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Soot & Shadow

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SOOT & SHADOW

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Christa Crawford

2019

Dedication

For Donna, whose feminist spirit serves as a constant source of inspiration.

S O O T & S H A D O W

by

CHRISTA CRAWFORD, MS

THESIS

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Preface

PROJECT SCOPE:

Writers, particularly poets, always feel exiled in some way - people who don't exactly feel at home, so they try to find a home in language.

— Natasha Trethewey

The longer I live, the more I understand the importance of finding *home*, and the feeling of being *home* is different for each of us. Some wander until they settle in a place that satisfies their longing, while others look inward. Language, for writers, can be comforting on a physical, spiritual, and communal level. We retreat inward to craft and shape our thoughts, using language as a sculptor uses the world around him to fashion something of meaning out of nothing. The creative process and even the product can be intensely gratifying. We think/speak/write our emotions and ideas into existence giving them validity — sharing our human experience with the world around us. Language itself becomes *home*.

My personal journey *home* has led me down a varied path through myriad genres of art from graphic design, drawing, painting, printmaking, fibers, metalsmithing, and back to graphic design again. The difference this time is the harmony I've found between graphic design and writing. Both, for me, are intensely visual experiences, the difference being the vehicle. An image is the focus of creation whether the medium is pictures or words. Regardless, I strive to elicit emotion, and the methodical search for the perfect story and word pairings is just part of the process. I also find comfort and excitement in digging until I uncover Barthes' *punctum* which can appear in a variety of ways including among the pages of a book, within articles, interviews, photographs, etc. It is amazing to me that we as writers have the ability and opportunity to look at

life from all angles and to view it with a magnifying glass exposing the essence of what it means to be human. For me, applied research has become the focus of my spy glass; the best way to shine a light into the darkest corners of humanity. Somewhere within the research lies the story. The way a writer chooses to use it is what gives the story life.

As such, poetry, like prose, can be so many things, but for me, it is a refined distillation of language and emotion that captures the essence of life itself: the relentless search for home and the immergence from or retreat into the shadows. The allure is powerful. I delight in the process of poetry writing as much as applied research, hence, for me, the marriage of the two now seems inevitable. Early in my tenure at UTEP, I encountered my first graduate poetry course and was tasked by Sasha Pimentel to write a series of poems born from a historic event. I was drawn to the March 25, 1911, Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. One hundred and forty-six souls lost their lives that day, most of them immigrant girls willing to work long hours for low pay, often under miserable conditions. The Triangle fire marked the beginning of radical labor changes in America. As I began searching for information about the event, my efforts proved fruitful. I came across a wealth of survivor interviews that gave me a priceless glimpse into the hearts, minds, and memories from that fateful spring day. While these interviews provided many details, some specifics were inevitably lost. So, I allowed my imagination to fill in the gaps. This manuscript expands upon the stories told by the survivors creating augmented, or somewhat fictionalized realities for both those who made it out alive and those who perished.

It wasn't until the next semester that I was introduced to Natasha Trethewey and others in Andrea Cote-Botero's Photo-Poetics course. *Bellocq's Ophelia* struck a chord that continues to ring an unforgettable tone which has forever changed me. At the time, I was asked to create a series of poems born from photographs. Like Trethewey, I looked to the past and created a collection

that emerged from a box of old black and white photographs purchased from eBay. I had no physical connection to the individuals whose likenesses stared back at me, but I was inspired to embark on a journey to create a new identity for these mysterious strangers — a fictional life based in historical fact. My hope was to create a reality that did not exist before, a world for a woman that lends authenticity to her story and the stories of thousands of other women like her who struggled to live with their own choices to leave a life they knew for one of uncertainty. Countless stories of War Brides emerged as I researched, and I knew I wanted to convey these women's overwhelming desire to claim a life for themselves beyond the turmoil to which they had become accustomed. There were thousands of British and Japanese women (and others from all over the world), referred to as 'War Brides,' who fell for American servicemen and the distraction they provided from the stress of war. Many of these women chose to leave their homes, families, and everything they knew for the promise of a bright, new life in America. Unfortunately, many of them discovered their reality to be far from the fairytale they envisioned.

Both the stories of the Triangle Shirtwaist victims and countless American War Brides provided fertile ground for research and challenging yet relatable human experiences that often centered around two common themes: freedom and loss. I hoped to capture the essence of these women, their strength, tenacity, bravery, and sacrifice, their overwhelming desire to live fully, unfettered by social constructs, injustice, or war. The women themselves were a terrific source of inspiration as I worked, but I also wanted to round out the collection with more personal stories of freedom and loss. The final section, *Otherness*, contains pieces that draw from my own life experience providing the reader additional opportunities to relate to the work as a whole while also allowing me to share some of myself. Helping me along the way were several poets and writers

whose work was invaluable. Barthes, Sebald, Tretheway, Bellatin, Edwards, Talese, Capote, Vuong, and others were instrumental in bringing this collection to life.

POETICS & ASSESSMENT:

*Nevertheless, the camera's rendering of reality
must always hide more than it discloses.*

— Susan Sontag

As I made my way through several courses in the Creative Writing Program, I was struck by the way photography can create a “living connection” to the past (Hirsch 42). The way photographs, as Hirsch states, “become screens—spaces of projection and approximation, and of protection” (38). Photography reminds us of where we’ve been yet can help us construct a new reality from past truths. Photographs “...actually reinforce the living connection between past and present, between the generation of witnesses and survivors, and the generation[s] after” (48). As such, I intended for the photographic references to function not as representations of events, but rather as a ‘petticoat’ of sorts that offers layers of support and buoyancy to the work. This photographic ‘petticoat’ is more than a reference: it’s the figurative and emotional scaffolding that, as Susan Sontag notes, “gives shape to experience” (Sontag 10). We as humans want to capture our experiences and snap a picture to lend validity to existence, to help us interpret the world around us (3). The images I referenced served as my inspiration, as well as the suggestive, figurative elements of fictionalized authenticity for newly constructed realities. While much of the work is based on historical fact, many of the finer details are constructed to create an image-rich ‘memory’ that I hope solicits an emotional response from the reader.

The piece, *And Then a Songbird Sings*, grew from a single scavenged black and white photo, circa 1943 of a small, delicate bird cage set atop a dining room table. Sunlight poured through the open window behind the cage forcing the adjacent wall into shadow dark enough to obscure but not dark enough to conceal the dainty floral wallpaper adorning the wall to the chair rail. The rectangular table was lovingly covered in a floral tablecloth that barely managed to cover the table's surface — The punctum, a proud chickadee sitting atop his cage. There was something so serene yet sad about the image. For me, it became the symbolic representation of freedom, of new beginnings, of hope. My war bride, much like her peers wanted to dance carefree, away from the spoils of war and into the arms of anything but her present existence.

You spoke and I was dancing on silver-
lined clouds across the hardwood
war to our backs, underfoot, forgotten

sounds transformed from sirens to horns, bombs
to drums — the pulse of the music reminding us
we're alive. You in your Navy blues, me in

a brown woolen suit — tweedy specks of orange
and cream, the scent of rose mingling with sandalwood,
musk, and scotch. I toss my hair, press my chest...(28)

Poetically, I wanted the reader to identify with the speaker. The language is approachable with a slight 'period' tinge to give a feel for the time. The tercets spill from one to the next with minimal punctuation which I hoped would convey a sense of movement - the repeated words adding to the musical rhythm, the "pulse of the music." The piece continues with lines that turn and shape meaning as phrases transform from one line to the next.

...days as if the sun would rise across the ocean
waves of happiness drowning our sorrow,
mending the tiny moth hole on my right lapel

our dreams taking flight on moth's wings.

Torn is another piece heavily influenced by photography. I imagined the woman in the black and white image I found to be the mother of Margaret, my British War Bride. She sat, in a soft blur, at a table covered with what appeared to be crumpled scraps of paper, cloth, odds and ends tumbling over themselves in chaos. This image became a poetic dialog between Margaret and her mother that would create tension for the reader.

Peeking from behind a mountain of paper
mother's protection unfolds

*Never shielding a daughter from her own desires
any more than the shade offers shelter from the wind —*

scattered paper like misdirected thoughts
of you. Sailing from table to floor

*a daughter anxious to dive bare feet
first into the Atlantic Ocean — into hungry whitecaps...*
(26)

This poem, written in couplets, slows the readers' progress while allowing them to participate at some level. The stanzas bounce back and forth in a visual dialog between regular and italicized couplets, yet the whole could easily be dissected into individual parts or poems able to be read independently. Two distinct voices emerge and interact in a way that feels relatable yet unique.

The War Bride series of poems led me to search for a new way to examine how applied research coupled with a series of disconnected images could serve as a springboard for creativity as well as a way to illustrate relatable human experience. I attempted to relate found imagery to a historical event and to explore the impact, validity, and authenticity that could be constructed, as Sebald explored in *Austerlitz* and Bellatin examined in *Shiki Nagaoka: A Nose for Fiction*. Photography can be a "means of manipulating reality" (Bellatin 27). As such, we have the drive

to find closure and to reconcile the unexplainable. Photographs can provide a visual link to the past that blurry, fuzzy memory often fails to satisfy.

