Some Signs

by

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Some Signs

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A Note on the Text

“Only the infinite limits the limitless.”
—Simone Weil

“You try to be free through writing. How wrong. Every word unveils another tie.”
—Edmond Jabès

Writing is, for me, about grappling with limits. Language lurches forward, gathers momentum, hits a wall. Then things get interesting.

My academic career has been positioned at the intersection of the study of poetry and the study of religion. The first field takes place at an extremity of human experience, and the second encounters the outer edge of language, where each word seeks to push past its own expressive capacity. Both disciplines tend thresholds and crossings; both disciplines hold open the tension that a heightened awareness of limits produces.

A similar tension is at play within the pages of my primary source text: the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. The stories contained in its volumes have always been in my life. They sit right under my skin, and under the skin of so much Western literature. And yet, I do not read Hebrew, so the Bible is necessarily a text in translation. It is a text coming to me across vast expanses of time and space, filtered through centuries of interpretation, commentary, and politics. It is a text filled with internal contradictions and complex resonance. There is no such thing as getting enough distance from the book, nor is there any hope of an unmediated relationship with it. There is no “real story” to get at—there is only the reader, the history, and the word.

Another limit intrudes. My back twinges, drawing a flare of pain across my ribs and shoulders. Due to a musculoskeletal condition that affects my nerve function, I am always negotiating with my body. On bad days, the first thing to go is my ability to write without discomfort, and then, on worse days, my ability to write at all. My entire skeleton is somewhat unstable, the ribs most of all. I sit inside a state of flux. The words, the pain: each one a conversation.

I cannot get my body out of the text any more than I can obscure the way in which narratives have formed my own shape. One of my early memories of story comes from the Jewish religious school I attended as a child. My class was given small curls of paper, meant to mimic Torah scrolls, and told to draw a favorite character from the Bible. While my classmates set to work creating smiling renditions of Adam, Rebecca, or Joseph, I drew a whale so large it barely fit on my paper. The teacher examined my picture and asked where Jonah was. Affronted by the obvious question, I replied, Inside.
Already I was developing a sense for how a story might swallow a person whole, only to spit her out again, covered in whale spit and seawater. Already I was coming to understand how a narrative could be a dare, a test, or a promise. Already there was the story in the book, and the story in my hand, and I was reading the two side by side.

This is nothing new. Throughout the long history of the Bible, various individuals and groups have developed reading practices that run in two directions. Walking an exegetical path both unpredictable and well worn, people read their own personal narratives into the text and the text out into the world. I am intimately concerned with this process of biblical double reading—both the project itself and the image it creates.

One of the last skills I retain, even when my mobility is severely impaired, is sewing: threading, stitching, and mending. I cannot explain it in terms of physiology, but I can trace its impact on my work. I am reading and writing in two directions at once. God stands at one end of the room and my body at the other. Poetry walks the crooked line in between: a bridge, a thread, a trajectory.

If these poems compose a kind of passage, then who is with me in the crossing? Simone Weil, Edmond Jabès, and Anne Carson form my core canon for the sake of this writing project. Weil, raised by agnostic Jews in Germany and France, ultimately embraced Christian mysticism and leftist politics, rejecting much of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish identity to which she was born. Jabès was a French Jew raised in Egypt before his exile to Paris, at once resolutely Jewish and stubbornly atheistic, and above all concerned with the orbital intersections of language, memory, and historical trauma. Carson, the enigmatic Canadian classicist poet, trails the other two chronologically, but her voice clearly moves across time and space to join the conversation.

What binds these innovative, distinctive writers together into my own canon is their remarkable combination of formal restraint and philosophical audacity. With linguistic precision and leanness that verges on the surgical, these writers employ their words in a wrestling match with the divine no less urgent than that of Jacob and his angel. Each of them approaches the divine at an angle. Not one possesses a linear or simple relationship to the subject of God; not one seems able to leave the matter alone.

These are writers who come up against limits, consider the scenery, and keep going.

My own theological wildness is warmer, younger, and less organized than that of my idols. Purposefully so. I cannot resurrect their genius; I can only pick up where they leave off. As I write, I have been circling around several questions. To what extent can I make the words of the Bible my own? What does it mean to exert ownership over any text, and especially over one as laden with claims as this one? What is the relationship between the body and the divine? Does the instability of the divine
produce an inherently queer linguistic response? How does my own transgressive, curious self move against traditions of text, word, and religion both familiar and strange? What is the responsibility of poetry to stand in the gaps all these questions break open?

I don’t want an answer; I want a conversation.

What follows is one entry point into that discussion. This collection of poems is a text in conversation, not only with the Bible and those modern writers already mentioned, but with a wide range of works spanning genres and centuries. I am a writer in relation to other writers, leaning my full weight against a complex landscape of trespassed borders, piercing questions, and open fields.

As Anne Carson writes, “From these diverse signs you can see/ how much work remains to do.”
I believe that ‘God’ is a perfectly fine name for the miracle of art.

