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PASSAGES

Bridget Wayland

A Thesis

in

The Department of English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Magisteriate of Arts
at Concordia University
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Abstract

Passages

Bridget Wayland

The term, *passages*, evokes the French term for landscapes, *paysages*. These poems are concerned with mapping: alternately marking new trails and finding paths through forests, bodies of water and cityscapes: places both familiar and unknown. As a whole, these *Passages* explore a personal vision of the natural world, family and community. Structured to represent the passage of time through four seasons, the collection explores rites of passage, the passage of life into death, and metamorphosis: the transformation of rocks, water, trees or light into the loci of memory.

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“*Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat...; *externally*, a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*.

The radicals of *lobe* are *lh*, the soft mass of the *b* (single-lobed, or *B*. double-lobed), with the liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward.

In globe, *glh*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves.

Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit.”

-Henry David Thoreau. *Spring*

I.

Mappings

Frail compasses and trenchant constellations
Brought us as far as this.
And now air and water, fire and earth
Stand at their given stations
Out there...

-Eavan Boland, *New Territory*

ASTRONOMY LESSON

I look for circles of rain
in the water to corroborate
the sound all around me.

There's no spray on my face,
nothing on the palm
I hold up to the sky.

In very black nights
just the river shines
and water is the only light.

It opens like a receptor dish
and finds stars
behind dark cloud,

a source to reflect. The river
pulls trickles from the rocks
in orbit, intercepts the glow
of town runoff.

It does no good
to discover this, until you
can collect the light
you need, the proof.



INGA IN SASKATCHEWAN

"We've never, no, not for a single day,
pure space before us, such as that which flowers
endlessly open into..."

- Rilke, *The Eighth Elegy*

I work in this fuckin diner, cross from Mels
Auto Parts, on th'only street in town.
Big Sky Country they call it:
all the sky you can eat, and theres no take-out
theres nowhere ta take it to anyways. We dont get
a lotta questions in here, but one time,
group a city girls wants to know
if the coffees good. Like they had a choice
of places ta stop at. Like there was a choice.
I just choke down enough of it
to get me through th'day I says, as I'm pourin.
Who gives a good goddamn
if the coffees shit. Take a look around,
theres twenty-two hundred miles
of empty sky. Jesus,
will ya listen to me yappin away.
Sometimes I gotta remind myself, *Inga*,
no one wants ta hear it.



MORGAN*

When I began to map
I was a younger man, believed
in the Mendelian concept,
heredity as a simple process:

the strongest alleles
replicate like turtles
in each source,
swimming separately.

When in fact they interact
as larger packs on chromosomes,
and swap as they combine.
I monitor the patterns,
add them up. The closest genes
rarely do-si-do, you see:
the best-worn path is one
that crosses a longer distance,
one morgan.

In the end I will
make a map of this world,
know the distance needed
between each feature: locations
of springs and settlements,
where to put the mountains.

✿

* A *morgan* is the unit used to measure the distance between genes on a chromosome. after Thomas Hunt Morgan (1866-1945). American gene-mapping pioneer.

CALENDAR *

One *a Haon*

The women gather February
rushes, trim the ends & wind their
centres in red thread.
Pull into a cross, each point
a quarter clutch of days.
Weave reeds into the spokes
of swastika points:
the four syllables of *eternity*:
they affix to thresholds:
correct the time.

•

* The Irish calendar divided the year in four equal segments, marked by the feasts of *Imbolg* or *Bhríde* on February first (now St. Bridget's Day), *la Bealtaine* on May first (now May Day), *la Lughnasa* on August first (now Midsummer's Day) and *la Samhna* on November first (now All Hallows Day). These "quarter festivals" evolved from rites for the shortest & longest days of the year and the start & end of the growing season. The importance of observing and preparing for these festivals was underscored by the danger ascribed to such liminal periods. By performing many ritual tasks associated with the protection of health and life, women played central roles in quarter festival rites. (*Pronunciation guide: BREE-da. BELL-ta-na; LOO-nuh-sa. SA-win.*)

Two a Do

In May, the women sing
come all to me, choose
the youngest girls
to gather first blooms
where two streams meet
and make a third,

where flowers spring
from three waters: talismans
tacked up in doorways, facing *Bhride*
wheels. The women bring renewal
and the breaking of winter
habits. They have until dark
to mark uncertain places—cattle,
wells, butter, and hearth—
in salt and cinders, water and iron;
tie tails in red string, make crosses on hides.