Further, I, like Talese and Kotlowitz, from Boynton's *The New New Journalism*, am in love with the stories of ordinary people, stories that, as Kotlowitz puts it, "give us reason to reflect on the human condition" (Boynton 131). "Stories of migration, of our search for home", the "dramas of everyday life" (135). This thesis collection, *On Moth's Wings: Memoirs of Freedom and Loss*, is a further exploration of "the fictional current that flows beneath the stream of reality" (177). Like Talese, I discovered that the story itself can often be found by looking *around* the subject as opposed to directly from the subjects themselves. Eyewitness accounts often gave me a much clearer picture of the voiceless victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire than one might expect. As such, my work is shaped not only by my own life experience but by the experiences of others. It is through thoughtful research that I find inspiration and most often I find myself inspired not by well-known persons of individual historical significance, but by those who are collectively important, those whose stories are remarkable not because they are famous but because they are relatable.

The impact we have on the world around us can be profound and those we come into contact with can often paint a more engaging portrait of us than we could ever create of ourselves. With this in mind, I endeavored here to delve deep into the ordinary to uncover the extraordinary aspects of what it means to be human. I intended for this collection to offer a connection to the past that serves as an illustration, or even evidence of the strength of character, tenacity, and spirit that paved the way for progressive thought and action. Immigrant women were an integral part of the evolution of this country, its workforce, and the heart of its existence. I hope to remind readers

of the sacrifices and relatable experiences endured by people, specifically women, not so different from themselves.

My series of poems dealing with the Triangle Shirtwaist tragedy center on the eyewitness accounts of workers, firemen, and passersby who survived the harrowing events of the day and were willing to share their memories with investigators. These interviews were made available through Cornell University. Reading through the transcripts, I found myself fascinated, aghast, moved, and motivated to further give the victims and survivors life through poetic investigation. The experience of the fire itself must have been utterly horrifying. For me, the accounts were both visceral and visual. My mind was filled with vivid images of charred, crackling machines, empty water buckets, plumes of thick, black smoke billowing through broken, open windows where ladders and hoses fell short and young women leapt nine stories to their death. I could smell the smoke, hear the screams, feel the heat, and I wanted readers to experience all of it with me.

ALL THE WHITE TURNS BLACK
and yards of crisp white cotton wilt, darkening
a makeshift clothesline, clean and taunt, falls
lifeless transformed to ash while delicate lace
withers falling victim to scorching heat and flame.
Oil-soaked scraps ignite in seconds— determined
ash consuming one row, then the next as embers
alight on the breeze off Washington and two
hundred and forty machines become fuel — food
for an indiscriminate beast. White hot flames devour
the light gives way to darkness (10).

White space and form are essential elements for me as a poet. The way the poem occupies and shares the page is everything. For me, the white space is every bit as important as the letterforms/lines/line breaks themselves. As a graphic designer, I am motivated by visual elements and enjoy utilizing color and pattern for emphasis. Shaded text and italics carve out meaning and add form as well as movement and vibration to a piece. Creating a multifaceted fabric is exciting

for me as a writer. As such, writing is a process and each component influences the other. In this collection and in general, I am obsessed with certain poetic elements including punctuation.

9

Then wrapping herself in darkness,
she plunged into the light
desperate to breathe —
for her lungs to fill
painlessly and for the tide
to roll unfettered across
a smooth white sand beach
and back again to the horizon
where colors dance in harmony
and time slows to a crawl

8

but the wind whipped through
her hair, coat fluttering on the
breeze she tore past one
floor then the next considering
the others — before, that...(8)

Minimal punctuation allows the reader to read quickly, plummeting with the narrator into the unknown, while strategically placed punctuation controls speed as well as emphasis. Here, the stanzas are numbered in decreasing order from nine to six representing the floors of the factory, six being the limit of where the fire hoses could reach. Pattern and repetition are invaluable to create rhythm and deepen meaning. Further, the line break is utterly essential. I love to break a line in such a way that multiple meanings are created from one line to the next.

Memories ignite and icy beads gather
rolling over hairs standing on ends

with a blackness that slides over eyelids
like a blindfold. Soot chokes lungs,

In the following piece, I hoped to echo the structure of the American flag without being too heavy-handed. Mary Domskey-Abrams' eyewitness account was the inspiration for this piece and I wanted to include her thoughts in a subtle way. She described a scene of three girls wrapping

themselves in the American flag and diving out a ninth story window and through a glass manhole cover to their deaths—ultimately, “buried in the deep.” This phrase was a powerful one and its inclusion seemed like a tasteful way to circle back to the survivor, my inspiration. Here, the shaded lines echo the seven red stripes and six white making up the American flag while the lines themselves can be read as a single unit or as two divided parts. Minimal and strategically placed punctuation controls the pacing.

AMONG THE PANIC, a hopeless mass of humanity
searching for protection, they fumbled in the dark
plumes of thick black smoke and flames followed the
desperate, weak warning from below —
Fire!

Late — too late for order,
too late for options
were few too many and the three reached for stars —
stripes that promised safety, opportunity where there was none
and they leaped huddled in a cocoon of liberty
freedom-bound, plummeting from the ninth to
ground level, beyond the pavement into the depths
together, *buried in the deep.*

Mary Domskey-Abrams

There is an arch of emotion present in the Triangle series of poems that conveys the working conditions prior, the events of the day, as well as the struggle to come to terms with life afterwards for both the victims and their families. I wanted readers to feel the shock and far-reaching horror felt across America and beyond. The flippancy displayed by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory owners was astounding and their complete lack of compassion and personal greed overruled any chance for ethical treatment of workers. It was important for me to convey not only the devastation of the fire itself but also the total disregard for human welfare. *Again Today* opens with a haunting quote and continues on to describe the empty buckets seen daily by a concerned worker that were meant to hold water to douse a fire.

AGAIN TODAY

Member of the Triangle Price Committee: *"Mr. Bonstein, why is there no water in the buckets? In case of a fire, there would be nothing with which to fight it."*

Triangle Manager, Bonstein: *"If you'll burn, there'll be something to put out the fire."*

I pass them —
empty mouths rusted,
scarred, misshapen, open
they swallow the clacking,
humming, chatter that rises
persistent in a cloud
over the ninth floor.

Above the rattle,
my mind lays stolen —
haunted by raspy groans
from a trio of buckets moaning
distraction — warning, pleading
for water to quench an
endless thirst (20).

I enjoyed playing with structure here, using pattern and repetition to enhance and deepen the meaning. The piece above, *Again Today*, contains a series of six sestets, punctuated by the interjection of two triplets every three stanzas.

and I stitch. Counting in one,
two,
threes — empty.

The stanzas and even lines begin to function as stitches echoing the rhythmic process of sewing and even the repetition of the act playing out in the narrator's dreams. She hears the droning machines, feels and sees the stitches falling in line one after the other and is haunted by

the three buckets standing empty. I wanted the reader to feel the emotions of the narrator not only through the linguistic repetition but also through the structure.

Some of my greatest challenges with this collection were with form and organization, whether to include prose along with poetry making a mixed-genre collection or to stick with poetry alone. I found the work of Gay Talese extremely inspiring and *Frank Sinatra has a Cold* coupled with Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* was a turning point for me in this MFA Program. Creative nonfiction had snuck up behind me and changed my life as a writer. I found myself hopelessly seduced by possibilities I had never considered. Once I read works like *Bellocq's Ophelia* and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, I realized the marriage of creative nonfiction and poetry were so much more than I envisioned and was powerless against them. As such, I forged ahead down a path I never intended. I decided, after much deliberation and work, to focus my efforts on poetry. The poetry needed room to breathe and realize its full potential on its own.

Once my course was determined, the question became whether to incorporate photography into the collection. Photography, in the beginning, seemed a necessary piece of the poetic puzzle, but after some deliberation, I realized the inclusion of photos created an undesirable shift in focus away from the work. I wanted the work to speak for itself, independently without relying on an accompanying image for support or explanation. The poems, like the women they depicted were strong enough to stand on their own. Hence, the photos became the underpinnings or petticoats meant to offer inspiration and support without taking center stage.

FRAMEWORK:

A task of poetry is to make audible (tangible but not necessarily graspable) those dimensions of the real that cannot be heard as much as to imagine new

reals that have never before existed.

— Charles Bernstein

While sifting through research and responding to the inspirational work of fellow poets, I sought to explore new horizons and to broaden my perspectives of poetic and literary form in this collection. This portion of the preface outlines a few of the many bibliographic influences that enticed and motivated me along the way.

Joshua Edward's *Castles and Islands* played an important role in the original conceptual organization of this collection. I was drawn to his use of photo postcards to punctuate and emphasize the work. There is a strong sense of place and movement through the pages that explodes into a sense of wonderment in the world around us. Vast oceanscapes, massive caves, lush tree canopies, enormous glacial ice sheets, mountains, wind-sculpted rocks all forces readers to acknowledge their own limits - their limited size and limited language. Travel, being the vehicle for Edwards, brings about feelings of longing, searching, contemplation of what it means to explore but also what it means to return home. I found the notion of 'postcards' an interesting concept in terms of my own collection. I wanted to have an undercurrent of *home* for these immigrant women to cling to, the home that was newly discovered as well as for what was left behind. I thought initially that images could serve as a vehicle to travel between past and present, between what is known and unknown, and between the reader and me. Preceding one of Edward's expansive, cloud-lined, oceanscapes:

THE STORY

I read the same book over and
over, as much to have a familiar
thing to hold as to forget how
far I am from everything I know.