—Sarah Manguso
If Only It Were That Simple

“We grow old through the word. We die of translation.”
—Edmond Jabès

As if my tongue were not known
to be made of sanded birch

As if the sky had not
already darkened

As if refrain were innovation
As if the sound were bridge enough
to carry us over

Here the dusty road’s vanishing point
Here the river narrows

Here the name of God collapses
into prayer

Here the hemline
Here the bitter end

Here the angels of infinite potential
fall against the window panes

Their stilled silhouettes
the only words I know
Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it.
Pore over it; grow gray and old over it. Stir not from it.

—Pirkei Avot, on the study of Torah
Face Forward

I know the first problem is narrative
and the second is vocabulary

I know to crush the garlic clove
with the flat of the knife

I know my window lights up
when I’m home

I know the kettle’s sound
just before boiling

I know obstacles include the season
I know a few animal antics

I know one half of a bargain
I know enough to meet your gaze

I know left turn at the orchard
I know the dark past the bonfire

I know cornerstone, skipping stone,
frozen stare, stony ground

I know the world wasn’t built in a teacup
I know not to lose sight of the road

I know the feat is neither trickery nor magic
I know you have no idea

I know force of a bite
I know the spring-loaded jaw

I know you by name

I know that after everything
the tongue still trusts
the teeth
For Starters

Monsters.
Or whatever you call a body
form has yet to set upon.

One here, shaped like mountains,
lifted its head and howled.
Half a world away,
a wooly muzzle snapped open,
shrieked its icy song.

Such a clamor
had never before been heard.
Nor had there been
any ears to hear it.

Scrape me off a fragment of that noise,
let me bite into it like a plum.

Sky and sea
were for once in collusion
with the land.

The words stood waiting,
razor-edged. Each name
a big fish in a brutal pond.

All creation resplendent
under the raw banner
of the first day,
every blinking eye
stunned by the circles
of widening light.
Morning Radio

A forearm makes the measure of your reach;
a tendon checks the measure of your bend.
A frozen river will hold your weight until it doesn’t;
an ocean rarely freezes, hardly holds.

Oh. Is it any wonder.

Your hands are caught up in a difficult grace.
Your hands are for nothing but turning.

No soul can possess a morning,
light glancing off all the edges.

Seen from far away
the song is seamless.
Tangled like old ribbons,
crisp edge and open weave.

Please. Come closer.
Let me remind you.

Salt is only salt,
water only water.
Everything we touch
turns to ocean.
Justice

In the version of the story where forgiveness is possible, wheat threshes itself, binds itself into sheaves, lies down in the twilight, rises at dawn.

Some subtle miracle threads its hand through every empty golden stalk.

In the version of the story where names are forgotten, no rain falls from blasted clouds
and grasses sway uncrushed by hooves.

After the fact, we rose from our shame to seek asylum in the hollow,
going out into the land of justice as strangers, as faithless pilgrims.
The State of Things

It’s safe to assume that within a year there will be no more glaciers.

A new set of rumors will spring up around the concept of snow: a riot of tall, chilled tales.

The crystalline structure was proof of someone’s imagination.

Ice core memory runs deep, remains unreliable, temperature dependent.

It is possible to trip a running horse with nothing but a safe assumption.

A string of words so thin as to be nearly invisible will cut through flesh to bone, no problem. What was it we wanted to keep steady? What was it like to be cold?

For the final act, I will assume the character of a poet: horses are big, but glaciers are bigger. Common knowledge once held that glaciers were bigger than God.
Signs and Wonders

The water receded
Wind died down
Turtles fled back to the swamps
Birds slit open the vacant air

We didn’t have much
but we had plenty of buckets
We strapped some, upturned,
to our feet as stilts
To rise above the mud

Others we filled with
whatever stranded fish
the birds hadn’t noticed

We expected another downpour
We expected a raging postscript
scrawled across the clouds
We expected total silence,
a vacant firmament, an empty earth

What we got instead:
all the colors spilled out in a covenant

Sugar on our open wounds
Smelled like meat and eucalyptus
Tasted like the end of the world

Sweet and vicious
Rough-grained
All the sureness on this earth
dissolved
Deckled Edge

The body lies
but it also remembers

as it slides through afternoons
where every slant of winter light recalls
whole architectures of desperation

that opened onto well-lit rooms,
tables laid for supper

The imperfect ease, elusive, elided

I have not rid myself
of the time spent in residence

Only yesterday,
the sureness of this struck me
like a stone, perfect and important

The light thin and clear and insistent,
barely touching the ground

This season of contrast
Of freezing and thawing

Always finding and losing its forms

The attention
sharpened to a piercing
point

The redwinged longing
The unspent pause
Bury

No one knows what to hide. My hands wrap cables, drain reservoirs, spill milk (so when I saw you hop the barbed-wire skyline

and head straight for my rooftop, I knew to get ready, loose the bundles of flax that they might fall over you, cover you,

and already I was marking how best to charge you, how to trade what I had for what I didn’t). My hands are scored, scarred, flawless.