Then men drive the herd
between two bonfires
to summer pasture, purified.

•

Three *a Tri*

She climbs up early for *Lughnasa*,
lets the sun soak in, stretches up
her arms; summer burnishes
the inner side of her elbows.

All day she fetches fuel,
tramples broom & brambles.
Hares shudder on the pinnacle,
pink eyes riveted. Witnesses

as midsummer sinks,
reddens the village spire
& trails up the slope
of every hillside where other folks
light tinder from the sunset: fire
follows fire.

•

Four a Ceathair

November night envelops
with a sudden, glittering frost:
under a threshold moon it silvers
the brims of cucumber leaves,
crystallises the spines
of pumpkin vines, makes
filigree of corn silk.

Her mother warns: hush!
sprinkle water through the garden, girl.
Set an extra place at the table
tonight and listen,
listen,

death wishes
to speak. Divine
its presence at your elbow:
it enters with the harvest
meal. Hush!

When the girl listens,
she finds its voice
in her bones. She thinks *Samhna*,
like the snail,
transforms in the traces
of its passing.



II.

Ice

The descent beckons
as the ascent beckoned.
Memory is a kind
of accomplishment
a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new
places

-William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

TRICKERY

Listen up, follow me.
Put your feet into my tracks.

That's the sound of dew freezing,
each blade of grass snapping in two.
It's the sound of puddles crystallising,
ice being made. Don't be afraid.

We're entering the forest.
no one can see us. Nobody knows
the way but me.

Are you hungry?
Look, these are white pleurotus—
oyster mushrooms, you can eat them.
And morchellas over here, fistulina
hepatica stuck to that poplar.

It's not far now. How are you feeling?
Here, take my arm. Yes,
this is a good place
to lie down.

✱

CANCER

For Cheryl M.

Our bodies learn vulnerability.
shrink into this cranny of the year.
As my mother's friend is diagnosed
& begins chemotherapy,
each gust of wind scatters snow
seed over sealed pores.

It is a sluggish winter
worming deeper
through the tissues, taking hold.

All we can do is bring in
the last of the summer flowers,

before their leaves shrivel
and green fades to clear,

before the coming frost
splits plant membranes and fills
the next cell with ice.

Alive, we wait
for spring to heave open
and render liquid
this cold white grain.



SKATING

For my mother

Skating on the river is one good thing
that she retains from childhood.

She relives it with ferocity that changes
her face. Stiffly swings her arms like fists
on a hula hoop; scissors her skate blades.
The sound is dry, chalk hitting hard
on a blackboard, solving problems,
making sums:

what she likes is ice.

steel muscles and perfection,
silence that keeps the living
black water down.

Below, there may be something
fighting through, ribbons
hanging from its knuckles. its tongue.

Above, there is sunlight
and skating with her kids.

✽

THE FARM

The tractor digs a heavy rim
around the farm
as it plants each field.

In the winter,
you push like a machine
into the treadmarks,

fit your knee, your shin into
a sunken gridline,

drape yourself over, try to fill it
with the hard bulge of your hip
and let the hollow of your waist
eat the lip of the frozen ditch.

If you can find a way to fit in,

it's a gift.

THE DISCOVERY OF FEAR

Your skate breaks through
and catches in the crunch of crust.

The sheets of ice are wedged
between the banks. Plates press
out & up against each other.

You hear a creak under the snow,
the agony of splitting. Want to pluck
its jigsaw centre, watch it buckle.

Your snowpants *zzzzz*
along the ice as a crack cuts through
and widens, opens to the shudder
inside you.



BURIAL

Her house is a crown
on the mountain; all
her neighbours come

to lay her out. Women
place the crucifix,
and use the finest lace to wrap
her to the bedframe, sheer stuff
clotted with alpine flowers:
opaque curlicues
under & around her.

Necks taut men hoist
& carry her out of the house

into the air

where wind flickers candle wax
over the sleeves of mourners,
their boots and the colourless grass

rocking back and forth, each blade
like a divining rod, the live end buried.



III.
Metropolitan

TWINNING

We are twinning in the belly
of some great metropolitan mother,
woman man woman man.