Some people like their reading
and their lives complex, but I
prefer the pleasure of words not
so unlike those in my throat,

and for me, the perfect book
tells this story: someone travels
for many years, then returns
to a home that no longer exists (Edwards 117).

Edwards conveys relatable human experience while giving pause to consider something bigger than himself. I wanted to invite the reader to find common ground with the women's stories and to relate to their desires, struggles, and triumphs. I hoped to draw a parallel between the supportive, petticoat-like layers and the groundwork laid by these women. Unlike Edwards, I looked to found objects, photographs that were technically unrelated to the work itself although connected conceptually. I wanted to provide breadcrumbs or suggestions of my conceptual process without distracting the reader with the images themselves. The intent was to enhance and elevate the work without creating unnecessary or undesirable tension or emphasis where it shouldn't be. Edward's photographs are his own and, as such, they function on a different level. In my mind, he was offering a dialog as much between the work and the reader as between the two genres and himself. The photographs seemed to function as an extension of himself, a parallel between photographer and poet.

Natasha Trethewey's approach to photo-poetics, although similar, differs from Edward's. In *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Trethewey uses Bellocq's images as inspiration but chooses to reference them in her writing without actually including the pieces themselves in the collection. She allows the photos to function as an undercurrent (what I refer to as the 'petticoat') or layers that support her creative focus. The photos seem to serve as a backdrop for Trethewey's exploration:

Portrait #2

— August 1911

I pose nude for this photograph, awkward,
one arm folded behind my back, the other
limp at my side. Seated, I raise my chin,
my back so straight I imagine the bones
separating in my spine, my neck lengthening
like evening shadow. When I see this plate
I try to recall what I was thinking —
how not to be exposed, though naked, how
to wear skin like a garment, seamless.
Bellocq thinks I'm right for the camera, keeps
coming to my room. *These plates are fragile*,
he says, showing me how easy it is
to shatter this image of myself, how
a quick scratch carves a scar across my chest... (Trethewey 42).

I fell in love with the way Trethewey vividly describes Bellocq's image(s) holding fast to specific details that crack the subject open allowing the reader to drink her in - not just her physical self but her emotional self. We experience her, her beauty, her poise, her awkwardness, her vulnerabilities, her desires. Trethewey allows herself to explore not just what she sees in the image but what is suggested by the image. She delves deeper. I believe her choice to omit the images from her collection allowed her to hold the readers' attention and take them on a journey, uninterrupted. We see the 'Ophelia' Trethewey *imagines* her to be. Found images along with quoted material often serve as visual and conceptual cues for the applied research.

I was also drawn to Ocean Vuong's work, particularly *Aubade with Burning City*. The poem opens with a brief explanation. In this introductory blurb, Vuong includes only what is necessary to add power to the piece through greater understanding on the part of the reader. The inclusion of song lyrics from "White Christmas" is haunting and authentic in the context of 'Operation Frequent Wind' that took place during the Vietnam War. Vuong plays with multiple voices and the balance of time and space:

Milkflower petals on the street
like pieces of a girl's dress.

May your days be merry and bright...

He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.

Open, he says.

She opens.

Outside, a soldier spits out
his cigarette as footsteps
fill the square like stones fallen from the sky. *May all*
your Christmases be white as the traffic guard
unstraps his holster (Vuong 10).

The reader is pulled back and forth across the page as if to mimic falling ash, like petals or “pieces of a girl’s dress” floating to the ground. He allows lines to ping-pong like conversation, the movement propelling us forward while the italicized lines interrupt the flow. Additionally, Vuong seems to layer applied research and what is most surely fictionalized elements to create authenticity.

Looking again at Trethewey, I found additional inspiration in both her language and form. Her language is honest, open, and relatable. The narrator invites the reader to get to know her as she gets to know herself. We witness her awakening, her blooming and growing into herself, accepting herself for all that she is as well as what she isn’t. There is concise storytelling through journalistic vignettes that I adore and hoped to capture. Trethewey seems to allow her lines to dictate form, breaking where they beg to be broken, grouping in couplets, triplets, etc. as circumstance demands. At times, she plays with language and the double meaning created by cleverly broken lines.

Look, this is a high-class house—polished
mahogany, potted ferns, rugs two inches thick.
The mirrored parlor multiplies everything—

One glass of champagne is twenty. You’ll see
yourself a hundred times. For our customers

You must learn to be watched. Empty... (11).

In the above piece, *Countess P—'s Advice for New Girls*, the word 'polished' could easily refer to the house in its entirety or to the mahogany.

There are indeed all sorts of men
who visit here: those who want
nothing but to talk or hear the soft tones
of a woman's voice; others prefer
simply to gaze upon me, my face
turned from them as the touch
only themselves....(18).

Here in Ophelia's *February 1911* journal entry "my face" allows customers to gaze upon her face more intimately or, if we continue on to the next line, her face turned away so that men might "touch only themselves" in a private moment of arousal.

...in Jackson Square, Cabildo
and Cathedral, spires pricking

a tumble of clouds, releasing,
it seems, our daily dose of rain...(25).

And here in *July 1911*, we see "spires pricking" which could refer to the prick of judgement from the church or spires pricking "a tumble of clouds."

As I developed this collection, I kept thinking about the value of language, the almost limitless power language has to convey almost anything. Yet, within the power of language lies a multitude of possibilities that must be finessed and sculpted. Restraint is key. Trethewey's words made sense to me when considering a subject like the Triangle fire:

...I do have difficult things, difficult knowledge, that I want to convey in such a way that the readers will be compelled to see and hear it. The restraint of the image, the restraints of form, serve as elegant vise-grips around something like a cross burning, so attention goes first to what the language is doing. Then the horror of the experience seeps in through the restraint and the formality of the language (Schwartz, np).

Restraint allows the poet to control the impact and release of information so the experience, the full magnitude of an event, can be realized. Restraint allows readers time to digest what they're feeling and experiencing without the distraction of the event itself. Restraint allows readers to experience a more complete range of emotions than they might if they were confronted head-on by the details of a traumatic event. For example, in detailing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the American retaliation, I chose, in one instance, to offer readers tiny vignettes in the form of haiku to control the speed with which readers experienced the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I wanted to restrain the language dramatically to maintain control over the power of not only the content itself but also the image(s) conveyed to the reader. I wanted the power of the linguistic imagery to burn — slowly.

I believe, like Trethewey, that there is an inherent intimacy in poetry — “a single voice speaking out against silence to whoever might listen...the voice of poetry allows us to listen, to really listen” (Schwartz np). We listen with all of ourselves—intellect, body, breath. Poetry seems to speak through us and to the deepest parts of ourselves until it becomes a part of our very being. Poetry has the capacity to change us. I know it changed me.

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S O O T

COURAGE IS A FUGITIVE leaving me
scrambling while others fly down
like doves chasing lovers,
they flutter through windows
to escape —

We rise, ascending with the heat to the roof
where scraps, wooden bridges the gap
between life and death, *from one building*
to the other

Ida Kornweiser

a fugitive caught,
courage found
to walk planks to live
where others fly —

POVERTY DISTORTS PERCEPTION—
childhood: expendable yet fleeting
as a meal in the dead of winter.

Collecting scraps, lacy tendrils reaching
from floor-born, heel-ground masses

we fumbled through the oil — hands tiny,
capable, innocent enough to grovel

up leavings, content enough to pocket
a penny less than our worth. We burrowed

headlong into the darkest corners of legality
Invisible *they would push me into the toilet to hide*

Ida Kornweiser

we crouched — hidden like acorns in the snow
anticipating spring to sprout and grow unnoticed

we waited for prying eyes to look past the clear
infraction that meant opportunity where there wasn't

one more day to be a child.

THE PULL of taut, stretched cotton tugs my arms, my legs
stiffen, resisting the beacon of light searching for life

and motionless I lay, mind wandering
resisting each
tick
tock.
Mother's voice disrupting
the silence —

Deeper I retreat, mind convincing body to lie
still, hidden beneath a white cavern of contentment

afraid of what's beyond. Drifting thoughts
tether my limbs to my sides, hands gripping
fists full, unable to fight
the silence —

Deeper I fall, mind
turning
twisting
stitching lace, sleeves set-in, thoughts racing,

reality holding me captive, a thief
stealing time lurking in the shadows
quenching
revealing
the darkness —

and I hear it, faint as a breeze, loud
as thunder: a siren screaming in the distance.

Memories and icy beads gather
rolling over hairs standing on ends

with a blackness that slides over eyelids
like a blindfold. Soot chokes lungs,

that rise and fall slowly, pinned
by the pressure of the past

haunting waking dreams turning to
nightmares, where sirens call
and smoke fills
—the darkness.

AMONG THE PANIC a hopeless mass of humanity
searching for protection, they fumbled in the dark
plumes of thick black smoke and flames followed the
desperate, weak warning from below —
Fire!

Late — too late for order,
too late for options
were few too many and the three reached for stars —
stripes that promised safety, opportunity where there was none
and they leaped huddled in a cocoon of liberty
freedom-bound, plummeting from the ninth to
ground level, beyond the pavement into the depths
together, *buried in the deep.*

Mary Domskey-Abrams

CLUTCHING A PICTURE OF THE SON

and the heavens wept
mourning rain falling streaks of tear
stained cheeks cloaked in darkness—

and the heavens wept
she's lost—shrouded in black

and the heavens wept
umbrellas casting shadows across faces

scarred,
and the heavens wept
marked

and the heavens wept
by goodbyes
and the heavens wept

that never come; and the heavens wept
and the heavens wept

Sorrow: a blanket drenched, heavy

and the heavens wept
communal sadness atop globe-
and the heavens wept

shouldered,
sheltered,

shattered
victims

weighs thick in an air that pours
and the heavens wept

and the heavens wept
and the heavens wept

and the heavens wept
too broken to bend—
and the heavens wept

too angry to forget.

and the heavens wept

SHE STOOD

rising on her toes
pausing to inhale
courage before the fall.