I have built a citadel of walls and no ceilings, a fortress open to the sky, strewn with drying stalks and bowls pouring over.

I may/may not let it go.
I may/may not push you down.
The front of the house is painted/panting/crimson.
You can’t taste anything in a garden. 
Open your mouth; 
the whole green world 
streams in.

Thinking “almond,” you get arugula, 
lemongrass, sandstone. 
Grains of sugar on your lips 
smell like wheat fields, 
feel like twilight.

What good are names and wonders 
when all I want is something 
to wrap my tongue around?

The first task: biting 
my own skin. 
Next: river stones, 
sticks, evening fog.

This is not anger. 
Rather, investigation. 

At night, I hold still, identify 
distinctions and borders. 
This is my hand. 
It ends at the end of my fingers. 
A tree's roots go into the dirt 
but are not dirt.

None of this explains 
the way your tongue 
can only split me open 
where I am 
already split.
Leviathan

I slept that year
with my hand in the mouth of a whale:
plastic zipper teeth, liquid-soft cloth.
A toy fiercer than any teddy;
a child deep in the belly of the beast.

My family stomached by sickness:
ocean is to winter
as digestive acid is to chemo haze.

My father asking “How
do you use the remote
to turn the TV on?
I don’t remember.”

We spent nights either simmering
or choking down syllables.
Had to repeat the monster’s name
until it slid off our dull tongues.

Called it Polyarteritis Nodosa.
Called it shipwreck.
Called it catch me by my
fingertips and hang me out to dry.

Barely a breath between my room
and theirs.
Practice makes you perfectly
sleepless.

Everyone knows
that when you whisper your sorrow
at a certain frequency
it will buckle and splinter.
It’s like knowing the name of God.
The fog doesn’t stick the way it used to.
The coffee shops are multiplying virally.
No one can pay the rent.
No one remembers the bones buried under the Dolores Park tennis courts.
Bus fare went up.
The routes have been cut.
I remember when it cost a quarter to cross the whole city.
The radical bookstore hovers near bankruptcy.

The bougainvilleas are on strike, won’t bloom until they get a raise.
There’s a critical citrus shortage.
No lemons to give the day a neon glow.
No grapefruit to sugar upon waking.

It’s on account of the vanishing bees.
Our gardens are too quiet.
The air empty of miniscule wings.
The noise and wires have gone underground.
So has all the art worth following.
There are pipes down there large enough to drive a car through.
There’s a creek running under all this concrete.
Having a crush on a city is as awkward as having a crush on God.

In the old Mission, they found a mural hidden behind the whitewashed adobe.
The brochure says it was painted by native laborers.
Converts with brushes in their hands.
As though it were only a matter of turning.
As though we could still turn this mess over, find treasure underneath.

The sacred heart of Jesus inked in red on plaster.
It’s the oldest thing in the city.
Run through with three swords.
No one can look at it.
The light would tear it apart.
You Need To Give Me The Water With Your Own Two Hands

It’s exactly the way a tame thing goes wild
Smooth coat suddenly tangled
Flank shying away from the hand
it once leaned towards

Last night, the moon hung too low,
trees straining up to meet it

That’s all the warning you get

Wake up one September
to a feral smell riding the crest of the wind

and the coffee cup
in your hand
becomes a hammer

Everything true is true only in the moment of writing
Everything true is true only in the moment that speaks it
The meaning, mispronounced, falls flatter than Kansas
Forget this and come up missing vowels

Summer fruit dying on the vine licks its lips
Like stones hold heat after sundown
Like a body holds heat after the bath

Forget this, find your hand cupped and grasping
Rake it through the river, come up empty
Hundred Proof Harmony

Boy cuts a route across narrowing daylight
Music turned up, windows rolled down
Our boy reads liner notes
over the top of the steering wheel,
loops uneven circles through his ten-block town
until the last light fails him

Skinny ankles, half-cocked wrists
held together with tape and safety pins
His heart a hot salty quiet
in the back of his throat

Come nightfall, our boy screams basement arias
to packed-in teenagers
His chest as full as an unopened forty

Our boy is rooster-proud, ready for battle
A raw knuckled war cry
leaves his mouth
pursed as if for kissing

There’s no such thing as a secret you can tell everyone
unless you write it in sweat and song
If there ever was a right time to start
it left for the city on the 6:30 express

Our boy swallows his fear, no chaser
Our boy struts across the stage

Truth is, this one goes out
to the sweet-limbed fellow in the corner,
swaying, hypnotized, over an empty bottle

The two boys held together with that fearless baseline
Our singer a proof-text, lyrics the commentary

When the music says go up, he starts climbing
Hinge

The hinge of action opens a cleft, 
one half falls away on either side.

The hand that reaches up 
to brush away a fly 
moments after the bang 
is not the same hand 
that straightened a collar 
just before.

A voice calls down 
Where are you?