Our limbs run parallel, ankles interlace
under the circle of this table,
boots pull against each other,

anchor

 this spinning conversation
on the effects of seeing bladerunner
nineteen times. Woman man

man woman swinging
pints of *boréale* into mouths and
wiping back the foam

on a rooftop above the blast
of traffic and white noise
of restaurant exhaust.

We lift the bar umbrella into thin
branches of an alder tree
and watch it draw its wings:

metal springs open
in the orange sky;

smoke leaches clouds,
neon across the city.

✽

I CONTROL (THE WAY I SHINE)

I admit I want the keypad
punch code for the entrance to
the cavern of glittering beauties:

the cover of Flare in the check-out line.
Open Sesame—

It's that miraculous
Adobe Illustrator, a glossy two-page spread
that pictures my desire & promises
to *set me free in 90 seconds!*

It takes longer to digest that impossible
meeting of synthetic & cuticle
on a pair of nails, *Eggplant* &
white-tipped Saturniid wings

caught in the magnifying glass.

And that slogan, grasping feminism
by the lacquer.



THE PLANTS IN MY APARTMENT

The plants in my apartment
are waking up at dawn
to watch me make my mindless rush to work.

They reproach my parched clay pots, they know the brink
I'm dancing close to, and teetering far
from centred. All I can take is
the weight of polymer mascara

inside my smeary glasses
that cut the glare of living things
and let me do my job.

I could push the lenses closer. but I know
leaves would start to push through
& drop their tropical sheath,

stretch back, and out. Go flat, and under-
curl until the margins wave and they
relax; let the tips go pendulous
and reach for the floor.

I lock the door behind them.

Let their spears swing down
like white-bisected arms
from balcony windows.

Let them listen
to the splat of my shoes
on gritty paving stones & pigeon shit.

FAIRMOUNT

Distracted, I speak French instead of Spanish
in the Chilean bakery. A woman's hand
slices avocado into bread rolls
behind the steamed plexiglass:
papitas rellenas, two twenty-five.

In the depanneur a doberman watches TV.
The woman says *she makes me laugh*
twenty times a minute & the man leans green
tattoos and elbows on the counter,
starts a story with *fuckin cops!*
as I descend to pick a movie. When I come up
he's forehead to forehead with the dog
and breathing into her mouth.
Her ears are flicking like a horse.
The woman is laughing.
Four ninety-five.

I walk round the corner of *St. Urbain*
with a warm paper bag of bagels.
A kid sticks his face through the rails,
spits at me from a balcony.
Misses, three bucks.



MUSICIANS

For the Chorduroys

They try each other out
on stage, bold as gunshots
straight through the crowd.

Each one, wary, lends an eye
to know the men around him:
their limbs; how likely they are
to move, and how fast.

When the drummer trips
up
there is the click and whirr he expects.
a quick snap of the singer's neck
& glare that touches him, rough.

He shifts to the other foot. Gauges
the distance that keeps them intimate

and apart. Sees him ease his finger off
the trigger & tilt down the metal
arm of his guitar.



NEW YEAR'S EVE

For Gay

She arrives from Acapulco,
takes a taxi from the airport to make it
in time: the only one over thirty
slips in, shaking her head

in time with the high hat & her hips
move side to side
in black pants, crumpled
stretch velour.

The drummer fumbles his brush,
a bottle smashes down among ankles,
smoke thickens in the corners
of our mouths. Her arms swoop up
and hands flutter down
to her knees, eyes shut to keep her
inside all of this

new dance.



IV.

Hunting Season

See that wreck of all things made with hands
Being fixed and certain, as all flesh is grass.
 The grandiose design
Must marry the ragged thing, and of the vision
Nothing endure that does not gain through ruin
 The right, the wavering line.

-John Glassco. *Gentleman's Farm*

O GOD, IN THE DREAM^{*}

The wolf people came
to paw at the window
and their eyes were deeper,
wider at the corners and

phosphorescent moth light
shone in beams to find me,
transfixed. How I wanted to go in

to the woods their world. I knew it
would be stumps, fallen logs
and dark shelter in leaves,
sensed above the running

& I knew it
would bring me to the heart.
But, of their hearts
I knew nothing,

and though they ran me
towards a thing
that forever glimmered through the trees,

a thud came down
 in heavy fur
and soon my clothes were pulled
from my sweating, my cold night hunt.



