

2014

Coming to Terms

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COMING TO TERMS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

KATHLEEN CERVENY

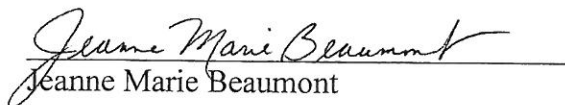
2014

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

July, 2014

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Kathleen Cerveny
Entitled *Coming to Terms*

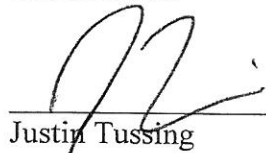
Be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.


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Abstract

Coming to Terms, by Kathleen Cervený, is a collection of poems exploring loss: of a long-term romantic relationship, of parents, and of youth. Taken together, the poems describe a journey through a range of emotions and the missteps and triumphs along the way. Dreams figure importantly in the collection. Dream-culled imagery is used to explore and express what is often hidden, suppressed, or actively denied in the face of loss. Sound and rhythm are consistent lyric elements throughout as are the use of assonance, alliteration, slant and internal rhyme. There is attention paid, but not slavish adherence to, metrical patterns. Most poems are written in free verse, but the collection includes a sonnet, two villanelles, and a pantoum. There is humor here, giving some relief to the overall somber nature of the work, and several poems inspired by the work of others. In all, the collection chronicles the efforts of a woman in her later years, struggling through both unanticipated and routine life changes and making her way to a place of new beginning.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my three mentors, who guided me through the challenging and rewarding journey of the past two years; Cait Johnson, Alexandra Oliver, and Jeanne Marie Beaumont. Each one applied the right measures of pressure, support, and objective belief in my ability to succeed. They took the very raw material I brought to them and gave me the tools to successively shape it into something better than it was.

I also want to thank my writing group, Take Nine, each member of which urged, supported, and advised me at various critical moments throughout the past two years. Their friendship and warm embrace of my work from the start have been the rain and sunlight that first opened the seed.

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Preface

That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.

Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

I'm not sure about being dissolved. For me, the two years of study and effort that produced the work in this manuscript feel more like a roller coaster ride: fear and thrills, the slow climb up, the terrifying descent into not knowing, and the headlong rush to the finish. But, yes, happiness and a deep, revelatory immersion in the work that at times did feel like being dissolved into the great traditions of craft and creativity.

Poetry is my second creative discipline. I graduated more than four decades ago with a degree in the Visual Arts and worked professionally as a ceramic artist for many years. I have also been an art teacher, an advocate for the arts, a volunteer nonprofit arts leader, a fundraiser, a public radio producer, and for the past 24 years, a grantmaker. As I looked forward to the day I would retire from the intense level of work that characterizes the lives of most Baby Boomers, I wanted to be able to “dissolve” myself back into a creative life once I left the full-time workforce.

Before coming to Stonecoast, I had been writing poetry for a number of years, had published a few poems in journals, but had not actively pursued publication. I had no formal training in creative writing, but had taken some on-line and summer workshops in Cleveland and at the Iowa Writers Workshop. A longstanding group of eight local poets had invited me to workshop with them, and we often read together as a group under the name Take Nine. But in spite of these experiences, and although I had loved poetry since childhood, without any formal training in the discipline I did not feel

I had what I needed to honestly declare myself a poet. So as I began to plan for the end of my professional career as a nonprofit executive, the time seemed right to dive back into the arts and try to dissolve myself in the formal study of poetry.

It's Not Personal

My bedrock grounding in poetry came from my early and limited reading experiences—mostly in high school and primarily the classical English and American poetry giants of the 19th and early 20th century. From this I understood poetry's role to be the succinct translation of important ideas, universal emotions, and aspects of the human condition through elevated language, complex metaphors, and in structured forms. This suggested to me that a level of intellectual remove was necessary; the poet is taken out of an immediate experience and finds the right external "story" through which to craft a more universal sharing of the experience. The elements of rhyme, meter, and form further distanced the poem from the raw experience of the poet. Frost uses the metaphor of a traveler taking a road "less traveled by" to express the challenge of choosing a hard life path and the resistance to temptations that are required to travel it. Even though the pronoun 'I' is employed, he doesn't reference directly his personal struggles.

The one exception to this sense of intellectual remove for me was Emily Dickinson, whose writing was so original and whose life was so outside the ordinary that the personal element in her poetry, crafted into each small gem of a poem, seemed necessary to the economy of her unique style. But even there, the language was elite and the form ecstatic, and therefore elevated above the common experience. I also, in a

way, dismissed Dickinson. She was too unique, if that can be said, and a woman, and therefore outside of what I then believed could be considered a model for serious poetry. I must hasten to add that this view came from ignorance, inexperience, and my coming up under the cultural influence and views of women in the 1950s. My view has since changed decidedly in her favor.

When eventually I began to read more contemporary poets, with no guidance—just picking things off the shelf—I was uncomfortable with some of the raw, emotional, and what seemed highly personal sharing that I often found. I avoided the confessional poets and gravitated towards those who wrote about nature and even, sometimes, politics. Mary Oliver became a favorite, and most of my writing before coming to Stonecoast was nature poetry. My visual art training had honed my observational skills, and my love of elevated language combined with those to create poems that were carefully written, keenly observed arms-length snapshots of the external world. Nothing personal.

I applied and was accepted to several low-residency programs. Since the classic forms and the poets of the nineteenth century were my poetry touchstones, and it seemed that iambic pentameter flowed from my pen with no urging whatsoever, I thought Stonecoast, with its first semester emphasis on meter, would be the right and safe place to begin this new journey.