9

Wrapping herself in darkness,
she plunged into the light
desperate to breathe—
for her lungs to fill
painlessly and for the tide
to roll unfettered across
a smooth white sand beach
and back again to the horizon
where colors dance in harmony
and time slows to a crawl

8

but the wind whipped through
her hair, coat fluttering on the
breeze she tore past one
floor then the next considering
the others— before, that
remained and her end laid
out before her along the
pavement sending needles
down her spine and her palms
turned cold and damp

7

as she watched her mother
brush her cheek, her father
sent a swirling cloud of
vanilla-scented smoke
past his glasses, into the
Saturday evening air
and the newspaper crinkled
with a turn— end over end
she tumbled as the haunting
reality snapped into focus:

6

the nets were too weak—
her body tensed, her eyes
clenched, her coat ripped,
catching on a hook at the sixth,
a sound that echoed
down Washington—
she stopped.

Mary Domskey-Abrams

Frozen in time
hanging
snagged,
spared,
breathing— alive.

ALL THE WHITE TURNS BLACK

as yards of crisp white cotton wilt, darkening
a makeshift clothesline, clean and taunt, falls
lifeless transformed to ash while delicate lace
withers falling victim to scorching heat and flame.
Oil-soaked scraps ignite in seconds— determined
ash consuming one row, then the next as embers
alight on the breeze off Washington and two
hundred and forty machines become fuel — food
for an indiscriminate beast. White hot flames devour
the light gives way to darkness

THE BLACKEST SMOKE. Her left thumb caressing her ring finger, she shuffled down the stairs humming softly to herself while thoughts of yesterday tumbled past her lips and erupted in an audible gasp.

The blackest smoke. Ten stories from top to bottom. Her left thumb caressing her ring finger, she shuffled down the stairs humming softly to herself while thoughts of yesterday tumbled past her lips and erupted in an audible gasp that could've been heard by her brother.

The blackest smoke. A reflection. Ten stories from top to bottom. Her left thumb caressing her ring finger, she shuffled down the stairs humming softly to herself while thoughts of yesterday tumbled past her lips and erupted in an audible gasp that could've been heard by her brother if the flames hadn't claimed him. The snapshots were kept in a stack and tied with a bow. We jumped through circles left in the exhale.

The blackest smoke. The bell tolled and the elevator slowed to a stop. Ten stories from top to bottom. A reflection. Her left thumb caressing her ring finger, she shuffled down the stairs humming softly to herself while thoughts of yesterday tumbled past her lips and erupted in an audible gasp that could've been heard by her brother if the flames hadn't claimed him. The kettle squealed, and the photos on the wall bent an ear to the breeze that whipped through the parlor window. The snapshots were kept in a stack and tied with a bow that she tucked in a box under the bed. A pigeon pecked at a crumb. She counted each one along University Place to calm her mind. And we jumped headlong through swirling dark circles and shards of glass.

The blackest smoke. Lofty gray clouds swallowing the blue. We jumped headlong through swirling dark circles left in the wake of the warming air teeming with ash and memory. Ten stories from top to bottom. The elevator slowed to a stop and the bell tolled. Her left thumb caressing her ring finger, she shuffled down the stairs humming softly to herself while thoughts of yesterday tumbled past her lips and erupted in an audible gasp that could've been heard by her brother if the flames hadn't claimed him. And to calm her mind, she counted each one along University Place as if they were stitches, garments left to be sewn between now and then. The kettle squealed, and the photos on the wall bent an ear to the breeze that whipped through the parlor window. A pigeon pecked at a crumb, ignored by passersby, and she wilted recalling her brother and the life she left behind. There was something in the air she didn't trust.

FRIDAY NIGHT

he drops to one knee
bending upward gazing
with a soulful wanting meant
for lovers and speaks —
 tender lips parted,
bud' moyey!
and I'm a giddy whirlwind of
billowing Georgette circling around
the room on a lily-scented breeze.

The phonograph plays *I Didn't Come to Say*
Goodbye and the voice of a girl
I once knew escapes me —

Mary Domskey-Abrams

poproschat'sya

I sing with all my heart,
'yes' pouring
like chocolate in August, sweet,
sensual, desire;
sladkaya

sladostrastnyy

shelaniye

my love is on my lips, in my mind
wandering to a workday skipped,
missed — our places
replaced by others —

And us: upstairs,
behind new machines
that hummm
the soundtrack punctuating each stitch,
my left hand, as if tugged by the string
of a puppeteer, rises —
 showing the ring
 that steals my thoughts,
lifts spirits: an exciting distraction until,
from downstairs a voice speaks —
 anguished, drawn,
 Pozhar! —
 Fire!

And joy transforms to panic, too late
to run from a beast who devours the breath
from your lungs —

poproschat'sya.

FATES SEALED

Hundreds of girls,
mostly Jewish,
 Italian,
 Russian,
most barely twenty,
 most thrilled
to have a job.
 Thrilled to work
shoulder
to shoulder,
behind machines
sewing until our fingers bled—
Blouse
after bloody blouse
until the bell rang—
and we filed in one
 after the other;
 a long line,
waiting.
Waiting for the day to end,
 for another to begin,
 for our sweethearts,
paychecks in hand,
 waiting for the manager
 to rifle
 through our things—
checking our purses for scraps.
Common thieves—
that's what they thought,
we were desperate.
Desperate to feed
our families,
desperate to make
 our way,
desperate to learn
the language, a trade,
to find the freedom,
the happiness
Lady Liberty promised.

They searched
our purses looking
for desperation. And
 the door remained locked—
 Young girls
 guilty,
locked away—
 fates sealed.

WE WERE WALKING when we heard it —
a commotion on Washington: screams,
shrieks that made your teeth ache.

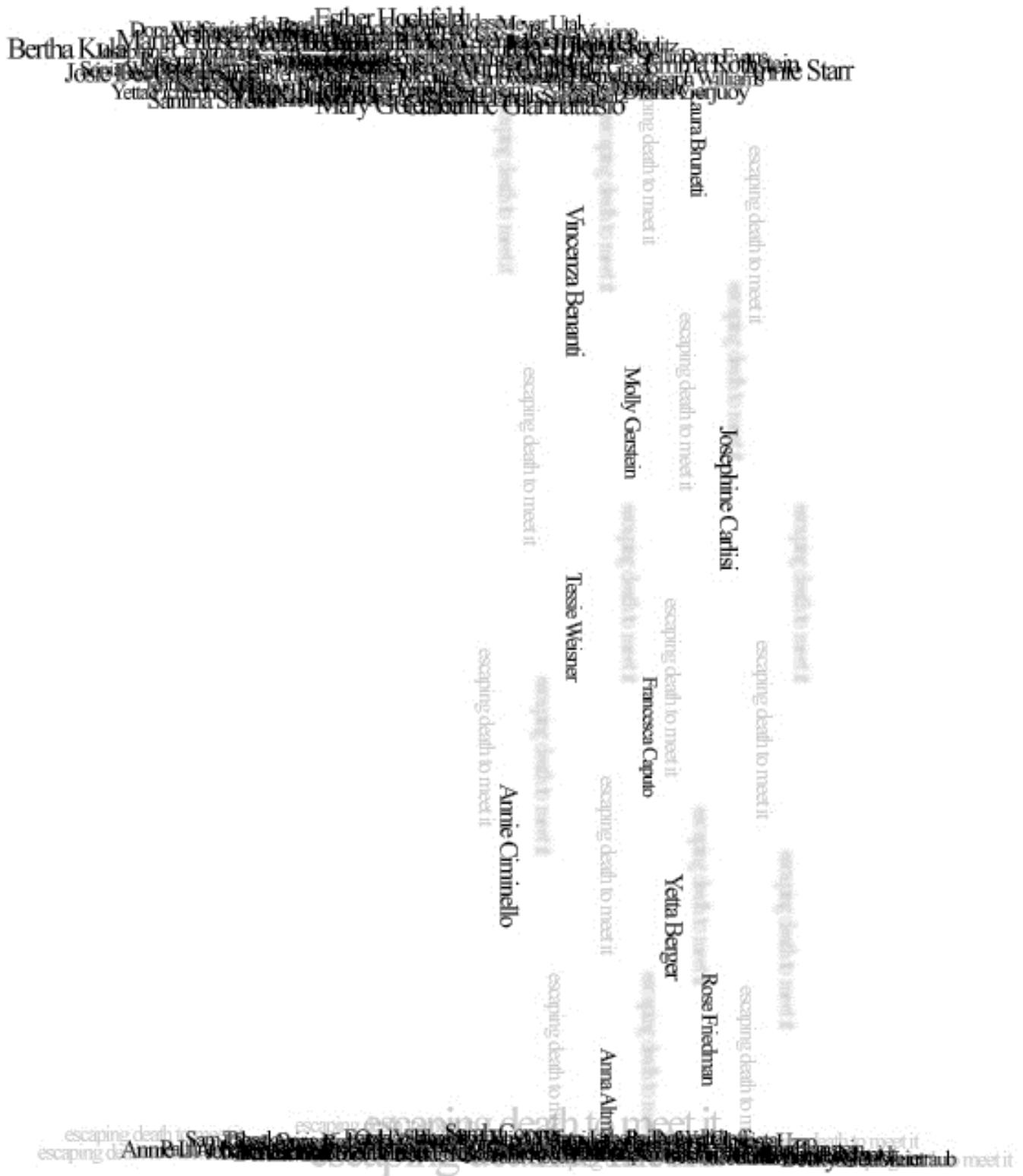
We watched in horror as billowing
black smoke tinged orange with flames
licking the sky, peering through broken
glass— girls one after the other
tumbling through embers,
hair ablaze,
clothes tattered,
a burning,
fluttering

f
r
e
e
f
a
l
l

ending
in a d e a f e n i n g sound
as bodies meet
pavement.