^{*} First line of "The Dream" by Louise Bogan (1897-1970)

ARTEMIS

For Deanna

She wished she had her arrows ready to hand: instead,
she caught up a handful of the water which she did have,
and threw it in the young man's face.

-From *The Story of Actaeon*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book III

i.

When he parts the screen of wet fronds,
Artemis straightens. Taller by a head,
her eyes cold pools inside a thicket.

Points of light drip
from the wet tips of her hair,
elbows, the corners of her mouth.

The links of chain glint
around her wrist, cocked to dip
into the water.

A quiver
runs down her spine and
the cords inside her arm
bloom stainless through the skin.

She says her lover's name,
puts panic fear inside his heart.
The pack begin to bark and he bolts.

The branches fork and clutch at
his hair, leaves flap around him.
He thrashes through all of it

& finds her face through cypresses.
She makes the sound he can't,
spills his blood like tears.

ii.

And then— she

 blinks his eyes away,

sinks until her knees are
wings, aches

and her body shakes
like sparks firing
one after another
arrows through her arms.

The swelling in her throat
lurches, kicks and is still.



PLOTLINE

$$y = f(x)$$

y is a function of x

On the porch writing letters,
my pencil catches every snap in the air
like the needle of a seismograph.
Bullets trace vectors, cross the page.

The sketch radiates from point O,
marked with moving pin heads
in a red and black chequered pattern,
the vests of men with rifles

who park their Chrysler minivan
on the side of the road,
jump the barbed wire fence and
claim the centre
of my pasture as wilderness.

They peer through sextant sights
in all directions, test
their circumference. Overhead crows
make a break for the woods

& my pencil plots the murder,
the transformation of this story

into algebra.



LEAVES

For Carrie

Inside the bar a woman picks out
a song she wrote alone
in her apartment. She's not used to
the ping of these nylon
strings, loud and out of tune,
patchily electrified
with speaker wire:

there is a shock each time
she hits the wrong chord,
but then the hush her madness brings
an audience, that expectation.

From low in her throat, words
have the strength
of leaves falling,
the unstoppable release
of lungs, of heat.

And when her voice falls in
to this groove,

a doppler sound strikes cold
over us, the gong
of loss down our limbs.

It takes all this
to sing goodnight to summer,
each note poised
at the height of a fall.

CLIFF

No one to talk to. Just the animals—
a sick kitten
shuddering on the back
porch other cats
fighting over a dead vole
but there's also thank god the *Songs in the Key of Life*,
their rhythmic insistence abundance swirling in the room
into morning coffee.

I'm on my knees, rubbing a sponge into
the rug rinsing in an old margarine container
removing the blood and fibres seeped overnight,
where my dog slept, slowly dying.
The only sound the heady *tseeee tseeee*
of birds the steady exhale from burning logs
the frustrated thruzz flies make skating
across the wrong side of windows.

We go for a walk very slowly prowling
for cat smells coyote shit dropped
like a taunt just on the edge
of lawn in the threshold space of old field
stacked bonfire ditch. Cliff's bleeding
held in by gauze and the cocoon of Ace bandages
I crown with a neon orange hunting vest
snapped together underneath him
just below the tumour. His now
timorous gait stumbles over tufts
of long grass furrow creases the stiff
stalks of dried goldenrod. Deaf dog
doesn't jump at the resonant pop
of gunshots, nor its echoes cascading over
the soft fur of field grass tawny
russet dull melon no colour
in particular in places.



V.

MEAT COVE

For my sister(s)

*The great parent is the earth: I believe that the stones
in the body of the earth are called her bones.*

The stones began to lose their hardness and rigidity and gradually grew
soft and in their softness assumed a shape.
The part of the stones that was of earth dampened
by some moisture was converted into flesh:
what was solid and unable to be so transformed was changed into bone:
what once had been a vein in the stone remained with the same name...

- Ovid, from *The Story of Deucalion & Pyrrha*

Lime. calcium. silica. pyrites.
THESE came to remember.

-Christopher Dewdney, *The Memory Table I*

1.

L'ESCAOQUETTE

Back in the Cheticamp campground
my sister Emily met four drunk *acadiens*
between the sand dunes they
shone flashlights in her eyes
just passing through she said and then
one boy foot poking the bluff — "*Meat Cove?*
Dey're all related to each odder
up dare y'know."