You say nothing 
or you say 
Here I am.

The halves of your life fall away 
on either side like a sliced apple. 
All the seeds exposed.

So many kinds of light 
can open up a day.

You will be thrown from the garden. 
You will be told to kill your son. 
You will be renamed.

If you work the settings right, 
you can get a double image.

*Something changes—* 
*then nothing is the same.*

What you don’t see 
sitting just to the left 
of what you do.
On the Behavior of Miracles

There’s the burnt sugar miracle
The salt-on-ice miracle

The miracle of eggshells
The miracle of sleep

There are miracles with wings
and miracles with teeth
There are miracles that ruin the paint job
and miracles who won’t stay to dinner

Victory is not the miracle
Dawn is not the miracle

Not even air, suffused as it is
with pollen and light

The miracle might be made of skin or breath
Might be alive and warm in my hands

It is always running late
It is always undignified

What has dignity
to do with the body?

When have you ever stayed dry?

When have you settled the ache
against your hip like a child
and walked out into the howl of night?

As soon as you’re outside, you see it
hunkered down on the grass,
shining out from under all that gray.

Put your weight behind it
and push
You have done enough, engineer
How dare we ask you for justice

—Alicia Suskin Ostriker
First Learn This

Knee deep in the wet clay of dream
the need to cry out
seizes your throat
in its bony grasp. The sound
is a fish hook
caught on your tongue.
The jerk of the line
hauls you onto the banks of waking,
open-mouthed and silent.

O you are made new every morning.
Not enough to start praying then.

You have to start before desire
stings your ankles,
before you have anything
to scream about.

In a winter-numb farmhouse,
the lights flicker. Each twitch
in the circuit makes it impossible
for eyes to adjust.

The filaments flinch, tremble, hold.
Your sight hurts behind the sockets.
Just above the sureness of the bone.

Start praying then, it’s too late.

You have to start
before your need
has a body to cling to,

before your heart
gets too heavy
to float.
Nothing Rises

Until the world ends,
it keeps going.
Everything before that
is practice.

Neither an ebb tide
nor a tidal wave
can empty the ocean.

I empty my pockets
at the feet of my beloved:
if these are my keys,
can you remember
where I put my hat?

On Sunday, we set out with bells
on wrists and ankles.

The birds say time to leave
this pecked-over farmyard.
The birds say go to the mountain,
cast down your heart’s desire.

Beside the roadways,
leaves are beginning to turn.

Every glimpse of orange
is brighter than a blessing,

washes over me
like floodwater.
Hypothesis

Suppose we figure memory
as the original impenetrable archive

The whole world smelled like oranges
Trees in flower not in fruit

Suppose I say
I no longer believe
that being perfect and important
in my work
will make up
for anything else

Suppose a hand
grasps a water glass
Suppose it slips

Suppose we say
damage cannot blunt beauty

Suppose it took me years to learn
to read the newspaper

The work
the pain
each one
a conversation
Aspiration

Whatever isn’t wind must be a body:
ice cube held to bug bitten eyelid,
mouth tonguing a nasturtium’s pepperlicked bite.

Reaching for the sweat-frosted bowl
unbends an elbow, uncurls a hand.
Knees don’t straighten, just knock.
Nobody home but this little soul.

In a summer-spent pause, the silence rushes.
The air holds fast, pulls close.

The sum of a body never equals the sum
of what’s beyond a body’s edge.

A stilted slumber breeds no tender lullaby.

A bird could cry louder than this day,
where breath rises in waves past the treetops,
breaks over smokestacks, and is gone.
Praise

Fear is not an animal.
It is not warm.
It does not bend.

Once I bent the ocean
to my hand.
Was it that simple?
Yes.

The crabs and fish
felt the dawn of their apocalypse.
The ground we walked on
was a moving thing, fins and shells
were slush beneath our feet.

Now I would offer
all my songs of praise
in exchange
for a fish in my hand.

While I walk, I dream
of translucent muscle and silvery scales.
While I walk, I clutch a stone
and will it to become water.

Fear is this stone in my hand.
Fear is this stone in my mouth.

If stones do not turn to water,
did water ever become dry land?

The sky over my head
is neither land nor water
and it does not speak a word.
Against the Sun

You are worse than crabapples,  
the taste of chalk and snow they leave in my mouth.  
You are an impossible tangle of fishing line;  
if I pull too hard you only catch and snarl.

Every time I try to chart my course by the light  
that slips between your fingers as you raise  
a hand to shield against the sun, you move,  
turn to look at me, and laugh.

Every time you tell me to go back,  
I find that the parallel tracks of our footsteps  
have disappeared.  
This train only runs one way.

What can I say?  
When I first looked into your face  
I saw my every harvest,  
every planting written there.

I cannot split my tongue like fruit  
from stem, I will not bind my hands  
to my sides with twine.  
I will not grind my words to make fine bread.  
We will never slice cleanly under any knife.

You did not ask me to bend my head to meet your palm.  
You could not ask me to stitch my shape into the cloth of your life.  
You will not ask me to explain.