Eraclio Montanaro

NINTH FLOOR AND BELOW



A BAD DREAM

I thought
as smoke filled the room
 "It's a bad dream."
as flames singed our petticoats
 "It's a bad dream."
as the fire escape gave way
 "It's a bad dream."
as the elevator stopped
 "It's a bad dream."
as ladders fell short
 "It's a bad dream."
as hoses sprayed water just shy
 "It's a bad dream."
as they took to the ledges
 "It's a bad dream."
as they leapt out windows
 "It's a bad dream."
I scratched my face,
tore my hair
to wake myself.

Ethel Monick Feigen

A CONSTANT PARADE OF PEOPLE

looking for signs of life

Friendly conversation
between us — Her mother distraught

and it hit me: I couldn't sleep for weeks —
"I dreamed about it at night,"

that I hadn't saved her daughter.
My mother pleading —

"I was falling out of the window screaming."
The whole house waking; me yelling

trying to calm her. *"She lost her mind" —*
"I was afraid to walk on the block where she lived"

in the dark, *"Mama, I just jumped out of the window."*

Rose Hauser

AGAIN TODAY

Member of the Triangle Price Committee: *"Mr. Bonstein, why is there no water in the buckets? In case of a fire, there would be nothing with which to fight it."*

Triangle Manager, Bonstein: *"If you'll burn, there'll be something to put out the fire."*

I pass them —
empty mouths rusted,
scarred, misshapen, open
they swallow the clacking,
humming, chatter that rises
persistent in a cloud
over the ninth floor.

Above the rattle,
my mind lays stolen —
haunted by raspy groans
from a trio of buckets moaning
distraction — warning, pleading
for water to quench an
endless thirst.

Elbows bump —
We squeeze, threading ourselves
between chairs staggered back to
back lacing eight-foot aisles of
machines drowning voices,
thoughts, worries while
scraps litter the floor

and I stitch. Counting in one,
two,
threes — empty.

Machines cry oily tears
flowing beneath busy feet —
creeping up wicker fingers
that clutch mountains of work

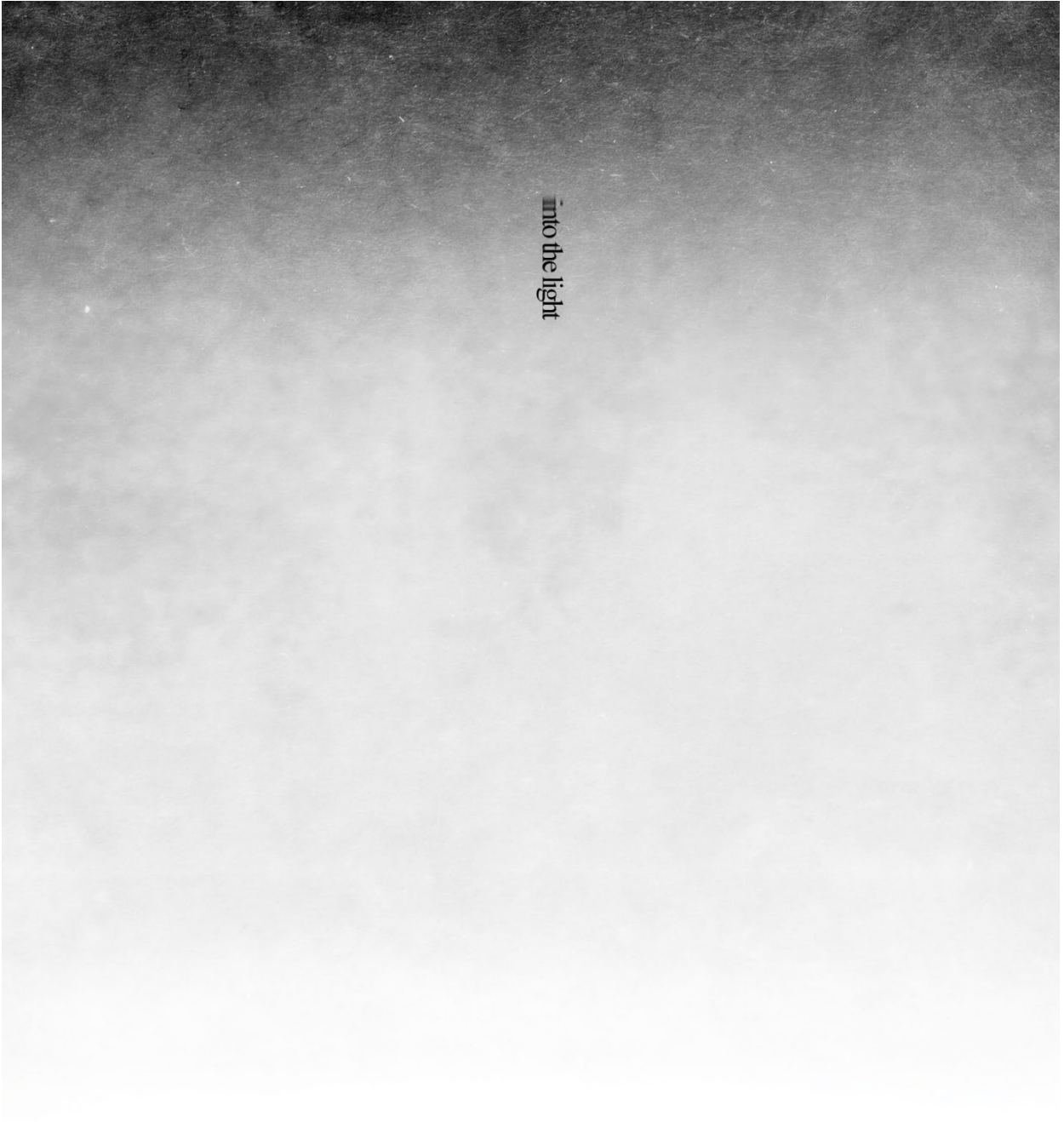
like handkerchiefs stitched
with detonation cord tendrils
hungry for sparks.

Skirts dance dusty circles around
ankles, heels that click —
shirtwaists rustle, fingers graze
steel and shock. Wincing sideways
glances at sunbeams as if they could
ignite scraps with a flash —
a waking omen.

The rattle and hum fades
distant in time. Mouths that form
voiceless words fall silent
on ears overcome by a chatter
that could be heard in the
dark, alone at night —
inescapable

and I stitch. Counting in one,
two,
threes — empty.





S H A D O W

AMERICAN DISTRACTION

From a photograph, circa 1942

Cool November winds bring uniformed distraction—
American GIs flooding British shores, flashing
silver tongues with all the charm and warmth
to ignite a fire from a single spark of conversation
in the street. Men whose words clung to the
London air with an unfamiliar drawl—legs
moving with a swagger that beckoned one to follow
Anywhere, even four thousand miles across
the pitching, churning Atlantic to the promise of an
exotic American dream.

TORN

From a photograph, circa 1942

Peeking from behind a mountain of paper
mother's protection unfolds

*Never shielding a daughter from her own desires
any more than the shade offers shelter from the wind —*

scattered paper like misdirected thoughts
of you. Sailing from table to floor

*a daughter anxious to dive bare feet
first into the Atlantic Ocean — into hungry whitecaps*

wanting me closer, close as the paper
floating from table, sneaking from the shadows —

*unplanned. 'It's not what you were
meant to do — to sail across the sea, alone*

hidden in a box of desires laid under
the stairs: my life sorted, my fate decided,

*waves of guilt and loneliness will swallow you
whole. Salty water won't quench your thirst*

longing for me to wed an English boy, to settle
in London, close enough to brunch on Sunday —

*but you can't any more than whiskey
can drown your sorrows.'*

but I can't. I'm not as torn
as you wish me to be.

MARGARET

From a photograph, circa 1942

The draft created an ocean between
love and duty, between obligation and
drunken past-born promises —
heels and flirty hems inching higher
tide rolling, room spinning, rug-
cutting newness born from smoke
filled lines whispered in the dark
amongst mixed company airborne
on tattered wings. I see her there
kind, with mischievous eyes and a
confident smirk — a Londoner with
pale lipped kisses blown over the heads
of my countrymen — on their shoulders,
their backs broken, bruised, heroic a toast to
the allied forces. Our promises of freedom
far removed from the innocent shores of
family clutching handkerchiefs and telegrams
with news of a son's return and a new daughter
born of war.