2.

EILEEN

up there
and up the road from
campground cliffs and home
nine-year old Eileen
sits on a scant inch
of dirt
 watching it bend

the tent pegs into grotesque
twists of wire,
Em and I
 poking
until we pierce
a single vein of soil
between stones —

This scrag
is shot through
 with the roots
of sea grasses
 their twine
knotting the earth
as fishing nets thread
 the sea —

and

 the wind
takes her hair
lifts and twists it

with stiff fingers mute
stark flag against
 the sky —

3.

SEVEN GENERATIONS

1. *Eileen McLellan b. 1987, Meat Cove*
2. *mother b.1967, Meat Cove*
3. *grandmother b.1947, Meat Cove*
4. *great grandmother b.1927, Meat Cove*
5. *great-great grandmother b.1907, Meat Cove*
6. *great great great grandmother b.1887, Meat Cove*
7. *great great great great grandmother b.1867, Scottish highlands*

i.

(Every girl
must learn to run
away from home,

just
think of the girls
in this lean place
sheared to the flint
to the
namelessness of bone

hemmed indoors away
from the sea

for twelve months
per year for
seven generations

nameless Mrs McLellans)

ii.

*“having lived here for seven generations...
Kenneth McLellan, your captain,
will provide you with interesting information and history
of where the first people that came to
the northern tip of Cape Breton settled”*

I want to tell her

Eileen

ask him

where is your mother

how close

are generations

see

how quickly

they succeeded

each

other

4.

THE CALLING

insipid on the skinned flint

shoulder of the road
between McLellans
we crouch and wait

for her to bring
wild foxes *from*
Black Point
she says

Em and I just watching
Eileen she
extends fragments of bread
to russet muzzles and

stretches the pith
of her fingers into fox ruff
calling each one
Willie

until the captain
calls her
once

Eileen!

5.

TALLBOYS

The men in Meat Cove
 burn tires in a pit
at the neck of the bluff,

dig in,
 and char fat
 steaks on a rack
 in the black smoke:

men who flip the tip
of baseball caps
as we walk by

 crush their tallboys on the rocks.

6.

THE INLET

we walk along the inlet,
 the slender webbed piece
stretched
between
 the thumb and index finger of
the cliffs.

The sea slaps down
 and down and down.
It chills the stone. makes veins

rise to the surface
of our feet.
waves like chisels
fluting the cold skin.

But when we sit
to warm our arches
 at the slim edge
of flat cove stone

there is the memory
of heat in it

7.

THE CHALICE

we two sisters curl up together in a shallow stone bowl we line with the layer of
ourselves cloaking the rock with the flat of her back warm fat coating of woman
the blood lining her body inside the cauldron of this inlet where stones still make rings
to hold to hold cast-iron upright to melt fat dripping where blood once caked the
stones warm and running interminably back into the sea

8.

MEMORIAL

warm-blooded they hauled
not so long ago
over us smothering
corpulence the heat of whales
by horses and harpoons —
the clan McLellan dropping
like wrinkled apples from their boats
with long strokes split
the expanse of the bodies —

we watched the hide unzip
and out spill
the interior: magma, warm-blooded strata:
first the fat
then the muscle, peeled down until
the steady bone plates
surface and molten gut
vivid below that

and in the cove
coating the stones
dulse is the fur
on our backs

sun-beaten and crumbling
warm-blooded back
to the sea



VI.
Spring

EN GARDE, GÉNÉRAL

Enfin, je trouve la solitude cachée
sous une aubépine : arbre surnaturel,
incarnation d'un esprit
damné ou condamné
à prendre cette forme

torturée dont chaque extrémité
pousse des pointes aiguës,
se lance en avant, essayant
par un grand bond de se sauver
de son enracinement. Mais...

l'aubépine est figée là.
en plein saut, tel un jet d'eau
qui n'arrivera jamais à
toucher le sol.

Écrasée

par le dense feuillage vert pâle,
d'un érable—grand anglophone du Québec,
inconscient des obstacles,
qui s'étire vers le ciel
sans se soucier du sol riche,
imprégné de sang.

•

I'm lost on the peripheral
Plains of Abraham, facing battle
with the thorn trees, a horde
ahead of tiny spears.