My heart is the blue sky over every golden field.  
My love is the legbone of horizon between them.
Inventory

When I take lilies out of border beds,
I don’t think twice.
No plants shake their heads in anger,
no frayed twig-ends rise against me.

Children take each other’s marbles,
each one weighted right to fill a palm,
and speak a playground tongue
that may or may not have a word for guilt.

When the bus won’t come,
we lean against a wall to wait
while you tell me about shoplifting as a kid.

Your unfinished hands plied a quiet trade
in gum and bracelets. No pets at home,
you popped the tops off cat food cans
and left them for the strays.

Far from your terrible prairie town,
you tilt your head back
to consider the clouds, say
I’m glad the landscape is changing
so that I am no longer the exception.

Laughter drifts around the story like a fringe.

There is no such thing
as an injured party.

Everyone has something worth stealing.
Above the lifted goods, a lowering sky.
Double Dare

You throw a wrench
in my body of knowledge.
“I’d like to know you,
but your sets of data don’t align.”

In last night’s film you played
the consummate formalist
so imagine my surprise today
at finding your shirt untucked and a-flutter,
a toothpick trembling between your lips.

“The timing might be wooden,
but there’s a fluid note
in the way you lean towards the exit.”

If it were just a question of knowing
the name of your favorite fruit,
I’d plant a tree and water it with my confusion.

There has to be a limit.
This is rotten to the root.
Your smile has gone on
quite long enough.
Tell me when
to call it quits.

In the final frame,
you did that trick with the cards,
the one you’d known since childhood,
and you looked like a star
from the twenties, silent, rumpled,
elegant as a top hat.
You didn’t look like anyone I’d known.

Cancel the command,
return to the limpid refrain:
you know full well
I like to know something
about everything.

These are just some of the early abstractions
and I have the pictures to prove it.
Cleared Ground

The torn green fabric of the grass
provides a place for us to kneel.

As a cloak, it’s too threadbare;
as a pillow, too thin.

When flocks of pigeons wobble skyward
feathers shudder down to earth like ashes.

We bypassed hope a while ago,
missed the exit, shrugged, kept driving.

I can’t get an answer for why the park smells like smoke.
Maybe the boy scouts are building fires

for their apocalypse-readiness class or the man from city maintenance
has been throwing lit matches into trash cans.

When I was little, I thought this park could fill
the gap cities have between mercy and asphalt

but now it’s plain that plan
just skins your lips and chaps your elbows.

Pulls the air right out of the water.
Will God still love me

if I keep saying
the opposite of what I mean?

I am lucid and extremely perishable,
running out of ground to cover.

I know that justice is too much to ask,
but how about some crumbs?

Once, too long ago, each winged thing
had a branch to come home to,

and the gravel grinding under my boot heels
belonged to a mountain.
Chromatography

If the eye sees the miracle upside down
If the brain remembers to right it

If the curse is a covenant
If tears are cut from the story
If the melodrama could be spared

If the jar seals correctly
If the weather holds

If the sand gives way
If this hard earth yields a shelter
If a body could give up its ghost

If the gift remains unvenomed
If fish lose their unlimbed ease

If color could peel back the curse
If tents are pitched to withstand the rain
If a blank face snaps the rope of history

If the sky has a leg to stand on
If the eye remembers its task

If only her braced limbs
could hold back the proof
as it hurls its ancient weight
against her door
What We Have Been Waiting For All This Time

The wool glove buried
in the deep drift by the curb
will surface at the first thaw

Beneath its lucid skin
the iced-over creek
drifts along the stones

The snow that bends the branches
when you wake
is gone by midmorning

Everything is moving

Your naked hand
its fingers stiff with cold
is the same hand
that pushes the broad year forward

The way the water handles every rock
echoes in the bare trees

The body of the year
is ceaseless in its turning
Downpour

I want the sky to be my own face staring back at me
I want to blaze like whiplashes of heat lightning

I have too many claims
grown stunted and stumbling
Unspoken iambs sparking hard
against my teeth

Everything is dry as tinder
Nothing is easy
Not the limits of my body
Not the way things change

When I unfold my trembling hands
Pry open the knotted fist
Draw the lines off the skin
Skin off the nerves
Nerves off the bones
See the bare limb, exposed, extended
What words will I find hiding there
humming a note wire-thin and strong

What soaking rain will follow
as I cross the courtyard
and open my mouth
Flight

The first time you reached towards me, I thought a bird trapped in the house was trying to escape. I left your bedroom door ajar, hoping to free some bright-boned thing.

It’s not a mighty likeness, though each kiss does alight in the middle of something: a kitchen briefly empty,

a sentence left unfinished, a front porch, a back step, a frozen street, a muffled night.

It’s exquisitely public. It’s best this way.

Neither of us wants our back against a wall.
Lions

Things that fall: rain, kingdoms, night, law. A season can fall upon you, throw itself at your doorstep, roar until you let it in.