In the year before deciding to go back to school, however, my internal world fractured when my partner of 23 years abruptly left. I was faced with starting over in ways I had never anticipated, and with a burden of “personal stuff” that I knew would insinuate itself into the work ahead. I almost decided not to come. I did not want to

become one of those sad, confessional women poets I had been so assiduously avoiding, and this was what I feared would happen. But as an experienced artist I also knew that poetry could be a way through, and hopefully, beyond.

What follows in the poems collected here is in large measure an accounting of the range of emotional responses to a lost romantic relationship. In content and style it is very different from what I brought to Stonecoast, but I believe it represents a journey of encounter and growth that speaks with a more honest, relevant, and hopefully more skilled voice. The title of this thesis and its opening poem, *Coming to Terms*, in a small way is emblematic of the experience of my emotional and academic journey over the past two years.

Breaking Open

At the beginning of my Stonecoast journey my comfort level was quite high. The tasks of the first workshop on meter were familiar from my excellent high school English classes and the “old boy” poets I loved to read. I had fun with the preparation material for the workshop, and as it turned out, I was the only student in my group of first semester poets that aced the work. A deceptively reassuring start.

But then Cait Johnson was assigned as my mentor. I like to say that Cait opened me up that first semester, or tried hard to. She pushed me in directions I had not only never thought to approach, but which also scared me. My early sense of comfort quickly disappeared. When she learned I had trained as a visual artist, my semester project requirement became a handmade art book of poems. While I reveled in having an art project to tackle, the twelve poems that eventually filled it came from very difficult

dives into scary emotional territory and non-poetic forms of writing. Although it doesn't appear in this manuscript, what I learned from Cait's assignment to write a play—a parody of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milkwood* set in a Catholic girl's school—opened the worlds of dialogue and persona for me. I could not have written "Ghost Ranch" or "Aria" without this experience.

Regarding "Aria," Cait's insistent focus on writing about sex and sensual, deeply emotional experiences pushed me to explore and express the loss and anger I had been harboring for my now single state and to find release through my poems, often through humor. With a sense of "laughter through the tears," "The centipedes in my shower" and "Unaccustomed as I was to public orgasms" are direct outcomes of this work with Cait for which I am deeply grateful.

She exposed me to so many poets and writers during that first semester that I would never have happened upon on my own. The wholly new voice I encountered on the opening page of Edna O'Brien's novel *A Pagan Place* so excited me that I put the book down, went for a short furious walk, and returned to write a memoir piece in "child's voice." The experience stunned me with the buried memories of my grandmothers that surfaced in that piece.

More difficult for me at the time was Cait's urging to work with dream images, although this proved a rich source for material in later semesters. The surreal and mystical content and the non-linear structure of Carole Maso's *Mother and Child*, which she suggested I read, actually put me off. However, encountering it again in a third semester workshop, having had some experience with surrealist poetry during a workshop in my second semester and later, after starting to work with Jeanne Marie

Beaumont and her urgings to “go deep” and “divagate,” I found real resonance for me in Maso’s work. More about divagation later.

Finally, the opening poem of this manuscript, and my thesis theme, “Coming to Terms” was directly inspired by the work of Sandra Cisneros, the poet who became a touchstone for me that first semester. It is a loose imitation of her poem, “I Am So Depressed I Feel Like Jumping in the River Behind My House but Won’t Because I’m Thirty and Not Eighteen.” Well, I was sixty-five and working with Cait gave me other options to jumping in the river—or Lake Erie.

Taming the Sound and Fury: Working with Alexandra Oliver

During my second semester I was fortunate to work with Alexandra Oliver, who helped me harness the raw material of emotion that Cait had brought to the surface. Getting my focus back to the architecture of the poem, Alexandra helped me reconnect with the tools of rhythm, meter, and rhyme that were natural for me—but now I could begin to use them with a growing lyric maturity. Analyzing and imitating work by poets as diverse as James Merrill, Louise Bogan, Theodore Roethke, and Carolyn Kizer expanded my range of listening for the persuasive rhythm that can move the reader through a free verse poem and hearing with a keener ear how the clap of hard consonants and the subtle hush of soft vowels work in poems. With Alexandra I was also able to begin using some of the more abstract dream imagery I had begun to capture from Cait’s earlier urging to record my dreams. “Falling Asleep at the Shoreline of the Pond” and “Fever Dream: Drone Strike Health Care” are poems initiated and shaped with Alexandra’s guidance.

As with Sandra Cisneros in the first semester, Alexandra's introduction to me of the work of Julia Alvarez became very important. The focus on family in her book *Homecoming* has generated a desire to write about my own family relationships, and Alvarez's focus on form throughout this book has shown me how the use of traditional and formal approaches can be turned to very modern uses. While I continue to face challenges in writing about my family, I have made a start with several poems about family members included here. The idea of writing a crown of sonnets about these relationships was prompted by Alexandra and it remains a goal that I hope to pursue post-Stonecoast. Although not in any formal structure, "Ancillary" was begun with Alexandra's support and after several revisions it is the first poem about my mother I consider to have achieved a measure of success.

Also, during this second semester, I was honored to be named poet laureate of my city, Cleveland Heights. This honor provided me with the inspiration for my upcoming third semester project, a community-focused research effort: *A Survey of the Roles and Experiences of Poets Laureate in the United States*. I began to shape the prospectus for this project during the latter part of the second semester.