My knees sink in the rich soil,
friable crumbs leave powder marks
between my finger pads & thumbs.

Blood pricks up on back ribs
& shoulder blades: not enough
to drench this patch of soil,
but drawn.

en garde!



SURVEILLANCE

k'tuf à tuf à tuf à tuf à tuf
à te kerry
k'ry k'ry k'ry. ú!

-John Glassco. *Cathird*

I've been sitting here long enough
for the birds to return:

Woodpecker

rips into a rotten branch, its
black head banging and banging
in the spring. I see its fat white belly
and the black-striped small of its back
through a sieve of red stalks, brambles
& basket grass. It hops up the trunk
of a junk tree, searches every inch
and flits down, double toes like pincers
gripping the bark;

Ostentatious

spring hawk, always hunting
by circling always leading one further
with that impatient kra kra kra kra
like four rapid hits on a rhythm stick,
each hit the gurgle of a stream over rapids,
rock bubbles. And always one
far off that answers, Kra!



MOOSE

Everyone responds to you
the way moose rub their racks on trees:

they're building up a mental image
of themselves, that part
they can only know *via negativa*.

They read the strength of treetrunks,
the shape of their own heads.

but antlers are a foreign sign:
the prongs emerge one summer, crosses
in familiar lines. Everything
is fair game. Blood

recedes from the flesh itching
to fall from bone.

They scrape off the velvet
tatters, trace new
boundaries and
search your face
for their names.

45

SURRENDER

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
through living roots...

-Scamus Heaney, *Digging*

The hoe hacks through sod
and rips it off like matted hide;
corners of the blade

catch on tendons, blind
ropes anchored in the deep
belly of clay
that hold this garden down.

•

Dusk slips in
too early, the opalescent
sky no longer sees
my fingers or the green
of weeds from last year's
vivid seedlings and I must

relent. Swing up the pendulum blade,
grip it with a duck bill pinch
& wipe it clean,
leaving a smear of clay
to crack off pale
and dry tomorrow morning

& hang it
from a stray nail, the shed's
weathered back wall
mounted like a gun rack.

•

Plucking my hands
from a cold rain barrel,
I can feel the fibres try
to take their former shape.

Flex then fist my fingers,
find the twinge in sinews
and roll the swollen strand
of muscle on the joint.

•

All around, there is stirring,
the drawing out of root tips.

Instant towers of plantain
shoot through the surface and unfurl
their victory flags.



BOUNDS

The sun edges black spruce
tips and dips below the scrim

of the forest, casts jagged shadow
on pale spring furrows
and young coyotes
crossing the field.

The fur shimmers once
to the beat of each heavy paw
hitting the ground; heads held forward,
bodies level and stealthy, they
make a silent disk to the treeline.

•

I don't know if they've seen me
standing in the garden
until they cross the ditch

and move into a grid of pines,
change their gait to lope
more swiftly uphill, shoulders popping up

above the branches—the free
feel of teenagers testing their bounds,
that keenness—

until they stop and turn,

meet me with stalker
eyes back to the house.

•

In the morning there's a puddle of piss
on the aluminium strip I use
to mark the border. Suddenly

illiterate, I want to read

with one sniff,

animal gather
 intelligence.

—

INTRICACIES

Signs are taken for wonders. "We would see a sign!"
The word within a word, unable to speak a word.
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year
Came Christ the Tiger.

-T. S. Eliot, *Gerontion*

i.

Everything thaws
from within:

in the spring my feet hold the lawn,
dent it as I walk across—

fontanelle of the year
under tangled dead grass.

ii.

I'm drowning
in a flood of emmenogogues:
fresh parsley tea, infusions
of rosemary and tarragon,
caraway decoction, saffron

and every year this river
spills its banks and swamps
the farm, leaves its
name written in silt,
the skunk smell of bank mud
& fiddleheads.

Branches droop into the water, star
flowers seed themselves

& everything digs in roots—

spiders lash themselves
to the stalks of stinging nettles.
slugs on the intricate
bodies of ferns, their
unravelling network tender.

iii.

I believed for years in wishing wells,
the spirit ear of water.

In a place where it pools
I can watch the tips of willows
paint the surface, still wait for a sign.



WOUNDED

Everybody comes to the river wounded
and wounds it in return.