Fall has sharp edges, crisp as apple flesh. Bitter. It will cut your fingers if you're not careful. A harsher bloom against the coming dark: a sudden flash, then stillness.

A holy day is like that. Smells like smoke and charred paper. Smells like raw meat and cinnamon.

A holy day is at my throat like an animal, both of our jaws bound, its massive paw a sinking weight upon my chest.

The space between skin and claw is a blessed fold. Observe the velvet, the slicing tip. One does not exist without the other.

Every fall precedes a winter. Every show of faith demands a lion, and a morning where the body emerges unscathed but not unchanged.

Prayers are falling out of my hands and in each tree blazes the head of a lion, mane fringed and burning.
Retreat

A formless rage, a field for battle
is not the salve you spread to blunt the pain.

How sharp your army’s swords
How bright their armor
How brittle their worn, spent prayers
How once the small animal of your goodness
walked a tightrope strung between two points
How its thin arms mid-air freewheeled
How its bones spit marrow onto dirt

At dawn, the field of your face falls silent
All the blades sheared off or set down
You are not separate from your gathering of strength,
from your forces bandaging their wounds

Come morning the ground
will cradle the wreckage
Sunup spent casting shadows
Splitting light from light

Relief is nowhere in the story
The current strains against its banks
It will not save you
Will not lift you up

Morning is indistinguishable
from morning

The river runs cherry, pomegranate, plum
Confusing spilled juice with spilled blood
doesn’t make either any easier to choke down

If I move the subject
from the desert to the riverbank,
the sentence does not soften, will not yield

Swallows wheel uncertain arcs—what
makes wings distinguishable from flight?
Rain will wash blood from the downed,
dispense of the story

There is no sense in it
No trick of syntax can save us
What Fuels the Work

The law of sin
cannot be burnt
as firewood.

Pliable sapling, damnable foe,
set alight, it fills
the room with smoke.

A wick set in
the law of guilt
will never cast good light:

a flight of sparks
then ash.

The law of peace
is diamond-tipped.
If you could spot it,
you would see it gleam.

Some say it burns forever.

Some say not even God
could set it aflame.
Hard Freeze

That whole winter
one long flinch

To get up every morning
and expect the worst thing

To look for it
with diligence

Not the hot seep
of the squirrel’s body
splayed like a compass
across the melting snow

Not the downed branches
slicing up the sidewalk
after a night of
sleepless wind

Not the steam

Not the smoke

Not the skid of tires
on that unseen slick

Not the pause
between fire and noise

Not the plastic bag
captured in the bare-knuckled branches
snapping like someone’s laundry

Not even you
stepping towards me
across the river’s
flimsy ice
What Poetry Can’t Manage

We wake up Nothing
to get dressed in The words
for our bodies gone Like
laundry day but worse
Everything shrunk down or
stretched out Your bed
a forest dense with limits

The smooth hot rocks we once uncurled on naked
My hands sliding under the tight elastic
that keeps your chest bound flat
Your typewritten note I’ll be your boy
in the sun, Your city-sprung dandelion
Your hands tracing the line
of my swung-out shoulder blades
Those wing bones you called them Those
crooked miracles

All that gauze
around the wounded mystery Gone

We—no, they—no, she—no, he—no, you
are encoded like radio waves

Relay towers bring
messages Miss my station
every time
Lament in Exile

O Jerusalem
if I forget you

O Jerusalem
if I go down to the river

O Jerusalem
to ask for a song

O Jerusalem
you are not my tongue

O Jerusalem
how can I be silent

O Jerusalem
you are not my right hand
nor my left

O Jerusalem
how can I forgive
your walls of barbed wire
and bone

when above the highest joy
a soldier stands guard,
his human heart beating
in the barrel of his gun

O Jerusalem
our hearts

O Jerusalem
our hands
Yield

A body bent in prayer
could hide in plainest sight,
visible as brick buildings,
impossible to pronounce.

In the narrow evening sky
the moon has gone blood orange dark,
slipped behind a folded seam.

I hold its hooded bulk
like an egg yolk
under my tongue.

Anything louder than breath will break it.

Better a drunken sway than a sober form
enfolded in the clutch of leather wings.

Better a restless hymn
than one with roots in trespassed lands.

Better the tide than the shore,
better the light than the stone.

Better this chest, holding a laugh
fuller of salt than the sky is of stars.
Ignition

God’s memory burns in capital letters
and your doubt is the kindling its
million mouths reach for.

The generations in your blood
are a coral necklace,
each bead worn blunt
by grinding years,
desert blush riding high
on the surface.

Your clothed feet, your naked questions
can take you to the edge
but they have to stop there.
The yawning fissure,
its ragged depth.

You have to step forward alone,
and when you face
the flames,

history disappears.
You are alone in your body,
and the unfurled tongue of God

runs up its impossible length.
I lost my way.
Can I say that
and still be trusted?

