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Fidelity

Oh, shaggy-coated hill—
You’ll miss me when I’m gone
and slowly,
shyly your grasses lift up
where my shape was
once.

williamsburg bank building

My father takes a photo of the same building every day
sitting in his car on the way to work.

Whenever I visit his apartment the clouds have changed shape
or there are new faces shuffling along the avenue.

I’ve never thought much of the way that he’s
always impressed enough by that scene
to try to capture it again (except that maybe
he should
keep his eyes on the road a little more often)

max
—— rosen-long
Inventory

The idea is to never slow,
to keep driving until we laugh
at the cars that are motionless behind us.

they are things kept in preserves
on the back pantry shelf,
honey squeezed into neatly packed jars
moth-eaten cardboard boxes,
shelves sagging in the middle under the weight.

But we,
we want to leave burnt toast moments
that catch in our tonsils
like old peanut shells.

We wait for snow that will never come.
Instead we get hail
it leaves dents in the car
we discover in the morning
and shrug at the inevitability of ice.

Instructions for my Sister

The city shivers
when you surface, the memory
of freshly drenched, bumping
bodies still clinging to your own
drenched skin. Is this sweet stink

St. Marks beat-boxes
in counterpoint with the bass's
beat, the thunk thunk lilting
through whispering streets with
amorphous melody. Can't sing
along to this one

(though I love you for trying).

Red ash brightens your
small fingers. Healing breath made
visible stills your still
racing lungs; but your smoke shines too
brightly if a man asks for a light.

Duck into shadows

(they love you for trying).

And so inhale last
ice air though your chest might protest
and re-submerge into
the dancing spirit pit. Lift your
feet! Clap your hands! And bow to the
blast of the mad world.
My father is a beekeeper. This is not unusual for girls like me who live where honeybees do. Before the day she met my father, my mother had never seen a honeybee. Since the day she met my father, my mother has not spoken.

This is what happened.

The summer air was thick. Bees hummed and so did my mother and she said she was not afraid.

Watch, my father said. He brought his face, tanned and rough, close to the hive. Honeybees circled. One settled on his cheek. Now two. Now thirty, and more still until all but his parched lips were covered. He saw her hands stiffen as he looked at her.

You are afraid.

I'm not.

It's all right to be.

I know.

She leaned forward and kissed him. He was gentler than she had imagined. The world paused to watch and honeybees held a dial tone chord. The sound was deafening and yet she found tranquility in it. The even vibrations spread through her toes and up her calves and to her lips. She tasted the midmorning sweat on his upper lip and breathed the scent of browning grass and honey. Bees hummed. She couldn't recall a time more peaceful than now.

And then, with no real cadence, she felt the sting of a honeybee. All went very quiet. She felt for her throat but could not find it. Her skin buzzed with numbness. (or was it only the sound of bees?) The ground flew upward and met her face and darkness met my mother.

Two miles of Carolina heat stretched before them to a red house and she hung heavy and limp across his chest, her sear trailing behind like an afterthought. He counted seconds in her breathing. In, out. Here then gone, until flashing reds and screaming tri-tones broke the silence and white highway lines spun by through the back of the speeding truck. The seconds came and left like waves. In, out. He feared they were not there at all. Here, gone, in, out. Here. She lives.

The hospital was white. Doors, smocks, gloves, my mother's face. And now, beside her, my kneeling father, white, too, and shivering in the cold room. He took her hand, heavy as guilt.

She will not hear, the nurse told him.

Now?

Now.

Now, ever.

He couldn't recall a time more lonesome than now.

The red house was quiet. In December when the wind was harsh enough to drive icicles through the ground, my mother sat sipping Earl Grey with honey from the hive. My father buttoned his trench to watch the bees before the morning woke. They spoke with hands about riding bicycles and wintertime and politics but never bees. They made love with hands, breaths, eyes, sadness.

Forgive me, he'd plead, but his words only skimmed her neck like a breeze.

Years rolled by. I sat on the stoop of our red house in August with my father next to me.

Do you love bees? I asked him.

Yes.

Why don't you talk about them?

I do.

You don't.

Maybe.

And he told me the story I have just told you. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and I spoke.
Do you love her?
Yes.
Why are you crying?

The night was black and I pulled on a sweater. My mother joined us and my father stopped crying.
Her black hair hung to her shoulders and she sat between us with a cup of tea and one for me. I
studied her face. I could see where I got my own high cheekbones and square jaw. She was still very
beautiful. We sat for a while and the night wrapped round us like a blanket. My mother spoke to us
with her hands.
Let’s take a walk.
I asked where.
The hive.

