

The Living at Dead Creek

We are either too early or too late
when we set out across the cattail marsh-
lands looking for the Snow geese
I have promised you. It is colder
than I prepared for, wind gusts
pushing our bodies from behind,
and the sun does not warm us
enough. There are days I categorize
as failed. When I lie down
on the floor among dinosaurs
and dolls, close my eyes and
pretend I'm dead, while my children
go about their lives, then
come pouncing on the raft
of my open heart. There I am
at forty-five, and all I can hear
is my daughter saying *I'm making you
alive*. And here we are, on a morning
when the clouds seem sketched against
the blue to save us from the idea
that it could be perfect, still-
flowering jewelweed along the banks,
an inflorescence of woolgrass and
bristly sedge, the creek wending
northward, all the way to the city,
flowing into the lake that separates us
from another country where I once danced
at the gay bar until morning
because I could. Migration,
I tell my daughter, is like going home.
It is a mystery to me, what comes
into focus for her, or does not.
The nature poem embellishes.
It takes the memory of this picture
and turns it outward so that we are
the only disruption in a world of hard
data: orange mountain lit
from within, godforsaken field and the
machinery of human defeat. Once,
this place was an ocean. Can't you feel it,
I want to ask her, but when I scan
the scene, she is already drifting.
How many other promises
won't I be able to keep? When

will she want to know where
she came from? Three geese take refuge.
There were supposed to be thousands
of them. They were supposed to put on
a show for us.

June Landscape with Child

The world is gone, I have to carry you.
—Paul Celan

On the Charmlee bluffs nine months
since you were pronounced alive

I don't wake you, dream-
slumped in my pack, exposed

to the whole disentangled world before us,
phantom sea, soft lip of land

dense with sage scrub, the salted breath
of belonging to one another, the spool

of light unwound, such trust
in my body to hold yours

adrift, careening through cloud-fields,
I don't dare disturb the gentle-

limbed surrender, or turn back
to say *here is the life I made*,

each blooming thing coming into view
for us to praise.

If we follow the hand-drawn legend,
this is a world of primary nouns:

to meadow, to ocean, to ruins.
Tell me again there's no god,

or these instructions for beauty
are ancient as the oak grove we rise from

to reconcile self with place, self
with other, sleeping child

with abstract scenery, mother
with future — an elegy that begins:

Joy is so easy to access
here. It's all a blur,

a jumble of landmarks
transmuted to scars

remembered as home,
and none of us needs directions

for what comes next. East,
west, cliff, canyon, tinder bones

of the toppled ranch, and the striking
golden invasion of mustard stalks everywhere

we step — a year from now fire
will take all of this with it.

And what would it have looked like
when you opened your eyes for the first time,

lopsided, nameless, lustrous,
any one of those animals

who would not wait to be overcome,
to clutch anything that might combust,

saying *save me, save me, save me.*

How My Children Were Made

Not with lust,
though the unsettled lover that carries my child
through woods of tapped maple trees
laid the sum of her muscular body on top of mine last night
and I wondered what could be made of that feeling,
already one hand on my belly holding the two of them warm,
deep in snow and the slow drip of sap into each pail.

We're walking with the biologist from Toulouse
whose burly husband fires up the sugar shack while their two sons
trail behind, and I stay at her side, wanting the closeness
of another mother. It's too early to know which heart
is viable, or how I will explain the singular life
I've chosen, with each step cautious not to fall on the ice-
rooted path, I hold onto anything within reach — the blunt light
of sky, her arm, the lover, my child, trunk of the hardwood — I want
to open my mouth and taste what there is.

No view of the mountains,
only a matter of time. But this is where
we would admire things like *eminence, panorama,*
perspective, or note the way our bodies are made
expansive by the intimacy of strangers who see us. What other way
do we know we are home? The science
of existence directs us to a language of outcomes. If this,
then this. I've read about the generosity
of trees, especially the *mothers,* ancient and wise, that nurture
and grieve and perceive each body
that passes through. *Silhouette, shadow.* And here we are taking
what we can for our own sweet pleasure.

At the clinic, the doctor named the risk factors,
and when it was over, praised his collection
of eggs. I was still nothing
more than a repository of longing, I was no one's passion, held
down by other forces. And months later, I watched the film
of my uterus on the screen — all I had to do
was lie there while two embryos were released
into the dark of me
until the lights went out, and I was infinitely alone,
only the nurse's hand to hold.

What part of this
is luck? What part of luck

contains happiness? What part
of happiness is the fact of our interdependence?
Of desire is science. Of taste is feeling. Of instinct
is love. Of child is poetry.
There's no need to apologize for the clouds.
Do you want to discuss reduction? the doctor asked me.
And to think of the frailty of trees
when other trees are removed. The sentience
of the forest, alive yet mute.
That I could choose to eliminate one
and keep the other. That something was taking form
at the boiling point, and all I could do
was open my mouth to the pure amber light echoing
from the place where the mountains
should have been, sticky and solicitous and eager.