Digression, Divagation, Going Deep

After my third semester workshop on persona poems with Jeanne Marie Beaumont and Cait Johnson, I knew I wanted to work closely with Jeanne Marie. I was supremely fortunate to have her assigned as my mentor for both the third and fourth semesters. Since so much of the third semester was taken up with a focus on my

research project, leaving less time for working on poems, it was a gift to have her guidance through the thesis semester as well.

How to begin? She scared me a little—or rather the prospect of engaging with the rigor and depth she brought to the work at this point in my academic journey scared me. I knew that as I moved into my final chapters at Stonecoast, the bar was now raised very high. Cait had scared me into looking deep. Now Jeanne Marie was about to scare me into going deep.

In addition to introducing me to new writers, Jeanne Marie expanded my vocabulary. “Divagation” became the password to unlock a greater level of sophistication and resonance in my work with her. She steered me to poets that demonstrated this practice of wandering and allowing the mind to drift freely across a number of associated levels of thought. Not exactly free association, but slightly divergent association that allowed the poem to find related, deeper and richer ideas and imagery before coming to its point.

This was, and still is, difficult for me. Perhaps “Life Drawing, 1965” is a relatively successful example, a poem that went through many revisions over the third semester in my struggle to use a real-life experience to say something of meaning about the trap of vanity and the destructive pressure our culture places on women’s views of their own bodies. Also, “Falling Asleep at the Shoreline of a Pond,” another frequently revised poem, seems to divagate productively from the central pond image into dream and personified nature imagery. This poem owes as much to Cait’s insistence that I record my dreams and Alexandra’s encouragement to use this material as it does to Jeanne Marie’s fierce insistence on revision and going deep. The poem itself is about

the fear of going deep—sinking down in sleep, beneath the water, floating down—divagating—through a range of unconscious but truth-telling metaphorical associations, and confronting what is hidden there.

Of the poets I was introduced to in my third semester, Anne Carson has become a favorite. I had previously read *NOX*, which I was drawn to because of its beautifully crafted art-book format, and *Antigonik*, because I love the Greek tragedies and the ancient myths. But I must say that although I appreciated their creativity and mastery, neither book really resonated for me in a way that I saw as relevant to my own work. But Jeanne Marie suggested I read *Glass, Irony and God*, and my view of Anne Carson changed. I went through that book—a used one with many notes and underlinings from a previous owner—underlining and circling more words and phrases that just seemed magical to me:

Spring opens like a blade . . . lowered into an atmosphere of glass . . . April light clear as an alarm . . . like the flesh of some interior organ of the moon . . . green thorn of the world poking up . . .

In the book's title poem the word April appears often. I took two lines referencing April and another that I could not leave alone and used them as inspiration for three poems in the manuscript: "Raw," "Unshuttering," and "Stasis." Each of these poems emerges from a place of deeply personal emotion, but achieves a measure of success, I believe, in not merely dwelling there, but expressing emotions others can recognize.

I can't say enough about how Jeanne Marie's thoughtful, detailed notes on the pages of my poems continue to teach me. The lengthy letter she sent with each critique

of my packets set the context for understanding these notes, and I will continue to treasure and refer back to these bright, peacock blue messages for years to come.

After Stonecoast: The Toolbox, the Quiver, and the Utensil Drawer

It has been an interesting tension for me, during much of my final semester, to keep a balanced view of what I had hoped to achieve in taking on this course of study, and the realization of how far I have yet to go in feeling confident about my voice and its ability to craft poems I believe to be honest and good. This is not a disappointing or despairing feeling. Rather, there is reassurance in recognizing the gulf between acquiring learning (and I know I have learned a great deal) and the time it takes to really put this learning into consistent practice. All of my mentors have reinforced this understanding at one time or another, reassuring me that this has been a time to acquire the tools for my toolbox (Jeanne Marie), put arrows in my quiver (Cait), and utensils in the drawer (Alexandra) for later use in crafting, cooking, and running the poem to ground.

Following graduation, I will have eight months remaining in my term as poet laureate of my city and at least that same amount of time until I retire from my long and very rewarding career in philanthropy. On the one hand, I could look at the space now opened up by the completion of my academic requirements as one thing taken off the incredibly full plate of these past two years. On the other hand, I could look at this space as room that's opened up on the plate for another helping of creative endeavor.

It is my intention, following graduation, to begin a new journey, one that moves me beyond the consuming focus on loss. I want to pursue publication, see if there is a

no desire to

and sit, and shiver

Rather, as in the final poem in this thesis, “Leaves—and Leaving,”

... like these leaves

Coming to Terms

Coming to Terms

Put down the crossword, the remote.
Dishes, dust, and others' words
can wait another day; and anyway—
who's counting? Only you.

Time to write the unwashed truth,
cowardice and lies, love
withheld in anger, the stale
and furtive funk of sex.

No distractions.

But the flowers riot in the yard!

Birds drop shards of broken song
into the afternoon like chips of flint.

I could drop myself
into the quicksand of regret.
But I don't.

Your memory could slay me
if I let your leaving bleed me.
But I won't.

Words on paper make a net.

Pen and paper;
salve and bandage.

Paper.

Pen.

Moment

There was nothing.

There was everything
collapsed into that moment.

The sun still shone,
the chair still held me
as I pinwheeled in the emptiness

between us, a crevasse
that widened at the booming
avalanche—

five cold words of doom
summoning the storm.

The breath it took to say them
a blizzard, smothering the world.