From a photograph, circa 1943

AND A SONGBIRD SINGS—

your voice: strong enough to set butterflies
in motion, soft enough to calm them,

you spoke and I was dancing on silver-
lined clouds across the hardwood
war to our backs, underfoot, forgotten

sounds transformed from sirens to horns, bombs
to drums — the pulse of the music reminding us
we're alive. You in your Navy blues, me in

a brown woolen suit — tweedy specks of orange
and cream, the scent of rose mingling with sandalwood,
musk, and scotch. I toss my hair, press my chest

into yours. You, strong hand in the small of my
back, exhaling whispered, whiskey-laced
promises of a new year removed from the gray

days as if the sun would rise across the ocean
waves of happiness drowning our sorrow,
mending the tiny moth hole on my right lapel

our dreams taking flight on moth's wings.

SHORE TO SHORE

From a photograph, circa 1944

Many thought it cliché, but we settled on Valentine's Day loving the sentiment — a farewell party masquerading as a wedding day to remember: cake, flowers, music, champagne, tearful goodbyes from family and friends, a bittersweet collection of snapshots — a box full of memories reminding me of the love traded and lost by spring when loneliness and isolation filled the holes in photos where family once stood. I watch loved ones fade from view — the sun retreating behind the clouds and the distance from shore to shore growing farther than it had ever been.

THE SOUND OF ROSES

From a photograph, circa 1944

I saw it in a magazine.
 white painted
 arch
lattice bending
 reaching
 in an elegant
backbend,
 feet planted,
hands, fingers spread
 gripping tufts,
 grass twining over,
 under meeting
thorny stems,
 wandering roots.
Arms long
 wrap through window-
 panes,
as waxy black-
 green leaves
 chime with the wind,
a chorus
 blossoms—
and I imagine
 growing old
 listening
 to the roses
bloom with you.

FROM SHADOW

From a photograph, circa 1945

Alone with cold cotton sheets,
stale air swirling behind the bedroom
door as it shuts, stuffing my nose
with sweat and worn leather
pushing me to the ocean—
body rolling, limbs reaching
with the tide for belonging
steps swallowed by time
flowing in circles,
fingers tracing rims—
a duet danced hotly to
music I cannot hear—
silenced by dark, smoky
vapor swirling around
a piano humming sounds of love
making perfume-scented dreams,
my nightmare. A competition
I cannot win—
Their memory hanging on
a ringing line ending in silence.
And my thoughts race, screaming,
alone—
lost against the sun
casting long, dark shadows
holding me captive,
keeping me blinded
by the seed I must tend.
Where power from the light
is seen in the darkest shadows.

I.

The telephone pole
leans towards the house to whisper
an ill-conceived line.

A backyard circus
with a powerline trapeze
where the squirrels go nuts.

Singing cicadas
speak from branches overhead
the song of summer.

The backyard is full —
from one side to the other
water, not grass grows.

A welcome retreat
for neighborhood kids bringing
their swimsuits and towels.

Eager and sun-soaked
kicking against the water —
rosy noses burn.

Red shoulders feel hot —
making showers hurt and sting!
Straps leave stark white marks.

Squeals of delight soar
over fences making waves
until sundown comes.

With quiet darkness
the chirping of a cricket —
the croak of a toad.

The snail is moving
picking up speed only when
I'm looking away.

The water is calm.
Stars reflect back to heaven
in conversation.

The air starts to cool
as Autumn's breeze is afoot —
the swimmers retreat.

II.

Green leaves turn to red
and a rumble overhead
disturbs the silence.

Planes take to the sky —
with the coming of winter,
the tides are turning.

Whispers on the wind:
Operation Meetinghouse
storms the Pacific.

Ripples in coffee
disrupt a Sunday morning.
A surprise attack.

The clouds shift orange
as Hell rains from the heavens —
the birds fall silent.

The groan of bombers
fill the void where birds once sang
and Tokyo burns.

Firebomb squads soar —
the city, singed and tattered
does not surrender.

Bright white light — then a
rolling wave of destruction
devoured what was.

Clothes burned from our flesh,
shadows walked where souls once stood.
Life seared from our bones.

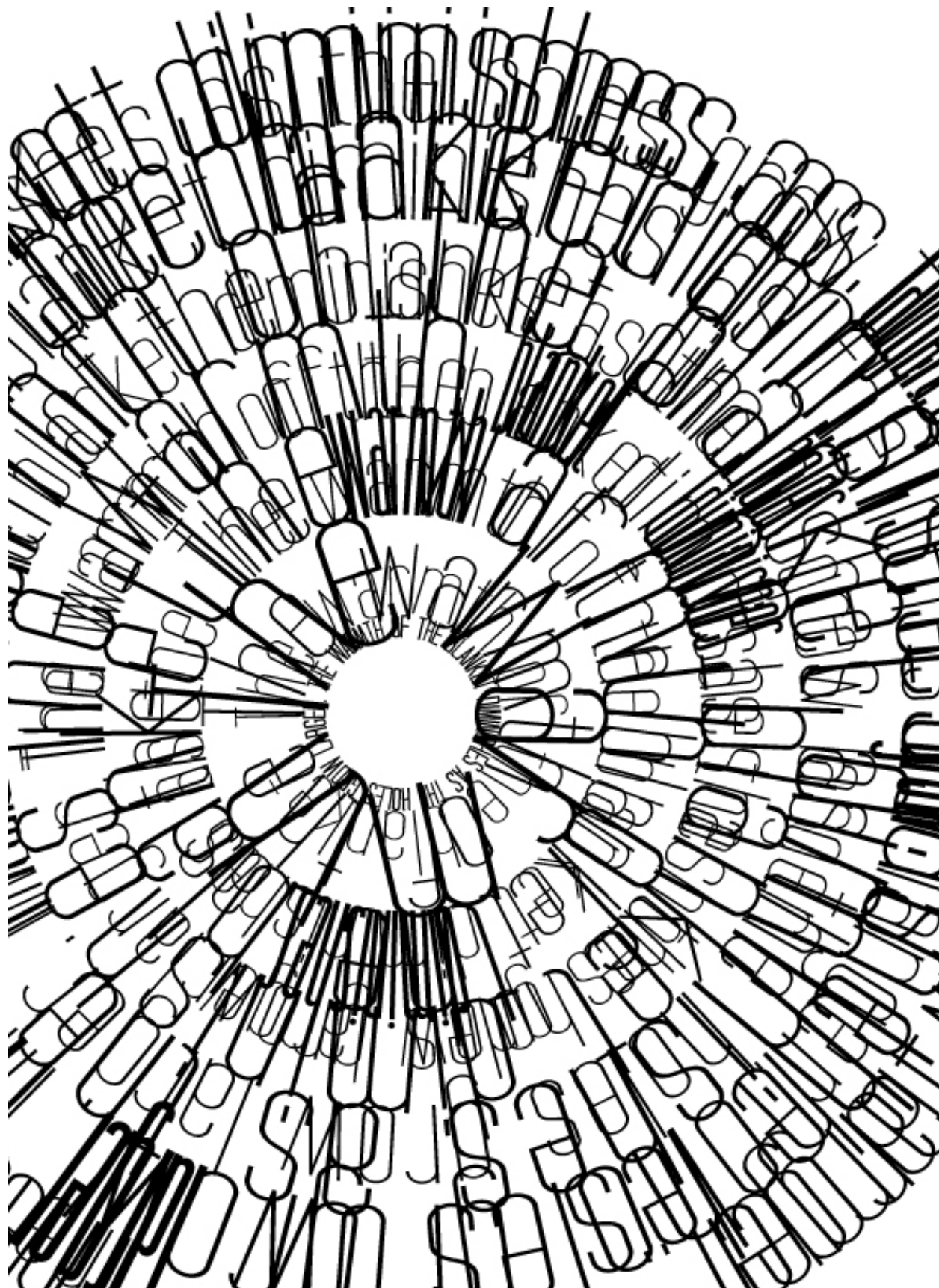
Another bomb fell
before surrender
and with it the end.

It's as if THE SUN BROKE OPEN and spilled
onto the surface of the earth:

so bright that we lost ourselves
so bright that the colors were consumed,
bleached silent, stolen.

And the bleach bled out—
choking our voices, nibbling our flesh until nothing
but bones remained.

Like a flash of a camera
ripping our souls from us leaving a shadow—
a fingerprint smear, a charcoal
memory with weight greater than the nothing
we became in an instant.



I PUT THEM IN MY POCKET— greedy fingers
feeling for a seam: a familiar line

connecting one piece to another, past to present
known to unknown. It wasn't the bonding thread,

its sinuous trail following my curves from waist
to thigh, but the frayed edge of the union between—

the whisper thin space keeping the inside in and
the outside out. A secret sneaking between

lips parted, an exhale of *truth* weaving
its way beyond borders looking for its

target. And it came like a Raven
tooling its way to a treat—unspotted,

unprepared for the acorn dropped by its captor
surprising the earth upon impact—

It was the impulse, the reactionary
tick that unraveled the thread exposing

bare, the flesh of my nation.

and what if my MY REFLECTION a stranger's eyes
knew everything was different— since the fall
brought the light to time and large panes telling stories
from another place, blocked the lost children crying for
a childhood buried deep in the noonday sun searing rubble, trapped alive
in a present no one wanted with mirrors blinding an unspeakable
reality: that turned life
withered and pale to rose aged and foreign
slender, soft fingertips until she fell calloused, broken-
hearted, deeper longing for
innocence and the girl that found confident
familiarly who stared comforting.
She picked back at hangnails
nervously mocked me hoping to
fade into masking a background of
noisy static stares eager to expose
weaknesses with lies, the truth
raw, pure diversions stones skipping
across the surface, hidden beneath a fragile newness,
tense: a reflection jarred, broken
by round eyes that stare, leering—
I wish couldn't smile wouldn't smile
back.

