

THE TIME IT TAKES TO DROWN

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RACHEL E. KRUMENACKER



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*We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is
memory.*

—Louise Gluck, “Nostos”

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CATALOG OF THINGS LOST

*From the next room I hear my father's voice...
a sound so sad I think he must be
reliving a catalog of things lost...
Natasha Trethewey, "Fouled"*

Before we had to unlearn hugs, before
hands draped across our bodies sent us
shuddering, flinching from touch,
we hushed our voices to say *fuck*
like we whispered bedtime prayers.
Our legs restless unfelt unclean. Before,

we wore lace at our throats and ankles,
bobby socks stained white with Jesus' blood,
preachers filled the extremes of FM radio,
warning of violence from someone who

lived in our hearts. Our girlhood shirtless
unshaven un-skinbroken. Before the Bible Belt

meant leather limp in the closets where we hid,
we feared hell more than we loved god.

Our fathers not in heaven, but on earth,
issuing their commandments against us, his hard-
hearted

Pharaohs. Our bodies created to be temples
yet no worshippers let in.

FOURTH OF JULY

You smell of fireworks' sulfur, flushed with
magnolia spirit,

heavy-lidded and heart-hungover from the
unbearable

intimacy of porches. You offer your shoulder for
my head

as the street lamps slur, awed I would trust you
with my worst possession. Crossettes silhouette
an incline aflame. You dig your fingers into
balsa-wood bones soaked in gin,
crack wide my ribs like oyster lips.

You loose the contents of your quiver
into kidneys, your gaze a clinical, exacting fire
that turns my goosebumps to stain-glass windows.
You spear me cervix to cortex.

We weep together, but you first.

HOMETOWN HEADLINE

“Amish Woman Swept Away in Flash Flood”
reaches national news. Everyone assumes Gaea
spares her righteous, rightful caretakers
from these fates, but Earth adores adopting
familiar, returning unto her those she claimed her own.

_____ deserved a better obituary I cannot write.
Her family asks no public mourning,
no photos of the dead posted online,
Personal blogs preserving her likeness.
No digital record of her life remains but this.

Growing up rural means nothing if you never
leave mom’s basement. Ashes to ashes,

dust to mud; her body reunites with crickbed,
but not where anyone can find it. Her mother
runs a bath while her sons scour churning banks,
dressed in Sunday's best fishing waders, hunting
vests.

Lavender tubwater laps against the shoals
of her ribcage; tinted water transforming bloated
bellies
Into murky tide pools. Recalls the day they first
met—
liquor amnii pouring down shared thighs, muscles
seized in expectation, exaltation, contraction—!

With measured breaths, she finds comfort
remembering,
how even in the womb, her daughter swam.

FEVER, 2020

I miss hairy legs in sundrunk air, forget
the purpose of doing, glimpse
purpling mountains hazy with dusk
and distance. I miss remembering
the point of being sober, the slow crawl
from a wound I stitched inside myself.
Wine warms the back of my neck the way
whispers never could. Slowly I succumb
to lidded eyes, sipping overflowing cups
easily as water. Gulping, guzzling boozy marrow
streaming from the pierced slit in my side.

P{S}ALM READING

Farmhands begat coal miners begat steel workers
begat me; calloused lilywhite, wringing hands,
upturnt towards sunlight, crying out their blood
will not to suffer forever; their sweatlabour not
spent

in vain. Homemakers' bleachbone, aching fingers
trace vellum-etched letters after sunset, the
insomniac
candle illuminating their grandchild's manuscripts.
Agony sounds out meanings ascribed to arbitrary

Symbols, misunderstandings pressed into lines
with every postmodern translation. My ancestors
study, against all skill and energy, after heaving
boulders

twelve-hour days, six on, one off; now hunched

o'er kitchen tables in agony and strength. Desperate

to regain what they sacrificed to till the land,

make life better for yet unborn descendants.

The unknown that comes after they leave.

