroom window  
opening into the summer air,  
buoyant as dreams.  
Big plans.  
We fly off the garage roof,  
jumping to the ground and roll.  
Old pros.  
Sometimes others tag along.  
Tonight we're on our own.  
Two tadpoles.  
Our parents, unaware as always,  
sit inside with Johnny Carson.  
They never laugh.  
It's the other side of the house.  
More like the other side of the moon.  
We smile, bikes ready  
to carry us anywhere.  
As far as we dare,  
Brian says with his eyes.  
We sail under the stars, shooting  
for 7-11 like it has all the answers.  
Pedaling in our high-tops,  
we wade through fireflies  
with the flurry of superheroes.  
We are the great escapers.  
Inside the store, the choices  
never fail to dazzle.  
We own the aisles, but we know  
it isn't about the sweets.  
We choose our favorites  
and head back into the dark.  
I turn to my brother  
as he unwraps a Reese's.  
I love him more than candy.

## **The Journey**

But after a while the road seems to drive you.  
And that's okay, if you like  
mile markers and weigh stations  
that measure nothing of importance  
the whine of your tires on pavement  
endless potholes and truck stops  
speed bumps and rumble strips  
the white lines and orange cones  
highways that leave you low  
exit ramps that steer you nowhere  
faded billboards and tires blown  
signs to places you'll never go  
and if you want your steering wheel  
to serve as the compass of your life.

But you know me.  
If there's a sky above  
then that's my path to the sea.  
And I'd rather be  
musing with a mountain,  
wondering what the crows know,  
making plans with the firs and pine,  
knowing I can take my time,  
and not let my travels  
be decreed by the speed limit  
but by how fast—or slow—  
my heart wants to go.

## The Only Prayer

I can't do the big prayers:  
don't know the Rosary,  
won't crumple my torso over my knees on the floor—  
arms outstretched with audacity.  
You won't find me facing Mecca, or  
orchestrating the *Amidah*,  
or waiting for the wafer silently hunched over the pew.  
I have no idea how to bow  
(or to whom)  
and may submit that flailing on the floor in foreign tongues  
or slipping notes in the Wailing Wall  
will almost certainly ensure one's heavenly requests  
remain unanswered.

Sometimes, getting up in the morning is  
the only prayer I know,  
the best I can offer  
to whatever deity  
may or may not be  
waiting for me to tumble humbly out of bed.