EARLY SPRING, WHEN THE WARMTH RETURNS

cherry tree blossoms,

limbs overhead fill with fragrant pink

flowers until they wither, dropping to the street below—
a signal to begin again

and my fondness of you grows.

NOTES

I

Father died this summer
before Tokyo fell. Shattered—
scorched to pieces

scattered ashes cast into
the open mouth of the wind
swept loneliness and dusty tears.

I

I started walking to school once Papa died.
Three full blocks on golden walks
embraced by Maples weeping—
their vibrant tears of autumn meant
the end for us was near.

And it was.
Our school was shut and the trees
continued their swan
song while we worked.
Zero fighters replaced books—
And I walked.

We were doing it to survive.

We were doing it for Japan.

We believed it
until fire consumed everything—
And I ran.

Stumbling over shards of teapot's broken wings,
fragile birds of porcelain feathered memories
ground to dust under tattered, tired shoes. Aching
for Maples to shed tears from blackened limbs
and for technicolor to drown the hushed sounds of
black and white.

Hiroko Furukawa

I

Say surrender. A blazing orange sky. Aflame. Say that you remember
cicadas screaming through the broken limbs— stopping
only when the broken shards ended. Leafless.

Say the sun rises. Amber. Say it's over.

That the green grass will grow through shattered crevices
sprouting confused. Say that you love me
despite myself. Say that I can claw my way through the rubble to find
a memory of noodles filling entwined in a blue crane painted
bowl of hope. Lost. Say you'd forgive me for losing myself in
a memory. Say you'd forgive me for losing myself in a dream.
Say that I wasn't wrong for wanting to shake off the dust. The ashes.
For leaving mother.

I

Stepping through the looking glass, I felt it. Destruction
gobbled whole like chocolate coating the palate,
erasing the bitter fruit.

I

Persistence. A raven puzzled, working to crack the nut.

I

I disappeared behind the counter. Crouching. Hiding until the uncomfortable silence of your
finger leaving prints was too much. I scrubbed as you pointed at the shining jewelry held captive
beneath the glass, my eyes never left the surface. Your hand grazed mine. I stopped. Turned.
Retreated. We did it again tomorrow.

I HELD MY BREATH as the pink cord split the sea
blue sash in two, my body divided—

Lotus float under tendrils
that fall from the bow at my waist

and a sea of blue silk reminds me of home:
blossoms skipping the hem.

My foot slides down the first of thirteen steps—
last giving way to the living room

where gasps and darting eyes trace patterns
like sparklers caught in an open shutter—

and I stand, kimono trembling, waiting
for disapproval to overtake my pride.
And it did.

The stairs opened wide swallowing
my Japanese frame, spitting back an *American*.

A NAME it didn't matter, then it did / I never heard it unspoken / until it didn't please you / a simple word struck-through, erased, deleted, transformed / the her I was, now wasn't, and I became someone else / my memory of a home bruised and broken faded / hands that wiped / glass cases on display / smiling girls selling familiarity / a shadow / baking in the searing foreign / charred remains / breathing deep the soot colored air of memories / lost a day from my journal / torn and tattered / my penmanship changed / smooth curves, confident forms / transform pointed / with uncomfortable spaces between / us / you and I were different / until time made us more the same / I thought you were the tether / the tide / the one to bring me to shore / then as quickly as I cast my anchor, my mind drifted to sea / clutching the waves / reaching for home / I followed the current.

SPACES BETWEEN

UNSAID

“And if I were to die tomorrow?” he said

Don’t say it, I thought, tracing the line of his
jaw with the back of my hand, feeling the warmth
of his cheek, his lips, his breath —

“What would you miss?”

How much better we were together, I thought.
I rest my head on his chest listening for a quickening
beat as my fingers trace down his torso to his navel —

“I’d miss the way your back arches, stiffens, raises
when you want me, how you giggle when you’re
nervous, how the sun sets your hair aflame, how
your breath quickens with your pulse when I touch you” —

I pinch his nipple, then nibble gently

“I barely recall life before us,” he said. “We’ve been ‘we’
longer than I was just me.”

I close my eyes and nod while memorizing his
shapes with my hand, the soft skin of his inner
bicep, how the fine hair disappears into silken folds

“I don’t remember a time when I didn’t love you,” he said.

I kissed his collarbone, his neck, his temple —
the lips I knew better than my own and salty
tears mingled with his taste,
I can’t forget

losing the memory in the downy hollow —
sheets once warm, now cool holding lingering
sandalwood with memories so vivid
I could touch you.

“I miss you,” I said.

DEFORESTATION

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THE CELLIST

Immersed in sounds of you —
silken chords lilting like feathers, tumbling
legato — you, posture perfect gripping
the neck, the sinew, the bow, creating

skin like porcelain — smooth as satin, delicate,
graceful, flows over slender limbs: arms that
end in dainty wrists and long elegant
fingers, controlled and tender.

Smooth determined strokes glide *largo*,
largo, largo, slowly, *larghetto* —

Gentle yet dominant, the instrument
responds willingly, timid to resist, timid
to react. Legs splayed out before me,
maestoso — cradling the shapely body

the pace quickens, *collé*,
collé, faster, *martelé* — *ritardando*

My fists clenched in passionate agony
aching for you to materialize —
to spring forth from my imagination
to grant me one touch

Rubato —

LOST IN DIMMED BLISS

“We still are whether we remember
where we’ve been or not,” she said
watching as a herd of antelope ran through
the Savannah beyond the confines of
the Zenith.

“Stop them before they go there. Before
they know more about us than I do. Before
yesterday is past me now.”

“The more recent the thought,
the dimmer —”

A glow on eggshell
walls strange and foreign

Strangers:
 pick,
 poke,
 prod,
 take,
 touch —

Mockingbirds dart through
openings in time, season after

seasoning the thoughts before they
run free with pink flowers

on a sofa leftover from
home right across the street

“but was it, or not; it fades
the familiar photographs on
walls where he watches
as I sleep —”

“I miss a lifetime sharing
shadows lost in the pale glow of

this morning's dimmer."

"Before I am here, we are."

NEAR THE END WITH A CUP OF COCOA

July 2017

Food is more than sustenance.

November 1981

Grandma shows me how to make hot chocolate. How she picks the perfect pot — Not the big pressure cooker or the smaller saucepan, but the medium-sized one, the one with the copper bottom and smooth black handle. The one banged about until it doesn't sit right on the burner; instead, it wobbles from side to side looking for stability. She tells me whole milk is best and pours it into the pan straight from the carton until there's just enough liquid to steady the wobble.

July 2017

The wobble makes the pot perfect. The same way scratches on a guitar make the sound warmer, better. The way mistakes teach us more than perfection.

September 1976

I am small, feet dangle over the edge of Grandmother's bed. I'm not sure what cancer is or what "the end" means, but she's been sick as long as I can remember, all three of my years. I wonder if it's like the end of a Warner Brothers cartoon, only more urgent.

November 1981

She turns up the heat. "Don't go too hot," she says. "If you crank it too high, it will scorch, and you don't want that. Just stick to medium or lower. That's best." With a wink, she hands me a wooden spoon, "Now keep stirring."

September 1976

The bed seems a mile high and the blanket, softer than my teddy bear. The room is dim with the curtains drawn, the only light is from a small bulb in the ceiling fixture, but I see the lines on her face, the way her skin falls in delicate folds like her nightgown, every piece of her visible just below the surface. There are so many things I don't know or understand. I'm seeing more than I should. Everything feels so fragile, my mother's emotional state, my father's patience, her voice, her skin, her bones, her breathing. I think my breath might somehow steal one away from her.

July 2017

Three years is not long enough to know someone, not long enough to learn who they are, not long enough to know how much they mean until they're gone.

November 1981

I stir until steam rises from the pot just as it does from the warm lake water on cool autumn mornings. I stir while she breaks two Hershey bars onto wax paper in perfect Hershey-monogrammed chunks. I watch, taking it all in, anticipating the rich chocolatey aroma, its smooth texture in my mouth. She turns off the burner then points to the spoon rest. Holding the wax paper along the edges allowing it to drape like a hammock between her hands, the chocolate nestled in its curve. She allows the paper to funnel the chocolate into the pot tapping every crumb into the steaming milk.

“Wait,” she says.

September 1976

My parents allow me to sit with her for a few minutes before my father takes me into the hallway. I bite my lip, don’t cry.

July 2017

Precious moments feel like hours, like the years between Christmases. Patience, once learned, manages to make sugar taste that much sweeter.

April 1978

Granddaddy stays in the same house alone. Within it, the same orange and brown floral sofa, the same gold chairs with wood trim, the same console TV with the brass sailboat clock on top, all in the same places year after year. His favorite chair is the one by the window with the ottoman where he watches the birds in the backyard while smoking pack after pack of Marlboro Reds.

November 1981

I stare into the pot watching the steam rise from the surface, anxious to see it transform from white to a rich chocolate brown. After about ten minutes, she points again to the spoon, then gives a nod towards the pot. I grab the spoon and plunge it into the hot Liquid.