•

A leaf turns its slow cartwheels
from pool to pool. It clutches a dry rock
and a swell pulls it under

water

is a concealing skin: room beneath it
in the river, a breadth of muscle
& vein, an escape route;

siphons strange blood
into a bigger body.

•

Southern baptists dip their sinners
in: destruction, then release.
Sheets of liquid sluicing off,

the reborn take their first sip
of life, draw deep
from the sharp ground-water.

Afterwards, they say—
I have felt it working on me,
I have felt it.

✻

VII.

My Brother(s)

...not a sound
Could find its way into this silence.
Nor intervene where you have found
In one stunned heart, which must now trounce
Breaking, if not a breathing space.
Well then a sister's grim embrace.

-Eavan Boland, *Sisters*

TACKLE

The only way may be
to haul you in
bleeding and flipping over,
your flanks dripping alcohol
& lake water, and look through you,
eye to eye.

I would ease out the hook
like you showed me:
leave no fingerprints,
bruises on your ribs;

I would let you go.



FROGS

Some boys counted frogs
they destroyed in algae ponds,
cracked off green branches,
tore up moss with Tonka toys
and came home to soup,
had sisters do the dishes.

My brothers knew how to hold a snake,
hook nightcrawlers and shoot
grounders, missing heads.

We hid in the root-ridged
maple realm of caves & leaf muck,
raided orchards and fled the sprayer
blasting malathion through the cortlands.

There was time
between the school bus & our parents
to belong to each other.



DOGEARS

Cleaning thrips
off the leaves of a potted tree,
with a steel bowl of dish soap
and an old J-cloth,

was like stroking
the ears of an old retriever,
one swipe on top and another
underneath the leaf.

I thought, there's something
in this gesture that you need.

Sometimes I want to tell you,
Stop. and Sit. and Stay.
And let you curl up on the sofa,

pat your hair, smooth it back
along the muscles of your skull,
run my fingers over 'til
your legs twitch, chasing cats.



SCHOOL

We're living underwater, but have not learned

to lift our feet, float and flick our bodies,
to press our breath out through our ribs.

Though we're speaking, the words are carried far away
to burst in to air.



FISHERMAN

For Packer

I'm amazed how long he stands there,
facing the lake.

Is he trying to feel
this elbow of green water
for the fish pulse

the way you sometimes feel it

twitch the ball of your palm

or flit through the deeper channel
of the vein in your throat?

•

All this looking for what
you can't see, the split second
when it swims past your boat.

His arm shoots out a line.

•

He told me if the bass doesn't bite
on the first cast, it's all over.

And when it splashes down he knows
he's failed.

But I watch him

reel in and cast again,
drag the hook back empty and again

let fly the line

to the place his eye
has taken it.

•

RESILIENCE

Stegosaurus boulders
lethargic in the sun's deep heat.

Elderberry umbels hanging over the cliff.

Just standing here you sense
the escape it was possible to make.

A black fire pit surrounded
by blueberries, animal prints
in the red mud. The proof was all
around us.



THE FISH

Water lapped against the dark slime
on upright boards. green, brown, blue,
as we stared at its stunned black eye.

Fins still. belly up,
just its jaw breaking
the surface.

Its body was a tapered blade
in the water. It quivered
like the stiffening arch of a penis,
and its silver speckled side
caught the sky.

 You hoisted
yourself off the dock
without splashing and waded out,
the yellow of your legs bouncing light
through the heavy lake around it.

Your arms cast no shadow
as they reached to turn the fish

and in a flash it was a smooth
white star shooting down,
deeper, dark
and out.



VII.
Fruition

FRUITFUL

Violet loves to think
about pomegranates, the
strings of jewels inside.

And when she's making jelly
she fills glass jars with hot fruit syrup
& lines them up, three rows by four
to glitter on the kitchen table—

I don't care what they do
in front of men and their mothers,
women still know
about pickles & jellies.
the slime and the sound
when suction shuts
the bottles' mouths

and together at night, they seed
a bushel of peppers,
slice and cook peaches.
add wacky tastes like vanilla bean
or turmeric,

they sterilise long-handled spoons
and deliver.

200

INVITATION

Two spires through green rafters,
two hundred summers of growth.
The white pine takes five arms
to circle, your faces turned
to ridged bark worn on cheeks
and on chests.