(I had seen the hive once, on the same day my father told me I couldn’t. I was younger than I am
now. He would not take me so I packed a knapsack with a honey sandwich and a bee hat. There
was something very exciting about having a secret. (There still is.) I came to the hive and honeybees
flew by like motorcycles. They were fat and loud. I wondered if my father said something to quiet
them. I wished I could quiet them. Instead, I stood very still and tried to follow the trail of a single
bee but it hurt my head. I felt the sun drip down my neck like honey. I said I was not afraid. I was
afraid. I ran and never went back.)

My father shook his head no.
No.
I watched them both; the whites of my father’s eyes and my mother, so eager, still so beautiful. She
rose and started toward a cobblestone path. I followed her and his footsteps were soft behind us.
Please, he said.
I want to. (This time it was me.)
It’s only a hive.

It’s not.
And in that moment he must have resigned because he quickened his pace and led us down
the path, my mother between us. I breathed in August nighttime. No sound but the gentle
pat of sandals on dirt. My father stopped.
Where are they? I asked.
What.
The bees.
Inside. And he pointed.

The hive hummed. In a moment a blurred honeybee would dip out and back in again, and
then another. I looked for a sign of faltering in my mother’s face but found none. Dew had
not yet settled on the grass so she took its place and lay with her hands at her side and her
pockets still sewn shut. I took a spot next to her. My father did the same. In, out, here,
gone. I took his hand.

Bees hummed and I felt them through my spine. I took my mother’s hand and felt them
through her fingertips. My heartbeat and I felt them through my heartbeat.

We walked back to the red house.
We've got to work it out,
Says the exquisite
Drip of a thing perched on
Lady Madonna's arm.

He's got great dewy eyes that so look like
Glassy, dripping plums.
He knows he's nearly number one
In the batting order of the heart -

Whose whirling gears stop a few dollars short
Of independence. He knows that she shifts like magma:
Imprecise, coarse and coursing,
Evaporating the dew right out of him

Till he's a shrively shrip of a prune.
But she's got the corkscrew legs of a woman
With only padded cares and he's feeling
Distinctly uncorked right now.

She's got hips that swing like a metronome
As if no scrawling mess of humanity
Ever slunk out from the over-ripe
Fruit-basket of her womb. As if

No rich, red, honest, aging magma
Ever made a home in the hollows of her heart.
As if nothing ever flowed so clean as
The cent spent on his latest rent,

*Give magma a kiss, baby.*
There are times when every fiber in my body is tense with anticipation of the moment. But its sudden absence catches me unready, as if it has caught me undressed in the bathroom, hours before the supposed test... as when I dream of action, but cannot act by definition... or when I try so hard to sleep, I just protract my time awake. I stare down the night until it’s cracked like an eggshell, and the sun bleeds yolk upon the intact sky of morning, darkness gone. The timing of events cannot be relied upon; Expect nothing. And wear nothing but a colorful coat, with a black reversible gut; you’ll be prepared for wedding, funeral, or rut.
I know you’re watching me.
Me in my blue frock, my missing sock
my toes
my slender knees
and the incessant ticking of the clock
I know you’re watching me.

Me and my wide-eyed regal pout
(my lower lip uncurled, stuck out)
my longlash flutter
and
the difficult climb of a single eyebrow –
a gracious bone for my shy lout.

A hip and a hop and a skip
and a stop.
A billowing hemline and one white cotton sock
and restless brown eyes darting bottom to top
and a stop.
You are watching me.

Me and my sunny hair, strands everywhere,
thin arms and monkeyish feet.
Honey hued
the perfect disguise.
Pink heat.
Your comic, helpless stare.
You and your quivering square jaw
nervous ape hands
reaching for fruit.
Unclean.
Unripe, deceptive, raw.
You never stop watching me.

Plunge, cut, slice, crisp, crunch, squish, dribble, dribble, plop.

“Apple of my eye,” you say. “Where are you going Delores Haze?”

The apple will bite back.
It's eight o'clock on a Thursday night, and I have a ten-page French grammar packet due Friday. I ease myself into the soft cushion of the living room armchair, my pen poised over the packet and ready to write down answer after answer. Nothing can distract me from this task.

My eyes skim over the page as my hand scribbles down verb after verb until I start to feel like a French robot. I am just approaching the end of the first page when I hear it: the soft ding of a bell.

No!

I tell myself. I need to finish this now.