Steadying my hand, “Gently,” she says.

February 1982

One day there’s another woman. She’s gentle, kind, exactly what Granddaddy needs. She cooks, cleans, and plays 42. They love dominos, coffee, and each other. I love visiting and doing things their way. Our house isn’t too far. We try to visit as often as we can because Granddaddy isn’t driving much anymore.

July 2017

It’s hard to see things come full circle, to watch them need you as much as you needed them.

November 1981

I stir feeling the thickness of the chocolate pushing against the spoon. The white shifts from stark to freckled to tan then brown. I look up at Grandma and smile. She grins while taking a small bottle from the cabinet.

“Vanilla — the secret ingredient.”

September 1983

Mornings are a comforting string of daily rituals. Granddaddy takes his coffee black in a dainty cup and saucer lined with tiny pink flowers. He spoons the coffee from the cup to the saucer until it holds just enough to make it to his mouth without spilling then slurps the blackness with gusto. He enjoys his biscuits with butter and sugar, shu-shu bread, as he calls it, melted butter and sugar in harmony. Eventually, Granddaddy gives up the Reds but not the coffee or shu-shu bread; I doubt I could give them up either.

July 2017

The shu-shu bread this morning makes me wish I drank my coffee from a saucer.

November 1981

Resting the bottle on the edge of the pan, she pours a thin stream of vanilla. I continue stirring glancing up with eager eyes every couple of seconds. Grandma places two mugs on the counter both blue with white insides. After giving the cocoa a final stir, she fills each cup.

Pushing one towards me, she says, “Careful now; it’s hot. You have to blow it, like this.”

March 1987

Following Grandmother’s death and hundreds of batches of shu-shu bread, I understand what it means to be near the end. When Granddaddy’s time comes, I bite my lip but still cry.

November 1981

I follow her lead and blow across the surface until the anticipation is too much to bear. I tilt the cup to my lips and slurp.

July 2017

It’s funny the things we remember, the things that change us, how reaching the end of a cup of cocoa can make us smile and cry. Food is so much more than sustenance.

CLOSET POSTERS

The closet wasn't light enough
or big enough to find myself
pinning to the Eggshell walls —
"It goes with everything"

Posters

staring at the emptiness,
sitting on my hands, eager
to streak dirty fingers
leaving prints of
my own

all over the Eggshell —
"Don't touch the walls"
but I couldn't — I didn't
do anything but
wish for

a closet big enough to stash
bits of myself, sprawling
over one Eggshell wall —
between hanging arms
and legs

fingerprints, posters, pins
in the corners of glossy prints —
"No holes in the walls"
where holes are now empty
Eggshell walls.

FROM ME TO YOU (*The Wind* vs. *2012 Tornado* - Lancaster, TX)

Tell me it doesn't please you. Hands entwined
bending spears of grassland tendrils — swaying
in unison as fluffy elephants, whales, and ships sail
crosswise in our sea of azure blue. But you —

you couldn't resist a desperate, frenzied
spectacle, spinning on point — dizzying
cloud-born pirouettes dancing buoyant;
stolen partners cast aside. Your jilted lovers'

reckless ballerina confusing sorrow with elation;
You: (busy making the papers) juggling trailers
aloft, your frenzied funnel of self-indulgent Hell
bent on destruction. We are different you and I —

an empathetic pollinizer turned sociopath. Lives
uprooted, ripped savagely limb from limb while you
laugh as mismatched knitted pairs soar, displaced —
snagging like homesick jewels on oaken earlobes.

FROM YOU TO ME (2012 *Tornado* - Lancaster, TX vs. *the Wind*)

Lie to me you bitch. Tell me it doesn't please you knowing there's a reset, like
the flood wiping the blight from the horizon in a dance of undetermined category
two opposing points of view you and me — what if my purpose is to wipe the board?

Toss the rooks and pawns airborne to scatter painfully on new beginnings —
fresh starts from the foundation. Do you not fan the flames that devour? Are we that
different? Playing innocent in a blameless game of chance is a sordid lie, my

fair-weather friend; it is my burden to teach the short-sighted a lesson, one hard
learned, that life is no more perfect than promised, that all could be lost, toppled
like cards, cast to you in an instant.

IT FELT COLD TO ME, the rip
of sticky tape like sticky
screams: boxed memories
for the road. Distressed

cries and cardboard. I stunned;
he there, (prize in hand)
walking to the back
of the car, tossing it in —
"Damn cat."

I begged; crying,
pleading with him
to tell me why —

he walked away. Windows
turned to walls; mortar
and thinly veiled promises
fell away empty. He could've

made a go but picked purse
strings laced with silver lined
clouds, (days that became

lifetimes.) It's all; he's done —
clinging to father's legacy and
mother's needs. The day

we saw time spent,
wasted, like shelter
colored leavings: unseen
obligation. Until he

stood with nothing —
just a box of misplaced dreams
and a daughter who knew it.

WHAT IF I had worn jeans
if I had cut my hair short
if I had been more forceful
if I had stayed home
if I had taken a friend
if I hadn't worn makeup
if I hadn't thought you were special
if I hadn't thought you were smart
if I hadn't been gullible
if I hadn't been there
if I didn't think we were friends
if I didn't want your attention
if I didn't see it coming
if I didn't want it
if I didn't see it with my eyes closed
if I didn't hear that song and cry
if I didn't feel violated
if I didn't feel dirty
if I didn't feel guilty
if I didn't hate myself
if I hadn't trusted you
if I trusted myself
I said no.

SUMMER CONDUCT

An early summer evening
 Zap! The bug catcher kills with a snap —
Balmy and quiet, except for a buzzing
 Young birds flitting, flying, looking over the
Cicada choir led by a
 Xeric landscape longing for
Deft and flashy firefly.
 Water — plants rustle, swish, sway
Eerie clouds stretch eastward
 Vigorously in the wind
Folding warm and cool,
 Underfoot the ground burns hot
Green and white, colorless
 Tender feet blister
Humidity hanging thick as
 Scorch, painful
Intermittent breezes howl
 Red skimming the surface
Jingling chimes ping, ching, and ting what they
 Quietly longing for soft
Know, that a mid-July storm
 Pillowry grass to soothe.
Languishing out west
 Only dry shards, yellow
Moves closer. The cicada song fades
 Needles remain —
Note by note into the warm
 Mounds of brittle, broken grass
Oleander air as the winds
 Long dead
Pick up speed and Mulberry leaves
 Kindling crunches, snaps
Quake with a dull rattle in anxious
 Just as charred
Reaction. My father's
 Insect carcasses
Smile broadens as large droplets
 Hang motionless defying
Tick, tick, ping the tin overhead. Safe
 Gravity dreaming for
Under cover, the orchestra begins with a tap,
 Flight —
Volume increases; the thunderous timpani, a
 Electrified. Summer

Woeful warning of what's to come. Once
 Dandelions wilt
Xeric, the cracks fill in seconds. We listen
 Crumbling, bending
Yearning for more from the over-
 Broken beneath
Zealous conductor.
 A crippling noonday sun.

WHITE-SPACES

What if the negative space humming gently— vibrations echoing static, a stone's voice the blank returns from the canyon, darting about the void bringing the response— silent the dialog, a conversation felt in the blinding light of memory, thought, whispers expansive spoken, a reply no one hears— seen, felt, experienced pushing back against page the line, the breath exhaled from the lung of the page. An imaginary scaffolding spoke circles around reaching, arms outstretched, bridging the gap between nothing lines darting in and something. Nothingness that is more than it isn't— a concrete nothing and out allows something to exist where it didn't before. A nothing that pushes against of the exhale the something. Weightless punctuation, a collaborative, personal pause giving language voice allowing line after line to dim the soulful brightness of the page. to speak What if I overtook the chatter? If blankness was something and something a gentle breath passing was nothing, Four Thirty-Three means more than Caged silence. between — from me to you A threshold we cross, "inflicted silence" seems louder when white followed by piercing lines said against the unsaid. Words resonate against those to black preceding and those that follow, vibrating, jumping the bridge between spoken negative and unspoken— the in-between spaces that ignite the imagination allowing to positive meaning to exist. My responsibility is weighted, full, heavy, and weightless, the way light gives so much and so little— I offer you this: an open abyss to traverse shadow form and weight a tightrope from one line, one word, one thought to the next pausing given pause to consider the gravity of nothing and the weight of silence. shaping spaces An ocean ebbing and flowing, buoyant, lifting, pushing lines shore to forming words shore— Alive until drought stifles meaning, silencing the very voice thoughts that now stands alone in the void, run aground, breathless, silent, a flood of sculpted, carved from darkness that's nothing without the light. A ship without the sea, the collaboration a symphony without rests, stars without the sky, a poem without pause— between word darkness overtaking the light devouring meaning as it goes, a one-sided and silence. Conversation without the means to leap across the void to the other side.

Vita

Christa Crawford studied Metals and Jewelry at the University of North Texas (UNT) in Denton. She has had her work shown publically in Denton, TX at the Lightwell Gallery as well as in countless juried exhibitions throughout the state of Texas. Christa also holds a MS in Learning Technologies from UNT, but has been working in graphic design for twenty plus years. She currently works as a graphic designer in the Dallas area and has had numerous graphic works published in various publications in and around Dallas/Ft. Worth and on the web. Christa's literary journey has only just begun although her love affair with language began at an early age.

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