—Peter Gizzi
Where to Stand

“Perhaps an angel looks like everything/ We have forgotten.”
—John Ashbery

Light approaches dimly through the keyhole. Feathers crowd around my eyes, block all but the most persistent forms.

From this position, the hand seems almost unmovable, the pen it grips clumsier still. Phrase not accountable to the paper, paper not accountable to the skin it mimics.

Every word recorded mocks another left unwritten.

History figures this pressure in sharp italics, serifs straining at the leash.

Where did the heroics go? Where are all the wonderful deeds? A thousand ghost kings clamor for the return of flesh to bone.

Into this problem, suppose an angel. Flares in broadest day. Pulls tight the cord between sky and ground. Upends the buckets, shatters the bowls.

There is movement in the marshes, fraying at the edges, a rush of flight underfoot.

Erase me from the margins I will still have read the book
Light on Water

What is the sky to a fish?
Another broken frame of reference
visible only from the bottom of the boat,
adding to the shock of capture.

Beyond the known, wet field,
a whole new sea of blue,
enuff to tip the scale
in the direction of recovery.

Gutted, cleaned,
the silver muscle gleams
guiltless and sweet.
The crow’s hard beak
picks through the entrails,
tells a fortune in the sand.

Fish stories are all about birds
and bird stories are filled with fish.
Each lipless mouth holds one end of a thread,
the middle wound fast around my wrist.

My body, gill-less, unwinged,
strains towards a truer saturation of color,
worrying the border between wet and dry.

Crow is nothing but a tease,
wants the bit of sparkle
I hold in my mouth.
Crow says Spit it out.
Wipe it off. Make it shine.
Foretold

Kings have always gone to oracles. Whether the ship gets a headwind or reaches its portent with all due haste, this battalion’s rout remains unmoved.

Breath buckled, expectation wrapped snugger than a noose, the audience chamber is decked out in silk, simmering.

Let me be the first to call your bluff.

There’s nothing there to count on. It takes more than a lucky glance to predict the sparrow’s storied flight.

The hand trembles on the knife. The blade shifts its weight and whimpers.

Let me be the first to up the ante.

Once I mistook your blush for an answer. That’s not prophecy, just gossip.

The queens who flood the Castro every June trade favors with oracles in assless chaps. Between the two, a certain kinship: history riding each head hard, a crown held fast by gravity.

Each one knows a sacred span of thigh. Each one knows a sacred sway of hip.

So let me be the first to call you out.

Let me be the first to call you holy.
Wrestling

I land at your feet and the sky comes down. 
Falls into my open mouth.

Rain pours steeply down my throat, 
lightning catches in my teeth. 
I only wanted to talk to you 
and now the span of the heavens 
fills my chest.

The way I feel about you is the way I feel about that boat lying next to the dock. 
It won’t get me across the river dry, but I know how to swim.

Safe passage doesn’t interest me. 
My bones may lose their sockets but they will not lose their songs.

We wake up smelling like sex and sounding like shorebirds, 
and even when I’m broken, 
I don’t let go until that same sky blesses me. 
Until I am given a new name.
Sure

What I want from you
is undone sunflowers
the Fibonacci sequenced seeds
crunched and spat
What I want
is the scattershot of hulls
in the nettle patch
beyond the porch rail

What I want from you
is a few hours
is correspondence
is the way your white v-neck hugs your skinny arms
is not going to please the neighbors
is going to come out wrong when I say it
is either local or seasonal, hard to find
is sealed
is clipped
is a matter of mechanics
is the pull one train car has upon another
is dependent on the tide
is liquid
is transparent
is not a big deal
is nothing but trouble
is explicit
for sure

There don’t have to be
so many sentences

There doesn’t have to be
so much noise
Preparation

I never said
it would float

I never let stray any word but a prayer
soaked in pitch and held down with iron

I never asked my hands
to shape a seaworthy vessel
from green weeping wood

I know nothing of craft
If children run barefoot
over the decks of my effort

they will come away crying
soles bloodied and splintered

I know nothing of buoyancy
Twilight finds me standing
in summer fields
knee-deep and rising

Back in the house they have God on the radio
storm warning on storm warning on storm
warning on ceaseless repeat,

taunting the tree frogs
and begging the crickets to sing
Records of the Event

Each heart’s aperture
opens or constricts
based on the quality of light.

The image comes out mirrored.
Every negative appears blank except for a flash of text.

Show me a sign. Show me a miracle.

What can you do but
train your sights on the sky.

Wonder’s volumes
are piling up around my feet.
Yellowed pages,
loosened spines.

My eyes are open
as wide as they will go.

There’s a softening
common to the form,
the door of the day
gone hingeless.

What can you do but
recalibrate the instruments,
wait for the weather to break.

Back on earth, my mouth
works the crackling air.

We all have names.