I put my pen back to the page, concentrating as hard as I can. But it's no use. A loud squawk punctuates my studious silence, and the ringing of the bell becomes louder and faster. That's it. I might as well give up. Ferdinand has won. Again.

Defeated, I finally look up across the room at the large, dark green cage where he lives. Just as I suspected, Ferdinand is clinging to the bars of his cage with both minute, four-toed feet, his bell toy swinging noisily beside him. I put down my homework and walk across the room to open the door on his cage, where he is staring at me as expectantly as a six year-old on Christmas morning. He happily ruffles his feathers and makes his way up my arm to my shoulder.

Ferdinand the monk parakeet has been a part of my life since he was only a few months old. Now he is two and a half years old, going through parrot adolescence, and has the intelligence of a toddler. Ferdinand may only be eleven inches long, but his vivid green plumage and constant vocalization make him hard to ignore.

Dogs are simple. When an owner leaves for vacation, the dog eagerly awaits his return. When an owner is angry at the dog's mess, the dog whines and scurries away with his tale between his legs. But Ferdinand is far more complex.

From my point of view our relationship is simple: Ferdinand is like a child, and it is my job to take care of him and keep him happy. When I'm home, he always wants me to take him out or give him a pecan. I can't shout or I'll frighten him, and I have to punish him gently but firmly when he bites or continuously screeches. I have to bathe him, which means letting him splash around in a pie plate of cold water, and then I have to wrap him in a hand towel to dry him off so he doesn't get too cold.

But from Ferdinand's point of view our relationship gets much more complicated. I always assumed that, since I raised him almost from birth, he sees me as his mother too. But months after I got him, I discovered that this might not be the case.

Like all parrots, monk parakeets are social. If Ferdinand lived in the wild, he would live in a large flock but would develop a close bond with one female. The whole flock would share an enormous nest of twigs divided into many tiny chambers, each one just large enough for a couple and their young. Ferdinand would spend most of his time with his monk parakeet spouse, preening her, nuzzling her, and taking care of their babies.

Monk parakeets mate for life.

But Ferdinand doesn't have a mate. Instead, he has me, and apparently he's decided to make the best of it. When I take him out of his cage, he climbs up onto my shoulder and delicately preens my hair, carefully running his beak over every strand just as he would clean his mate's feathers. Of course, he also expects that I do the same for him and climbs down to my forearm so that I can use my fingernails to preen the feathers on his head that he can't reach.

When he is feeling especially loving, he sits on my shoulder, nuzzling one of my cheeks, and makes tiny clicking and whistling noises. It is undeniably cute, but I can't help but feel I am leading him on when I nuzzle him back.

I often feel that green is the perfect color for Ferdinand since he gets so jealous of
my human mates. In the last four years I have had two long-term boyfriends, and both of them were subjected to severe attacks for the first few months they came to my house. If I am sitting on the couch with a boy and we are touching even in the slightest way, Ferdinand is liable to fly over, race along the back of the couch, and ambush him with a few sharp bites to the back of the neck.

Besides this jealousy, it hardly helps that my mother and I have trained him to say “I love you.” Though I know he’s only repeating it, I can’t help but feel he knows what he’s saying when I tell him I love him and he says it back.

Matters are further complicated because I don’t actually know if he is male or female. Once, when he attempted to mount my ear in a fit of passion, I thought he must be male, but I have never actually verified his gender because it takes a fairly expensive blood test that might scare him. Since a bird’s sex doesn’t really matter if they’re not reproducing, I just picked a gender arbitrarily when I named him. So now I’m stuck with a stubborn, jealous, androgynous bird who is apparently in love with me.

But, just as if he was really my husband or son, I actually love being stuck with him. Sometimes having someone around whose only English consists of “I love you,” “hi,” and “good boy” is very pleasant, even if that someone happens to be tiny with green feathers. So when I resign myself to taking him out of his cage instead of getting work done, I secretly love it. And I better, since he’ll live until I’m in my forties.
This page is a broad winter field;  
I walk and yearn to be tracked,  
Madly hoping you will sound the depths  
Of my footprints, pour over my steps,  
And know that the sigh I carried  
To the frozen river and deposited there  
Was heavy, but not burdensome—  

But not quite madly enough,  
For I hedge my bets, and tell you  
How my shoes filled with blood—  
Though the snow is as dry as paper.
When the blond beast speaks
The seagulls flock to its side
With snappy hurls of the sideways girls
Who relish their sun stretches
And tighten their bra straps.
Young moose clicking their awkward heels
Stumbling crooked in their pastel skins
And garter belts too loose for such shy hips.