Stasis

The light of the stalled time after lunch
hardens slowly around the morning's ambition;
pine sap trapping the industrious bug of intention.

It swims for a moment—a dreamer caught
in the viscous horror of a scene it cannot escape,
legs straining against bonds of its own avoidance.

The petrifying glue slows motion to a stop.
The bug stares through the golden trap, complex eyes
kaleidoscoping its unattainable tomorrow.

The amber of an afternoon, a jewel bead of time
is now cut and polished into semi-precious stasis, strung
alongside many others, dropped into a box among
the chain of days lengthening toward nothing.

That One Day

The postcard sea
its liquid, mesmerizing laps

Secrets
sink below the hissing foam

The hieroglyphs
of shore-bird tracks

A broken shell
reveals its spiral stair

Beach glass
smoothed from shattered waste

Your voice—its edge
the irritating grit of sand

Redwing Blackbird on the Road

All across the summer fields
 crimson epaulets flicker—
small flames on midnight wings.

Their bold calligraphy of flight
 carves serifs in the wavered air
inches above the ribboned road.

Now, one ball of broken feathers,
 blown along the berm
in the backwash of speeding machines.

Uncoupled

Can birds become unfaithful? Do you know
if there is partner theft among the crows?

Can a younger falcon's smooth, unruffled wings
seduce the older peregrine away?

It's Saturday. Week-end errands, groceries.
A stop to mail my single tax return.

On the post office roof, two
Canadian geese, necks twined,

feathered breasts pressed close.
Do geese mate for life? Swans do,

and owls, eagles, puffins, crows,
the albatross, even the black vulture.

Twenty years we were together,
like cardinals. A steady pair.

I think I'm doing well—stopped caring.
But later, unpacking groceries at home

I've shopped again for too much food to eat alone.

Avoidance

The poplar's leaves clap softly. Rain
from last night's storm still ticks through trees,
the neighbors' wind chimes shatter the day.
A dog yaps. The titmice chatter sharp as teeth.

Why is this so hard? To sit and write. No
seeming purpose to the task. I want to make.
To do. And so I make the bed, do the dishes,
scrub the bathtub, change the litter,
convince myself that order's the condition
most conducive to the Muse's whisper.

But something lurks behind the page,
between the lines, beneath the careful words.
Is it just the demi-god of ridicule? Or

have I stumbled on a truth and, like a child
with a real transgression to confess
do I invent, instead, the sins that wring
a penance of no consequence?

Falling Asleep at the Shoreline of a Pond

Broken branches
of unfinished work

leaves
of petty irritations
litter the surface.

Thoughts swarm
like gnats,
scattered
by the random stab
of a dragonfly—

forgotten promise
glittered
and disturbing.

Further in
the water clouds.
A shiver moves
the sunken weeds.
Sinuous traverse
of scaly memories.

In the deeper stillness
at the bottom of the pond,

broken bottles,
long lost
rings and watches
angry stones
of withheld solace

settle
in the viscous
and irrational
sediment,

fetid bed of mistakes,
misdeeds, mistrust.

Missed chances.

In time, the night moves
dark and deep above,
its currents smooth,
deceptively unruffled.

Then from its cave
of sunken
 dreams,
the ancient denizen
 swims forth.

Fever Dream: Drone Strike Health Care

There's two of us, each needing an injection
to treat a malady that no one knows
or understands. Mine is curable
the other's not—and he doesn't know.

We are instructed to be on a hillside
out in a certain field at precisely six o'clock.
This is very clear. But whether morning
or the dinner hour, no one knows.

We must lie across a certain asphalt runway
framed against the hillside green, our bodies
naked, splayed like starfish stranded on a black
volcanic beach—a place that no one knows.

Two drones will come in low, anonymous;
surgical delivery of hypodermic cures.

Should we lie face up, or down?
No one knows. What if the operator's aim
is not precise? If the needles pierce our spine—
my face? What if each receives the other's remedy?

No one knows. The hour approaches.

Too Much and Not Enough

Fifty years and still she lies,
 bikini-ed on the backyard patch
of my green memory. It's only sun
 that heats the unschooled mound
between her legs, the meadow
 of her stomach in the shallow valley
between the ridges of her hip bones.
 The gentle rise of each small breast
embroidered with a neat French knot of flesh.
 Each contour minimal—just enough.

Live Light, I write
on the bathroom mirror,
the refrigerator door.
Motto to lose weight;
 be once again
 slim-hipped,
 sylphid. Breasts
 like nectarines.
Agile as dragonfly,
sleek as newt.

Now, too much: of flesh, of things, of wasted
 chances. Reams of ineffective words piled thick.
My body is a cornucopia of regret—a vessel,
 adipous. No diet can reduce, unlearn
the habits of more pleasure taken than returned.

The wily mound knows too much too.
And yet—not enough.

Twirling

In the basement blue-heart furnace world
beneath the Atlas-arms of heat
the banner of myself unfurls.

Victrola's scratchy voices turn
the gyroscope within. I meet
myself in basement's furnace world.

Hem of skirt, my arms and curls
fly up and out. Centrifugal beat
releases me and I unfurl.

Thready tenors croon and stir
the places where my sex first feels
its blue heat in this twirling world.

Perpetual motion stirs the pearl
of knowing; unselfconscious, I'm revealed
and blue heat rises as I twirl.

I vibrate. I'm a whirling girl,
a dervish, centered and complete.
The basement's blue-heart furnace world
released me once—and I unfurled.

Life Drawing, 1965

What was her name,
that girl across the hall
that confusing year
in art school's freshman dorm?