Body Electric

Before I was a mother,
I would crawl along these crags,
all spunk and grace, no qualm.
But today, on the top
of Buck Mountain, pregnant
with twins, I don't let myself yearn
for the woman carrying my daughter
with the tenderness of a woman
who will eventually need me
too. From the valley, anyone might look
up to see *family*. Look how they've arrived
to take in the view. And maybe

I pretended, every part of me swelling
and flushed and laboring to get there,
each step tactical, a triumph. But
this wasn't a story I could live with.
And when the thunderclouds came so quickly
all I could think was how reckless
I had been, putting the one life I'd made
into another woman's hands, while
we rushed down the slope
of shale and sludge, the path surging
with rainwater, my daughter somewhere
behind me, I ran and I ran
counting the seconds between the flash
and the sound to equal the distance
it might take to get struck, knowing
the same body that was a conductor
could not also be a shelter;
knowing how rare it is
to not want to be touched by light.

Fireflies in Vermont

There we are at twilight
with the lurch of a wild animal

pacing under the thicket of our yard
for the first glimmer. I am not sure

how long I can carry her on my shoulders, soft-
bodied pulsing wonder,

but I don't remember
how to put her down. It is hard

to breathe in this air, stagnant and
sweltering, hushed — some things

I simply can't explain. *If you want
to catch one,*

you have to act like one. In-
destructible, vigilant, for-

giving of this momentary
radiance, a code

of too much wanting. Let me remind
you what I am here for. My breasts

are still sticky with milk, the babies
are finally asleep. Every-

thing that must be cared for
is in reach. If I was never one

for prayer,
why do I want to lower us to the earth

for a closer look? *The head
is the sensory unit of the body.*

The body is a lantern, fright-
fully exquisite. There was a girl

who took it apart, wing
by tender wing, and I was her

accomplice. We wore it well,
our fingers banded with shiny

stolen promises. It was magical.
Then we faded out.

How could I not have seen
our mistake in believing

the splendor could be ours?
How could I have wanted it

any other way?
Things were dying

while we were becoming alive.

Northeastern Tracks

Sometimes I don't know where to begin.
The sun is dead. The chickens were mauled.
The cattle burned. The baby in my belly
will come too late to know the woman
who raised me like a mother.
Every object in the *still-life of farm*
restores the sorrows that love
cannot dismantle, treading
on the iced-over swamp
of January, our bodies percussive
in the way of ghosts, each crack echoing
deep within the land's quiet hollow,
and parts of us we can't possibly protect
falling through. *The business of life and death*,
she calls it, then describes what survived
the fire. We keep walking. The silver maple
is a question of shadow.
Three sister sheep press their faces
to the slightest opening in the fence
to be touched. I take my hand out
of my glove and understand
how one spark could give this life
purpose, or ravage it. *We never know
the whole story*. Back at the house,
we look up the tracks
we've left behind: bounded, diagonal,
the escape route, the scale of a thing
pursued. I see rivers of milk.
I see the scar of barn. And yet, who
would not choose to be born? Beauty,
I'm not sure if you're the pasture
that erases my feet
or the lighted sky
under which I long to be found.

Northwest

I admit, I am afraid of isolation,

and of the way the land breaks off here
into pieces,

and of the woman who says *forever*
moving her tongue along my skin
like she means it.

If I believe her, I will suffer.
If I don't believe her, I will suffer.

Who has never wanted to be unneeding?

One year since I've seen the mountains
or had proof love could be enough.
The mind loves hope.

Dumb heart, come down from the walnut tree.
All the distance is ultimately a lie.

In Alaska, the heart was a 14-pound King.
In Seattle, she held a fishingpole to the sky.
She waited.

I will remember this version of me.
I will remember loganberry, fishscales, the future,
the letter that says: *love can sidewind*.

Dear god, it is years since I've prayed.
I understand the birds are holy.
I understand the body leads us to love, or

this is one way of knowing the world.

In the Kitchen

It's right before you drive away:
our limbs still warm with sleep,
coffee sputtering out, the north
wind, your hips pressing me
hard against the table. I like it hard
because I need to remember this.
I want to say harder. How we must
look to the road that's gone,
to the splayed morning of cold
butter and inveterate greed.
Light comes and goes in the field.
Oranges in a bowl, garlic, radio.
In the story of us, no one wins.
Isolation is a new theme
someone says. By now
I've invented you. Most people
don't like to touch dead things.
That's what my friend tells me
when I find my fish on the floor.
It must have wanted an out.
Sometimes my desire scares me.
Sometimes I watch football
and think: four chances
is enough to get there. But
we don't have helmets.
I want to say harder,
I can take it, but
there's no proof I can.