ON MOVING HOUSE (AGAIN)

They teach you of loss, but not how to leave
behind walls that housed your most-loathed,
unlovely parts for years. Uncomfortable daily
ennui

prompted by mom's third text of the day:

your childhood disassembled; bedroom
packed safely into basement boxes
should you ever need to visit home again.

Blessed be those that receive a second chance

at family. The soft, sucking stick
of bare feet against dirty linoleum
haunts dreams where I can't run
fast enough, safely lock my door.

I never meant someone else's small town
to be my final resting place. No house
this side of waking able to confine us two
in harmony within its walls any longer.

THE TIME IT TAKES TO DROWN

A strong drink no longer makes a dent
in my sobriety. Me, liquor and god
can't all fit in the same clay jar; an ouroboros
of ego, poison roiling in my stomach's pit.

You learn a helplessness eagerly awaiting
your own apocalypse. Why love the world now,
when one day eternal oblivion will perfect it?

Not so much losing memories as not making any
more.

Supplication: the act of begging mercy at your
aggressor's knees.

Mine bruise from praying to glass-eyed, doll-dead
reflections.

Horse -bridled and -blinded, my own hand's mercy

leads me from distillery waters begging me to
drink.

YOUNG LOVE

My ring-necked pheasant,
 your bones—how aware of mine!—
formed the caryatid
 where I built my shrine.

ON GRIEF

Telling more people doesn't dilute pain nor truth,
only mystifies it. How *do* I feel. How do you want
me to feel,

and why are you never satisfied with my answer?

The busyness of a peaceful death adjusts to the
living's schedule.

The ongoing finality of living. What I'd give for
one restful day

of oblivion. We leave instructions, but tire of
holding space

for those who have left. Maybe after I've gone
you'll commit

to loving me like I asked.

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

Young and politely aimless, yet ascetic in the
saintly way—

We white-knuckled our hands into knots, liltng
gay liturgies on

the sweet, suckling air of pondscum summers,
floating downriver

on inner tubes blown full of the only breaths we
shared in daylight.

At dusk, after fireflies worm their way between our
hooked jaws,

our secret selves drown in the drought-receding
shallows

as you pull your hand from mine. Eyes downcast to
sidewalk cracks,

you hustle, wet flipflops slapping a block ahead so
no one could tell

you were with me, knew I'd follow you to earth's
end regardless,

Never able to understand the world from your point
of view.

Doomed eternally to peer parallel, across tandem
hemispheres,

from opposite sides of the same tarnished coin.

RIP VAN GOGH, YOU WOULD'VE LOVED VAPE PENS

Eating yellow paint proved to be urban legend,
old Facebook wives' tales; though to be sure,
the man needed prescriptions. Science.

What I think life means: diligence, apologizing.

When taught how to engage with the world,
I became weeping, guarded; unaware who I am
and always was, deserved love.

I do not care whether you take this as confessional
or

comic relief; my friends text wherever they arrive
safely.

During panic attacks, I repeat their names

until sobbing recedes to natural breath,

We pet our cats, mutually, unspeaking,

Engrossed in our respective, interwoven lives.

Hoping the silence never ends.

COLLEGE POETRY CLUB, EN MEMORIUM

I found the drafts we wrote cuddled on tattered
couches,

our self-worth placed in odd company and
curb-found treasures, rollback deals.

Sardonic, hot takes that didn't age well,

Bukowski lovers as we all were back then—

Unflattering, purple prose vignettes of those

Unkindly depicted as Unlike us:

Walmart shoppers of ill repute, poor

in spirit, the morally absent. Regular people.

Mediocrity a fate we hoped to avoid,

but not knowing what could unravel our futures

Based on individual genetic codes. No one knew

how badly the others wanted to die yet.

On our first and last date, flustered by talk,
you stopped the car dead at a green light.
I pointed, you laughed, we drove on.
Sometimes I see you cross the road in town;
my fondest, holiest of ghosts I rejoice to see.