I remember when I came upon her—
a skeleton reflecting on itself,
sketching her image naked
in the bathroom's floor-length mirror.

What happened in that moment:

the hunted horror of her look
at me, the shock of mine, reflected
and thrown back at her?

It was long before I knew about
 the hungry worm—
courier of shame
inside the brain of some;
the one that thins us down
 to bone
to less than bone

 an armature;

 less flesh
 than
 Giacometti's
 pained
 attenuations,
 skin
 sloughed off
 mid-stride
 across the
art museum's barren floor.

And why, so many decades later
does that moment haunt me still—
so late and at a time when vanity
should have been subtracted
 from the sum
of who I have become?

Even now
that worm of conformation
gnaws
and whispers
through its slavered gums:

*If only you were blond,
were tall,
had flawless
skin.*

*If only you were
beautiful.*

*If you were
only*

thin.

Unaccustomed as I was to public orgasms,

the first one came
like a water balloon
bursting in my lap.

Just fifteen and squeezed,
boy-me-boy
in the back seat of a car
the other girl in front,
her mother driving.

Like the quills that pluck
a harpsichord's tuned
and tensioned strings,
something plucked me

and I vibrated
at the simple press
of shoulder
against shoulder.

This was never covered
in *The Stork Didn't Bring You*
by Miss Lois Pemberton, (Hermitage Press, New York, 1948)
a book
my Mother borrowed from the library—
but which we never once
discussed.

Trigger Point

"You love to ride the curve,"
he said as we sped,
me driving, he
quite happy
to be driven.

That old Volvo
new then and me
newly free
with a California boy
sweet and easy
in ways new to me.

What is it
in this moment
thirty years gone
and sliding down
the highway moon
still high, dotted lanes
pulsing the dark smooth
rush of the arrowed road's
arcing dip and rise bumping
me along that brings to mind—

rough mouth flicking tongue?

Rung

In the Pullman kitchen, hands sunk deep in soapy water, she stood and washed and thought of nothing.

The boys were in the living room talking trash and sports. Married just two months, and he'd invited his best friends—four of them, and none attached.

At the sink, hands bound by suds and questions she would never think to answer, she did not hear him step behind her. The tall one. The smart one she had always thought beyond her reach.

And when his finger drew itself down, hard and fast along her spine, pressing for a moment just above the cleft, she rang like a bell so loud she feared the world would hear.

Rewrite

I fled into the cool and buttered dark
of movies, that summer's escapist grace.
Mutants, wizards, magic took the place
of facing all the edits to my part,
and for a little while freeze-framed the start
of scripting fresh the plot that was erased.
But this hero had no wand, no magic cape,
no superpowers. Just a broken heart.

The Director left no notes, no grip, no crew,
no *deus ex machina* from the Greeks.
Old footage must be edited anew—
sans villains, rings, or altruistic freaks.
The camera's rolling now, I hear my cue.
Actors have arrived, begin to speak . . .

Raw

In this month
of mud-stiff days,
still-born weeks,
the long scraped
April wind blows hard
against remembering.

Was it ten or twenty
years ago that
I still loved you?
Or did I ever?
Or you, me?

Was it merely
mutual alliance—
a convenience
shared by two
unfinished souls?

And was it only
that you found
what it was
you thought
was missing

before I did?

If I had been
the younger one,
with ruby prospects
opening doors
would I have
honored our
unsanctified
agreement?

Through this year
of rapiered dreams,
these questions burn
like April's rain
whipped hard
against my heart.

And I am flayed.

Incantation

We wait for you, the room and I.

The candle sticks its golden tongue
into the evening's eager dark

When will you come? When will you come?

It flicks its undulating flame
in mocking echoes of itself
across an antique gilded frame
the burnished binding of a book.

When will you come?

We wait for you, the bed and I,
its rumpled sheets a glacial map
of jagged untraversed crevasses,
of frozen mounds bereft of warmth—
the liquid melt of seasons past.

O will you come?

The house is patient. I am not.
The gravity of what we had,
what I have done

please come, please come

is pressing like the stone on stone
of Salem's harsh confessional,
the glassy rock that was my heart.

I've tripped the honey-baited snares
removed the razored lures and webs

I wait for you. I wait for you.

The baited springes are uncocked
the path snow-free, the door unlocked.

*We wait for you, the room and I.
When will you come?*

Soon Upon a Time

White as snow, red as blood, black as ebony wood.

I still can taste the bitter peel,
feel the cunning comb, its teeth
entangled in the midnight of my hair.

It's almost quiet all the time.
Scuttle of leaves, drum of rain,
the soft cloud-fall of winter's snow.

Small creatures come, their murmurings
a drone of comfort underneath
the silence that oppresses this small space.

This is not sleep. No dreams
but memories of peddler crones
a sad-eyed man, a sharpened axe.

And visions of a gilded prison.
Iron shoes. A fiery dance.

Fire and Frost

Jack Frost rimes the windows with his glaze.
I scrape a portal clear within one pane.
The maple sets its fiery crown ablaze.

My book of spells falls open to the page
for summoning of passions that have waned.
Jack Frost blooms your name in feathered glaze

across the pane. Now, quivered maple waves
its fiery wands above the rutted lane.
The window's stained with maple's fractured blaze.

In scarlet tinted dreams I search for ways
to see beyond tomorrow, past the pane
that blooms again with Jack Frost's feathered glaze.

The rutted lane that carried you away
puts on a coat of dying coals—remains
of maple's crown, its dying blaze.

