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Call Her Name

Tonight the owl in the pine cries out and hears
only its own cry in the air, curved like the earth
and the oncoming dark. And light
bequeaths to the night its many countries
on both sides of my window: in one, a lamp
and a book; in another, the late-blooming rose,
an owl, a bitten moon.

In those days
the child climbed the sycamore into the dizzying air
where no one thought to find her. Standing in the sky
she could see the man leave by the front door and walk
down the street to his car, could hear her mother
close the door behind him.
And the child told no one what she knew,
her tongue a broken clapper inside a bell.

What does a river know that an ocean does not?
Something about time's secret life overfilling its banks.
And the owl hidden in the trees
is God calling God,
while darkness spills itself over the flowers.

In her mind the child believed at any moment
her father might turn the corner of her street.
Knowing neither his name nor his face,
she wondered if he would come walking or by car.

Sometimes on a dirt road that measures one horizon to another,
I've seen a silent animal emerge from the wheat
just after the sun's death,
the eyes alone on the road and staring.

Alone with time,
the child waited in the sycamore, heat ironing her skin
until the windows lit the yard, until her mother
called and called her name,
and hearing no sound, turned back inside.
Then the child climbed down.

There was snow that year we buried the mare;
barbed wire hobbled the fence posts, the earth
turning around its new wound, snow
that lit the night, the pines
laying their thin shadows down. I slept and woke
as the sorrel whinnied on and on, the moon
searching the sea for what had drowned.

Inside the house was a smashed cup and her mother
kneeling on the kitchen floor. And the girl knew
there were laws of arrival and departure.
From her bed she considered climbing the night's branches
and saw herself in them, looking down
from the glittering leaves.

When I returned to the place in Spring, the prayers
I had strung across the brook were gone.

And tonight the owl
crying out and flying, the rose high on the trellis
opening her white face.

And then they left that house
and drove to a place of trees without number.
The girl chose the largest oak,
which wore on its branches a dress of lace.
First she nailed boards up the trunk and understood
she must be ever vigilant
with her father not knowing where to find her.

And the oak just outside her window.
She wondered if the branch that nearly touched her
would hold her weight. And how her mother
wanted the tree felled.

The moon grown round, perched in the night,
its ears hidden under down.

The Dead Do not Dream of Me

My dead have grown numerous
as shore birds,
as the sparks from dry boards
when the old wheat bin
burned after rain.

One held lilacs to her face. One
flew from a bridge,
her wet skirt wrapping her legs.
Another lit cigarettes in the dark.
On the street, you could hear
The Pearl Fishers

booming from the house.
I go into the lingering daylight,
the moon sliding down,
but hear no music from the dead.

*I flew back through the open door
from which I came, all bitten
wing and wind, and vanished
through the hole of my mouth. Child,
I am finished with this earth.*

In the window it is winter.
 Even the dog now gone.
 Branches hold nothing but lichen and sky
 and remnants of the rain.
 Crows mark the fog.
 I cannot go into death
 in search of them.

*Even your name is not your name.
Even our death is not our death.
We are a house inside a house;
you are the hours not yet born.*

— — —

Mother was prettiest after the war.
She rode seated backward on a train.
The light on the river, the wheat
still green.
She saw nothing of what was to come.
On her lap, two pears, one plum.

I wonder now if I imagined that year —
snow on the mimosa,
or the sandstorm
rolling over us, blotting out the sun.
Someone calling and calling my name.
And now I'm the only one
who's lived to tell it.
I've heard the stones speak, and flocks of geese
when they rise from the pond.
I have dreamed a road composed of light.
But the dead do not dream of me.

*I dream still of opening myself, ravished,
in shadowed rooms
and have swept up all their names
and filled my pockets with their dust.
I keep my secrets, child, crumpled in my fists
so that you never know
from whom you were made.*

— — —

And what name do I answer to?
Somewhere a box of letters.
In June, the sun refuses to go down,
the horses in high grass swishing their tails.
The dead snagged on the world,
their lives folded up, a piece of cloth, a leaf.
The dead do not write to me.

*Gray limbs against the sky, we scratch
out our names, as though we never were.*

— — —

*We have this treasure in earthen vessels,
writes Paul, death works in us.*
I carry the taste of blood on my lip,
and the moon, light from my candle
sending back messages in code.
Sometimes the trees wave wildly to the stars,
but the dead do not pass through the veil to me.

*What remnant we are we have placed
in you — wet stone, a lump of ice, ring
of soot. It was I who broke the vase,
and I who tore the cloth*

trembling on the line.
*We are the dead; we are finished
with this earth.*

— — —

Last night, the owls. Crying, not
as usual across the distant dark,
but soft, having found each other at last.
I stand to grieve or to praise,
 open a book
and read aloud by lamplight
words of invocation, of intercession.
I have searched through absence,
broken narrative,
 photographs.
Let the dead come to me.

*Let grief be enough. Leave us
in the dark, beneath the coal-smoked
earth. Begin again
 to name each thing:
say water, say breath.
 Say empty. Say heart.*

Pneuma

In the morning I could find no sign of her
imprinted near the water.

As I slept in a house beside a river,
a cougar came.
And beneath my window, screamed.

Some part of her walked through me
then continued down the hall
toward my children
asleep in their cribs.
Sinew, shoulders, spine, she parted the night.

And claimed us. And required of us
suffering, and bereavement, and joy.
And sentenced us to live
in immensity's open mouth.

It is the oldest story.
Something searches for us,
and when it finds our lives,
returns over and over.

I never know when she will arrive
or take her leave.
But like the echo of a prior bell,
she circles inside me,
cold, delicate,
her four paws clotted with darkness.