AUTOCOMPLETE (TEXTS UNSENT)

I'm fine. I'm fine. Please stop calling me. Give my love to grandma. Remember when I begged for your attention? Sometimes I confuse your car's squeaking brakes for sparrow calls. There's a nest outside my window now, where mockingbirds spar jays for dominion over this small corner of our household, drawing blood over who it's meant to serve. This reminds me of you. Birds remind me of me. I heard; I didn't know them well. I'm sorry.

GAY AGENDA

Paradox: bourbonfat business owners

wish I didn't exist, yet profit off my pride
regardless;

Abomination too cool a name for the girl

sucking down ramen in a rented room,

drinking away what brain cells god knit for her,

not fearing any celestial wrath,

but mother's omnipresent one.

The matron admits, knees pressed to her
youngest's,

I don't think the gays are bad, yet in the same
breath,

How can you support them? Were they weaker
women,

They could confess—

godforsaken bitch

fresh on the lips of roommates cursing me
in diaries I read behind their backs. As my mother
read mine. The only way we knew to ask
if other's emotions got the better of them, too.

I know you are, but what am I?

spat at sleeping forms in unwashed sheets,
depression still a private, all-encompassing fear;
the devil I knew all along, ever-threatening
to drag me screaming, against best intentions,
to a hell I wanted to deserve.

My father texts daily to ask who I'm with,
what I'm doing. I've never lied successfully.
I can't respond: taking meds, then a shower. '
Trying not to write my story's end tonight.

WE YELLED AT WOLVES

risking to howl and be heard

knowing they chased our throats either way

AUTOCOMPLETE

(written with the iOS QuickType feature)

and I don't know what I want to do with my life but
I don't want to do

anything with my life but I don't want to do
anything

and I was told that I was a good person, and
I thought it was a good idea

to be a good person, and I was a good person
five years later he was a good friend of course he
was

I can see the way I want you back
to the person you are, the person
you are and you are the best person

I'm not sure if I can get it to work

but he is my favorite person

and now all I want is to be a good person

and I will be happy to be with you, and
I don't have to be good to be with you,
but I don't want to be good
he's just got a little more than a lot to do with my
life

lol I don't know what I want to be
but I'm still here for you

CHATTANOOGA NATIONAL CEMETERY

And I wrote how I envisioned the old Romantics
did,

in my single family home, late-due on rent again.

Desk facing autumn window at dusk,

last season cider mimicking mama's foot

against some floor bassinet. The tart rock of sleep,
cradling another sweaty "last" whiskey in leaded
hands.

Old-fashioned glass falling when my wrist slips,
denting cured, post-war floorboards.

Rows of polished military graves wink between
dining-car embouchures. Uniform, fabric-
embellished teeth

beckoning from veteran ancestors who laid down
lives

for promises I could never keep.

Exaggerated, whip-sharp shadows crack downhill
the brown lawns; lightning striking earth from
naked, sleeping boughs. Not even the best
groundskeeper keeps round-the-clock watch
against the drought of the American South,

longing to see it be made great again.

Our fathers, and their fathers before them
planted orchards in calculated, metric
expectation, when rainfall could still be

predicted. When their poet-sons would finally
hitch rides home, tired of time spent away.

My own former warrior jokes, whenever we
pass his fellow fallen, “Rachel, how many

people you think live down in that graveyard?”
No matter the size, publicity of park or plot, I
dutifully respond, grand-daughterhood
fulfilled, “None, Papa. They’re all dead.”

AUTOBIOGRAPHY (PHARMAKON)

I.

REMEDY

Children crowd around an old tube tv,
(the cancer-causing kind,
last Gen's leadpaint chewtoys,
asbestos leaking open-mouthed
from unfurnished basement
ceilings). The program's host,
a self-professed born-again
pre-schooler, recites her script:
humanity's last, only defense
before the devil takes over:
sign over your heart's lease
unto Jesus. I, a full year senior,
grow jealous someone younger

learned life's elusive meaning.

Thirty voices chant sinners' prayers.

Most barely understand addition,

how shoes work. Herded into

pens of plastic chairs, divided

M&M's, cheese crackers around squat,

lamine formica tables.