Each day I scrape the window clear and gaze
out to the lane that carried you away.
Each night my window's rimed and newly glazed.
The maple's crown has lost its fiery blaze.

How to Build a Fire

Start with clearing litter
from around the chosen ground,
the space of holy conflagration.
Sweep away the muddled
refuse, all that's useless,
what's no longer wanted.

*empty wrappers
from his broken vows*

Sit a moment—breathing.

*

Choose the sacred purpose of the fire,
then search for what there is
that's worth the burning—

*concert tickets from the Schubert 8th,
Mahler 10th
all the smiling Christmas photos
from before*

*

Plan the healing sequence of the pyre.

Will it be a slowly smoldered
ceremony, wanting constant tending?
Will it need successive contributions
over time?

*Yes! Your kiln-dried cord
of harbored anger*

*

Or does it mean to be a holocaust—
hot and high incendiary, burning
for a moment, clean, then gone?

*

Or will you build your fire
for safety only—warmth and light,
protection from the darkling spirits of the night?
Oh, this will take a hoarding—
gathering stores of great abundance
*crumpled handkerchiefs of tears
forked branch of accusations
seasoned logs of long-withheld affection*

*

Is your fire the engine for a spell?
If so, the proper cauldron, recipe,
ingredients are needed.

a cup of bitten nails
a ladle-full of rime scraped
from time spent
waiting by the window,
a flagon of silence from an empty room

This one needs a covert preparation
that demands consideration
of the stars, the phases
of the moon, the nature
of the one to whom the spell
is bound—
for whom the spell is
conjured.

*

Last of course—the option
to forego the effort altogether.
Layer on the patchwork shawl,
quilted counterpane
of lives you haven't lived,
matted blankets of regret,
and sit, and shiver
in the dark.

Dream of Abundance

Barrels and barrels of Champagne grapes—
 dusky garnet pebbles of future celebration.
Baskets of blue suede Shiraz marbles,
 bins of pale jade beads of Chardonnay.

Bushels of rough skinned avocados,
 their lush green secret, fecund seeds.
Crates of scrub-rough tubers—yams and Russets.
 A duffle bulged with sweet, slow-pitch Vidalias.

This treasure piled inside a secret cellar.
 But behind the curtain of this bright abundance
a scaly wizard pushes buttons, pulls his levers.
 The dream turns dark and hopeless in my throat.

I wake at six, drag dream remnants to the kitchen,
 lay them on the table like a bunch of lockless keys.
From the pocket of my jacket, last night's *Mega Millions*
 ticket sticks out its trickster's tongue.

Exhortation to the Dreamer

Do not wake.
Do not slit the envelope
of your sleep-sealed eyes.
Do not take a breath or sigh
your acquiescence to the day.

Resist. Resist. Turn and curl
again into the nest of night,
nepenthe womb of nothing
to be done, of everything
that isn't everything that waits
beyond that pricked, insistent
instant of awareness. Do not wake.

Fall back into the liquid
melt of memory,
agate pebbled stream
that sings your body's song.
Sink, Lethean, down
into the sea-bed cave
of mystic fathoming.

Rise and shine, they say.
Rise and face the day.
Some go further—*Carpe diem*—
gird your loins for battle.
But here you need no arms,
no camouflage for fitting in,
no smiling masquerade to hide
desire, your longing for the night.

Do not wake. Float past
tomorrow's shuttered houses,
shrouded mirrors
reflecting no facsimile
of anything you've dreamed.
Remember. Find again in sleep
the mythic story of your life.

Unshuttering

The bleached wooden sky of April
lays its planks across the morning,
weathered boards against the tempest.

Heavy too, the planks I've laid;
hammered tight across the shattered
panes of your commitment. Fitted
with precision, mortised clean—no
chink to leak the hoarded rage.

My boarded heart is heavy
with its coffin weight of anger.

What would happen if I pried
some shingles from this house of outrage;
opened to the air the whirling seed
of fury at its center? Would there be
combustion? Conflagration?

Or, like this paneled sky that lumbers darkly
now, but only for today, could the shutters part,
release a cauterizing light? I watch the sun

begin to splinter April's clouds.
With a breath and then another, I begin
to prise the planks—release the light
that pulses still behind the boarded door.

Journey

Crickets chirp slower
three weeks into October.
Fifteen months alone.

Pages of my book
curl back upon each other:
a fainting maiden's arm.

Unplanned journey—fits and starts,
sweat and chill. Broken nails.
Clenched fist and jaw.

Across the empty chasm
something I thought lost
has found me here.

What's found is echoed now.
A calm and measured psalm.
Autumn crickets' song.

My Father Climbed a Mountain Every Day

It's been years but still I see you grasp
the downtown bus's open doorframe (cane
hooked in the crook of your left arm), the torqued
lunge of hip to swing the stiff leg up onto that first high
step, the strong pull up, like the start of a routine on the steady rings
you'd mastered back in high school, to hoist your body
and the wood and leather leg strapped on each day,
up one step, then up the next.

It's been years, but still I see you
almost leaping down the basement stairs,
gymnast's arms pumping the double handrails
like the parallel bars you'd mastered back in high school.
I still see you swing the one unbending leg
out and forward, taking three steps at a time
before landing, the flag of your empty
pant leg fluttering behind.

It's been years but still I see you moving
with an athlete's grace on crutches through
your basement workshop, hear the high complaint of drills
whine of band saw, bang of hammers. I still smell
the sweet, clean scent of pine sap, sawdust.