They are ill-fitted with bones.

Raggedy Ann with her porcelain faces
Painted tiny green eyes on her Saturday night.
She cinched her waist
And polished her curls,
Chewed on her wires
And darkened her pearls
And announced to the stall,
“Heather Hodder Is A Bitch.”

Friedrich was not impressed.

In a year you will opt for a snake’s skin
As all others will screech and tear at the sides.
In two, you will rub on thicker charcoal
For those picturehouse inspired eyes.
In three years you will pushpin holes
Into four fleshy chambers; foolishly.

In four, you will put bitter catclaws through your gut
Two dozen times to feel so dangerously alive.

In half a decade you will know the meaning of silence;
of eyes averted, muttered breaths, and endless, endless haze stretching for miles down the hallway.

For, you see, when the blond beast speaks
Four senses cease to exist.
There are only ears
And those who divert them.
in the jaundiced glare of the lampposts,
the cherry blossoms look like bone-ivory
carved.

my city has no
stars only constellations
of burning windows.

Muscles
pulse beneath strained
hip flesh like the rumbling
of an oncoming train. You pass
me by.

academy, 3AM

Notes from a Windowsill

Bridge
Sitting alone in the back seat, I realized I had never been the only kid in the car during the drive up to Cape Cod; it seemed considerably longer this way. I thought about retrieving the video camera from my suitcase, but didn't see the point of filming miles of highway without anyone commentating in the background. Instead I pulled a brush out of the front pocket of my backpack and began to drag it through my hair, starting from the top of my head and sliding all the way down to my split ends.

The route had stayed the same, but the roads had become boring, endless stretches of tar, lined so thickly with trees that the once visible scrawny shacks were now hidden, as though nature was ashamed of them. My father exaggerated his habit of playing tug-o'-war against himself, jerking the wheel back and forth as though he couldn't decide which direction to go in. I concentrated hard on the road, watching it through the windshield to make sure our tires stayed within the white lines, holding my breath every time the cars in front of us screeched to a halt while we were still speeding towards them.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. That summer the road had been covered in a patchwork quilt of cars, rays of sunlight hitting their metallic hoods as they streamed down the highway and bouncing back with a painful brightness. She had just turned fifteen, while I had yet to reach my fourteenth birthday. When we reached Provincetown, my father turned off the radio and my mother began straining her eyes to read the street names, none of which seemed to match the address she had scrawled on a scrap of paper in her loose script. After forty minutes of searching, my father began to curse her, calling her delusional because the “fucking house” simply did not exist.

We finally found the house on a narrow, one-way street ten blocks from the center of town. Sluggishly, we unloaded our bodies from the car, leaving all of our luggage in the back because we were too tired from the six hour drive to lift anything but our own heads. The house had two bedrooms. My mother and father shared one; she and I shared the other. Our room resembled a barn loft that had been given a wooden floor and a fresh coat of paint, and the only way to reach it was to climb up an oversized bunk bed ladder. The ceiling over the bed sloped so far down that the price you’d pay for sitting up too quickly was a large, red welt in the center of your forehead.

We would have been content to spend our days inside that summer (we had brought along the video camera and were busy making a “documentary” of the house), but we were drawn out by the beautiful weather and my mother’s “this is Cape Cod, you don’t spend your time here like you do at home” lectures. So instead of gluing our faces to the TV, we spent our days stretched out on the sand of Herring Cove Beach.

Overflowing with bodies, tents, and umbrellas, the beach basked in its popularity, leaving the frosty ocean lonely. I remember watching the waves throw themselves onto the sand, as if trying with all their might to reach us and soak our towels. Fortunately for us, the waves were tied to the ocean and could only go so far before gravity would yank them back again. I had been happy that summer, sprawled out on the sand next to her, watching her zoom in on the “hot” lifeguards down the beach.

This summer wouldn’t be the same. There would be no cursing, no long searches for a non-existent house, no barn loft bedroom, and no filming on the beach. The days would be rough and windy, bitterly cold. My mother would blame the weather on Hurricane Katrina, but I would know the truth. I was alone on the same beach where we had once sat together.
An Invocation of the void--
A myth the ages have destroyed
Is the existence of a Muse.
You may believe it, if you choose.

It matters not. I saw the hearse
of God and earth as candidates
For center of the universe
Vanish past the graveyard gates.

The muscle moving heaven's limbs
Each comet's wag, each star that dims;
What sets a solar system's place
are vacuums black and deep in space.