Tree squirrels *chitchitchit*
and flit between the limbs
like monkeys, uplifted
in the span of branches where
down has no reality, only
here.

A hundred and forty
may gather under the canopy,
their feet on its fan of roots:

that burrow beyond the dripline
and beckon, thirsty. *Come.*



MAPLE HILL

There is a hill under me

hard body sprouting lacy pea
green leaves, curled buds

and there is the pull of him

the liquid pulse of trees.
this windless tension

one shoe on skirt
hiked up to hips

my head in the moss
& leaf litter.

I hold his tongue
between my lips

his hips
between my thighs.

squeeze shut and
like the maple stand

clamp roots around
the bedrock, grow here.

24

CHURCH

For Chris

Our palms come together
as we tramp up the weathered ramp,
and enter into marriage
through a barn.

Light sifts through
cobwebs, mottled windows
jacquard his face.

The aisle is flanked with bays of grain.
We cross the threshing floor,
nave worn smooth by hooves
and flails, the rhythm of hands.

reach the altar and kneel together
in mounds of loose hay, collapsed bales
striped by concentrated light.

Holding on to the purlin beam, he pushes out
the shutter of a window, lets in the wind.

Our eyes follow gold
and black flecks
floating in the updraft,
skim the timbers and the long spine
of the ridgepole.

A row of rafters lifts the chest.
Heat hisses in
and out the ridge holes,
breathing
through each other's mouths

we make this our church.

HAYING

After breakfast we drive into the hills,
kick up a plume of dust.

In the truck I slide away, catch
the roar of locusts, sweet snatches
of late-summer hay: everything
springs from tractor tines.

The road ends in solid cedar brush.
One of us fishes through the trunk
while blue clouds slide behind
a single tree at the crest of the hill,
bleached scarecrow, spiny
against the deep sea sky.

We jump the ditch and plunge
into the field, fresh-shorn stubble,
studded with great wheels of timothy,
clover & yarrow packed and rolled
together by the baler, solid.



THE RIVER IS ALIVE

It's a medium into which slip
the summer's slim intrusions:
heron's bills. Deer forelegs
& narrow hooves. Tongues.

Your toes feel ribs
in eddies & under
soft mounds of sand.

Dip your head inside:
you don't expect sound,
but your ear tunes to the roar:
arrowheads sway slowly;
minnows dance to it.



PASSES

He can bend down the branches of the willow best
Who has experienced the roots of the willow

-Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus* VI

i.

Next year's sleek green hoods
& air-conditioned cabs
pass the farmers standing ringside.
Their faces pull
very slowly right to left—

*This here 's a 1999 John Deere
with three thousand horsepower
and a standard backhoe*

—and whip back around,
wide open in the shade of cap brims,
focus of desire that forgets

their heavy arms, hands
so muscled they grow pudgy
when relaxed. A man's fingers
curl up outside his pockets,
waistband like a barrel hoop
strung with frayed suspenders.

ii.

The smell of barn and billyboots
from a young man standing close;
yellow caterpillar bristles
crawl across his upper lip,
cheeks stretched back against the sun.

It's been ten years but I remember
that whiff of pasteurisation and cow,
the twang of country boys
who liked to linger before school
by open locker doors, taped-up
pictures of Hank Williams inside.

My parents sold the cows
when I was ten. All I know of farming
is a child's impression
or second-hand. but I remember

farm boys, luminous vikings
who cuffed each other
at the base of the skull.
horsed around the halls
and passed through them
as if biding their time;

& feeling scared

around that energy, as if

they saw through
this thing called puberty,
as if they couldn't wait
to get you in the barn:

that ripe and steamy pit,
ship's belly filled with feed
and animal noise. hooves and piss
and muscle.

iii.

Every morning, every evening
the same goal, the black walk
from house and back before dawn
& before bed. The patience
and endurance for chores.

Pull off loops of baling twine
& sheets of pressed hay,
break through ice to water
and feed and milk and muck.

These are men who have the will
to wrestle down a yearling,
clip a number through its ear.
but strength must be
in tending.

It's not just the rhythm
of this work, the ploughing & seeding,
spraying & haying, the periods
of fencing, birthing, weaning and
of sending off the calves to slaughter:

it's what the tending does for them,
what a man becomes.



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