It's been years but now I understand the pride
I mistook for anger—pride that hid, perhaps denied
emotions I could not imagine as you pushed my hand away,
refusing help to walk the long church aisle
toward mother's casket at the altar rail.

Ironing: a Devotional
for Anna

Each Saturday, beside the Vulcan furnace
 in the basement, my grandmother's
bunioned feet shift side to side along
 the board's extended tongue.

Her right hand dips into a dented saucepan.
 A snap of wrist and silver rains
across the shirt. I watch her lay each sleeve
 across the chest (dip and flick),
fold shoulders to their mates (dip and flick),
 then tightly roll each shirt from tail to collar.
The hot iron hisses. Stray drops kiss
 the mirror of its gothic face
standing upright on its metal plate.
 With each dip and flick the sagging
skin below her housedress sleeve waggles
 and I see again her right hand's
middle finger, one joint short—bitten by a mangle
 at the laundry where she worked.
In turn, each shirt's unrolled and snugged
 across the silvered board.
She lifts the iron with its cord, the tail
 of a contented cat, rising
to the outlet in the light above her head.

Her tuneless hum accompanies
 the iron's skating glide,
its soothing strokes transforming
 and restoring my father's wrinkled shirts.

She does the cuffs and collars first. Then sleeves,
 a knife-crease pressed hard down each arm
from shoulder to the fold above the cuff.
 Then deep and even strokes along the back.
Puckers in the pocket's top-stitched square
 are flattened smooth across the chest. Last,
the wrinkled button placket: carefully she jiggles
 the iron's tip between each pierced
and polished chip of shell, an artist dabbing final touches
 on the portrait of the shirt.

All day the basement is perfumed with clean,
bleach-scented steam. One by one
each shirt is hung on water pipes above our heads;
a pastel bank of cumulus that floats,
devotion—pressed and buttoned at the throat.

Barbara

You were foreign to me from the start. An incubator baby, coming early, but arriving late. When the bundle of you finally appeared it was not the fat, bald child I'd expected. Shock of dark hair to my blonde, ruddy cheeks to my pale face, eyes of earth, not sky. You were from another tribe. Not mine.

That day you came to help me finish up the paperwork from hospitals, the nursing home, we sat across the table I had carried through my life till then—through art school, one apartment, then another, my divorce. I remember my embarrassment, clearing paints and brushes from that scarred but sturdy table; one rare constant in my vacillated life. I shuffled sketchbooks, scooped up paint rags, last night's crusted dinner dishes. From a briefcase you set out a raft of sharpened pencils, stack of labeled folders, a calculator, legal pad. All day we waded through a hurricane of unpaid bills, a sadness of insurance forms, finality of wills.

I remember looking up. It was as if a door had opened. There you were: my sister. Where had you been these years? Where had I, that you'd been hidden from my knowing?

Our life lines, moving parallel, knew little of each other. You took the path I'd scorned—children, house, religion. But now, across the table's bruised expanse, sorting out the ending of our mother's life, closing the last door on her existence, finally I saw her—and myself—in you.

Our mother's fragile lidded eyes, her thin, determined mouth, unlike, yet like mine. Suddenly, her hands were there as well, extending from your wrists—and mine: capable, unlovely, strong. Suddenly I laughed at the discovery. "What is it?" you said, laughing back, the sound of your laugh echoing my own.

Ancillary

an' cil lā ry a. [L. from ancilla, a maidservant]

In the hospital, her body curls
crustacean-like around itself,
a lower-case 'c,' sans serif.

Thin legs drawn up, the hunch
of her spine curved away
from the machines feeding

and tracking her existence,
she is disappearing.

In photographs, she was the shadow—
attenuated ghost that crept
into the frame, sun behind her

as she took our pictures, never
appearing in them herself. Almost
invisible, but necessary—

a stanchion of support for all we did,
desired, aspired to become.

* *

Today, the interphalangeal joint
of my little finger swells with pain.

For decades I anticipated thumbs
and wrists to make complaints

from their years of useful labor,
not this inconsequential finger.

What has it done that it should curl
so painfully against these page's words

except support the hand that writes
the memory this poem records?

Enough

The nurse placed a pen
in my mother's hand.
I held her wrist to steady it.
The hospital form asked
if she was competent
to decide.

In the space marked
"do not resuscitate"
her thin hand,
its skin fragile
as the crepe paper festoons
strung across the ceiling
for each family milestone,
made its mark—
something like a heart.

It was enough.

The Cycle
for V and R

In the forest when a tree
has reached that moment
when it can no longer stand,

weakened by worm,
battered by storms
hollowed out for shelter

by furred and feathered
creatures taking nurture
from its vigor,

sometimes there is another
there to bear its weight,
to hold it in its arms

for a little time—
a year, a decade—more
until the burdened one

reaches its own moment
and releases both
to a beginning.

Waiting for the Mouse to Die

Its dove gray haunch
 lay still
under the thin
 wooden slat
 of the trap;
the curl of its tail
 a dark serif
against the bend
of the sink's drainpipe.

Its front leg—
 thin
as broom-straw,
with its tiny pink paw,
 moved
almost imperceptibly
 with the rhythm
 of its breath
 or
the beating of its heart.

I couldn't tell.

It had dragged itself
and the cruel device away
from where I'd set it
 but could go no further.

The two I'd trapped
last week died quickly,
their doll-like heads neatly
 caught
under the efficient sprung wire;

jet bead eyes and pink noses
exactly like the catnip toys
 my girls bat casually
 about the house.