Now close your eyes, and please describe
your view of inner space. Profound!
The blinking of a stellar tribe,
A chaos cosmos swirling round

Some unknown center. This is where
A thing called 'thought' lies in its lair,
a mindless mess. What brings the skein
Of poems forth from such a brain?

I said before, I saw the hearse.
Though I may think that Muse and soul
exist, who cares, when every verse
still circles round a great white hole?

The vacuum of the empty page,
which begs in godblind lust and rage
that blankness be consumed with black,
seduced my pen to this attack.
I love the American Way.
You know, I went to the supermarket today,
and in the corn-syrup aisle, I noticed there lay
a kiss on the lips all cellophane wrapped,
perfect and sweet if the plastic’s peeled back.
A man with a price gun placed me gently on a rack
and shot the caged kiss with a 2.99
caliber price tag, and it presently bled,
staining the kiss a wet sticky red.

I creeped behind the meat counter.
I looked through the greasy glass windows in the white double doors.
And I saw the butchers slicing up lovers.
Surgically transubstantiated, the meat was of whores,
though the air smelled of love, flying off to heaven.

Their gift to us, I thought of the smell.
Despite mutilation, love still wishes well.

So on my way home I shoplifted a kiss.
I washed off the blood, and ate it with ketchup.
He opened the door
snakes wrapped closely around his neck,
not tame little earthworms,
not metaphors, fictions,
but breathing, staring
with slit-cornered eyes,
golden bullet glares

He cracked his little jokes
that stunk of past telling
thinking himself clever
for taming the little beasts
(subjugating himself
to inevitable death, I thought)

what a terrifying,
breathtaking beauty
of gleaming scales and hard ribs
he bared his gorgeous fangs at me
in greeting, whispering
leave this place
This is the House of Snakes
oh no please
go i'm sick
of my irises being old.
of my tires
collecting dust, of
the clinging hint of decay
and must.

the background
to this scene is an old woman –
who is me.
the foreground to this scene is
a photocopier.

click, screeeen. click, screeeen.
laminating lines that
insist

will this suffice? half of
‘the want bone’ is missing.
the class won’t mind. half of
my mind is loping
like an orangutan or
an urchin gone blind,
scrounging about the
grime-grains of the sea.

the foreground is you.
the background is me.
One Year Later

In order to please, I ignore you.
we were gone, together,
you wore pink so I wouldn't be the only one.
I don't remind you of this
In order to avoid you, I take the other set of stairs.
we lay under the table
two flights above the party—you tied a ribbon around my wrist.
I don't remind you of this
In order to prevent eye contact, I look down.
before we met,
you watched me as I mixed cinnamon with my apple sauce.
I don't remind you of this
In order to be silent, I don't approach you.
you begged me
to read my poetry,
sitting cross-legged like a child.
I don't remind you of this
In order to forget you, I try to think of other things.
My body, your body.
You told me then
that the world belonged to the young,
the untouched children of the sunny spot,
and that you’d show me where to find them.
(And of course, I already knew.)
But you were sweat-skinned
and oil-haired, with a smile that could melt
my face
off.
I was a lens-charred fire ant.
So when I lay on the cool, clammy sand
bed and let my skin
sizzle & steam
until heat took the shape of a
thick
pallid
curtain,
I held my eyes open wider and wider until they met the sun.
You told me I had whore’s hair.
Oh
but that you would take care of it.
(But I already knew that.)
You told me Earth itself
will spread its tongues at my feet
and I will learn
to dance to its syllables.
(I already knew that.)

You told me of the three-fold iris I have yet to bear,
one that will burn
your knowledge onto mine and
churn my speech to ancient s l u r s
(Already knew that.)
You told me stories of the damned, of those who
dared to bask in your abrasive light.
I am not one of them;
though now it is
a familial matter.
(Knew that.)
You told me of a pair
of vigilant blue eyes pinned to the face of a child,
wild like color
and wrapped in a four-letter word: ours. And
(That)
I did not know.
What You Should Be Thinking

The medium warned us to be afraid of artifice in late July, while the lawn mowers whirred soft ohms in the sticky grass with a sound like lowing. Afterwards, we wandered into the food court and sat for an hour or so in the pale plastic-backed chairs, held hands over the table while staring into space, into the stores behind our shoulders.

Your fingers dissolved into my palms like cotton candy, but mine were the ones that squeezed yours, and slid over that hallowed ground in the hollows between your knuckles. Our knees bumped as we stood and walked to the bus stop.
When a man lights a cigarette in Kuala Lumpur.

It rains heroin in Norfolk.