There is no dust
anywhere on me.
Opposite the Earth

The country of my throat is unmappable
My jawbone a chancy weapon

If you throw it, it will not return to your hand

When you told me the moon is leaving
for more attractive planets
all I could think was how yours might be
the only earthly body less reliable than mine

Your force pulls my oceans to their pliant limits
Peels the water straight off the sea bed

When you ask why I don’t drink
I say what’s wrong with being thirsty

A desert before the year’s sole rainfall
is alarmingly beautiful, defiant and scoured

It’s that time of year
when gravity realigns

Your fist wrapped tight around my hair
will not keep me in your orbit

No land this parched ever offered up a garden
No one ever said you could stay
Finding Food

Late night, the fox lit out for prey.
Its mouth wants the wet pause.
Its mouth wants a dull cry, a slack pulse.
In front of some old moon,
cloud like a fish.

My sleeve caught on a pause.
To pray is not to fish—that gap
when the line sinks in.
That rock of the stern.
That moon we use for bait.

My knife’s edge dull and clouded.
Take up the slack in the line,
stand me on a rock.
Unmouth me, says the fish.
My pulse outfoxed.
Chapter and Verse

An unpaginated text 
asks for a knife;  
the branched-out fishbone falls,  
leaves syntax unstrung,  
hanging

I have this nightmare  
where I never find the poem

I have this nightmare  
where doves come crashing  
out of the oven,  
pinfeathers singed, smoking

I have this nightmare  
where everything is as it should be  
except my hands

each one a pinpricked can,  
dark except where light  
comes through the tin

I have this nightmare of driving  
through an unpunctuated landscape  
my hands two bark-striped trees,  
leafless, the road as white as doves,  
the world unpoemed
Centrifugal Force

"There exists a 'deifugal' force. Otherwise all would be God."
—Simone Weil

It takes more than friction to keep the car
from peeling off this curve.

The sloped shoulder of hillside
exerts its own pressure,
insists on us as plotted points,
ever mind the motion.

It’s all a matter of exchange: for this car ride,
half a day. For the sandwich, five dollars.
For the bones, a shelter of skin. For the
shelter, a towel and some driftwood.
For the tide, a chart. For the plug, a socket.

I’m willing to buy that certain vectors are fictions,
that some forces live only in reaction,
and yet we flee the center,
sewn-through with instinct
like the kids chased backwards
by each foam-laced wave.

So how do you account for the dizziness,
or for the way the light moves away from your face

in the moment when you reach out
and tuck my hair behind my ear?
The Latest Approximation

It’s a science.
It’s almost see-through.
It’s clearly going to come apart.
It’s a name. It’s a woman’s name.
It’s like the other day
when everyone’s shoes
came untied at once.

It’s date- and time-stamped.
It’s got the barest echo of a roar.
It’s orbiting in an uneven ellipse.
It’s yellowed at the edges.
It’s plain to see, if only you’d
refocus the lens.

It’s all explained in the commentary.
It’s not available in the fall catalogue.
It’s helpful to hold your breath.
It’s shining. It’s hungry.
It’s waiting to be let in.

It’s irrelevant
to check your watch.

It’s close to the ocean.
It’s compulsory for newcomers.
It’s hard to put your finger on.

It’s about to begin.
It’s resistant to the antidote.
It’s difficult to settle.
It’s written in an illegible script.
It’s rawboned.
It’s all ears.
It’s only going to get trickier from here.
It’s here. It’s almost here.
The Noise

Wake the stones that want for nothing.
Wake the creek bed. Wake the mint
and thyme, the watercress, wake the corn silk
wound tight around the blunt-nosed cobs.

Wake the clean-sucked bones up off the plate.
Wake the marrow sliding down your throat.

Wake the neighbors.

Wake the tail-tucked nightmare
from its place behind your ear.
Wake the fairgrounds. Wake the rides
tarped-over for off-season sleep, wake
the trucks left to rust on blocks
in the yard, wake the road stripes.

Morning has got to come some time.

Wake the power lines that loop like stitches
across the whole red pan of the valley.

Wake the chain that keeps the dog held fast,
wake the tadpoles nestled in the mud,
wake the mud. Wake the weeds, wake the tool shed.
Wake the ditches, wake the dirt,
wake the scissors and the tin scraps
and the crossbeams and the hatchets
and the cables and the buttons,
wake the sky.
Overflow

Slate blue roofing tile
Plastic colander, metal chain
A Barbie doll’s bottom half
Rubber sole of a leather boot

What a nice prayer that makes
in the landfill past the factory

Sum of a city, roguish backslide

Allow the sink
to run over

The work is to think
about it all in terms
of something older than
the story and its excess

There’s always a way to proceed
once you accept the basic data

Claim the rusted faucet
Claim the blossoming mess
Claim the neck that cranes out
to survey the scene

The new heavens
and the new earth,
uncountable, not in sight
The Problem of Navigation

What way is there
but down to the shoreline?

That path worn deep in the stone
Its shallow track a call that never falters
That path a clever ruse

What lies beyond
upsets the compass
of my language

After the land, water
After the water, land

What are we
if not founded
upon the seas

No way now but through
the impassible strait
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