As I sit here
 sipping my wine,
waiting for the mouse to die
 I realize
in the universe of things
 I am willing to do
 this
is no longer one of them.

Mended Dreams

With ruby lids against the sprinklered sun
where forests stitch the seamless blue to green
there's no more time, and nothing can be done.
Old tufts of dreams, like clouds, are caught in trees.

Where forests stitch the seamless blue to green
our tale is calligraphed on leaf-pocked paths.
My tufted dreams, dark clouds amidst the trees
that ring the meadow's plane of rain-washed grass.

Our transient tale is written on the path
as coppered evening pleads its case to stay
and linger on the plane of rain-washed grass,
its thinning hours watercolored gray.

As coppered evening pleads its case to stay
the sedative of night revives the dream
through waning hours watered down to gray.
The morning swells, now—bursting at the seams.

The sedative of night's restored the dream.
With ruby lids against the sprinklered sun
and gibbous morning bursting at the seams,
there's still more time. And nothing, now, is done.

That morning

there was nothing
between her and the sky—
the air so permeable
the blue poured
through her
all day.

She was
a vessel, clear
as glass, the clean,
fresh melt of glaciers
from a time before
time.

When the amethyst
evening
rang her body
like a bell and
she took
a breath.

It was like
the first breath
after dreamless sleep.

It was like nothing
had come before
and she was minted
new,
all the days
behind virginal.

Unspent.

Forsythia

For spring

For yellow smell of earth

For sun-smudged weathered fences

around the vacant lot

Forsythia

Waterfall of honeyed promise

Buttered signal flags of April

Bangled arms of gypsy dancers

For prancing, can-can galaxy

canary-spangled chorus line

For kicking up the day

For golden morning fireworks

For brassy, brambled exclamations

Persephone's parade

Forsythia

For coin-tossed fountained wishes

For yellow-ribboned dreadlocks

of remembrance

For gilded feather dusters sweeping up

our grief

For light in darkness, seeping

through the open door

Forsythia.

Ghost Ranch

How beautiful to be.
Alone.

Clean and sere
dune and mesa—

the empty road.

My music,
just the fluted owl,
howl
of the coyote.

Countless wheeling suns
my comforter.

Nectar of the cactus rose
enough
for sustenance.

I choose this spare
and elemental place,
choose
this body, weathered
as the piñon—
honed
into an instrument
of unapologetic
truth.

This scalpel, now
can carve
the hard architecture
of bone,
reveal

the beating
flower's
heart.

Aria

I am
a shooting star, your oyster's treasure,
silver brushstroke of surprise.
Tickled effervescent rising
giddy from the crystal flute.

A fuchsia bubblegum balloon,
your velvet seed pod of amazement.
Impish dancing mushroom cap
of slippery delight.

I am your "open sesame"
tiny knurl—your starter button.
Now part the velvet curtain
and let's begin to sing.

The centipedes in my shower

come up through the drain
no matter how
I stopper them out.
They wriggle their way
into my day to ruin it
from the start.

When the water breaks
their soft bodies apart,
a hundred hairy legs
litter the tub
like a flock
of misplaced commas
sticking stubborn
to the clean porcelain
of morning.

Or like whiskers
from a vanished man
shedding the rough
stubble of a hundred
legless promises
all over my new life.

Question

Today I watched a rainbow
 move across my wall
 pulling time along,
jeweled brushstroke
 of pitiless inevitability.

Three years now. My life full again
 of the prised promise
 once obscured
behind your shadow.

The question is
 do I want this rainbow,
or would I rather clouds—and you?

More Time

More time than it takes to do it, more breath than it takes to live; my reckoning is incomplete, unfinished. My numbered days are countless as the dishes in the sink and the tines of all the forks; I've set out bowls of kibble for the cats who nibble now, contentedly and smile. The symphony is threaded through the needle of my morning and I am stitching yet another song of days, for the joining of this one to the others is the Mobius strip of living in the present; continuous existence, no entrance and no exit. I do not need to know what is required beyond this time, of which so much remains. I am numerous, of many parts and purposes. Inside this room, all the invited company is assembled. And their ancestors. They are legion; all of my familiars, past and present. I run ahead, and the time runs with me toward a platinum infinity. No agenda is required. All the stops are opportunities added to the alphabet of knowing. I go forward through the quarries not yet visited. The path will be revealed by doing, intersected by accomplishment; all the batteries will be charged to overflowing. I'm at the start; doing and connecting, yes! time and work, intersecting at the axis of the wheel.

Leaves—and Leaving

Like the stars we see
but are no longer there—
 just the record of their light
 hurtling
 toward us
 from their empty place in space,
each leaf's place
 in the cycle
 will end.

So too, us.
 Me.

But like these leaves
 that give up all their
 glory
 before they go,
I want to leave
 blazing.

NOTES

The title poem, “Coming to Terms,” is a loose imitation of Sandra Cisneros’s “I Am So Depressed I Feel Like Jumping in the River Behind My House but Won’t Because I’m Thirty and Not Eighteen” from *Loose Woman*, New York: Vintage-Random, 1994.

“Aria” was inspired by Cisneros’s “Little Clown, My Heart” from the same book.

Three poems contain lines taken from Anne Carson’s *The Glass Essay*: “Stasis,” “Unshuttering,” and “Raw.”

The final poem, “More Time,” is a reverse imitation of Andre Breton’s “Less Time,” a copy of which was provided as part of a workshop handout and assignment during my third semester residency.

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