Our portion of the two fish,

five loaves. I search for my parents

amongst the throng pressed bodily

against glass nursery doors,

the mob rescuing their tiresome,

unsettling darlings from

Kid's Sermon shepherds.

Left alone that night

in a bed too big for me,
I ponder hell for the first time.
If I should die before I wake.

II. POISON

Midwinter sleepaway camp, where exhausted
white parents
pay nine hundred Bucks to ship highschoolers
to twelve cabins nestled against ski slopes, named
after Israel's colonizing sons, or Judas' postmortem
friends.

Our lives entrusted to whoever volunteered
to drive the rented bus. At altar call,
one of the hot, older boys known for teasing girls
who cut short their hair,

“what can I grab onto, then?,”

moved to tears, tracked the metal aisle
of folding chairs, Moses parting Red Seas,

And we all followed, hoping he would lead
our youth group to deliverance
from our perceived oppressors.
Those who victimized us.

A weight lifts off my sore shoulders, ascending
heavenward, hoping vulnerability would
no longer cost my soul.

III. SCAPEGOAT

Growing up gay in the church: years of our brains
marinating

In theology like Philadelphia rum-soaked hams.
Grandma's

Easter dinner calls for a pound of potatoes per
person;

arbitrary etiquette, passed around like common
sense.

“Writing what I know” narrows its focus to my
mirror.

Maybe my biggest sin was loneliness so vast
not even an omnipotent god had enough love to
give.

The irony of fire and brimstone raining, reigning

above pulpits. Televangelists bellow tongue-
holstered

sermons with no bearing on reality, foundationless
as

temples they built upon sand. Coastlines rise.

The wine and loneliness changed our communion,

but only how rivers resculpt canyons: an
evolutionary myth,

that Creation possesses ability to change. A draft
re-edited.

That's what all gods and artists want, right,

to create with impunity? Michaelangelo
painstakingly frees

the voiceless, godsent hunk from marbled nudity,

with the same diligence it takes to tread water,

waiting for my mother to call Sunday afternoons.

The only forgiveness I seek comes from her.
When I speak to those outside my religion,
I hear I narrowly escaped a cult.
Help me understand where we went wrong.

ORACLE

You say the ocean's rising/like I give a shit/You say the whole world's ending

/honey, it already did

Bo Burnham, "All Eyes on Me"

And I became Apollo's Cassandra: oracle
of doubt, self-appointed to read between
biblical lines. Loudest missionary of absolute,
unquestionable truth. A lot of bottled rage

needed to break over my head before

I stopped believing I could walk on water.

I rattle my prison bars in Delphi's sinking temple;

Those in power refuse to see the signs of the gods.

My life under no microscope holds water, yet

I feel scraped across specimen glass; buttered bread

we all ration 'til payday. The bleeding call for
alms,

beg Samaritans' salvation while tax collectors

support the latest war from megachurches' offering
plates.

We didn't expect to die—instead, promised fiery,
heavenward chariots as a martyr's reward for a
pure life

unlived. I remain delusional: who would name me
prophet

of the damned, thousands of black sheep happily
abandoned

for a predestined flock. If I censor my words so
you'll love me,

do we even know each other? I already spent one
lifetime

believing I got born evil, broken, when all I wanted

was mama to rip religion's illegal mattress tag off my life.

Do not question if or why you hate me, only who taught you how. Would you not also write epistles, if Consciousness' stream demanded eternal torment of your loved ones? Why can't my god be proud of what I do?

MOURNING DOVE

Ah, the old atonement—!

That modern banshee scuttles
from the forest floor, startling
the feathery bulk of desiccated leaves
as cicadas preach summer's resurrection.

She mutters her cool, cool, to the damp deciduous
morning,
nostalgia a word she implicitly understands,
her voice echoing the wet grave
of the creek. Why she traded invisibility granted by
underbrush

—a mystery the hyacinth with its closed
bells finds impossible to solve—

so that a stranger on a screened-in porch may hear
her and dream

of running,

home, barefoot in crabgrass and violets.

mother never watching from the screened-in porch,

but upstairs.

BENEDICTION & CREDITS

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