

CROSS POLLINATION

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Degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

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Seedlings & Saplings

Stretching Towards Significance

tonight the milky way tilts on the pond the pond is as black as the sky and the sky sets itself a silver table with tapers that signal in the pond as black fills the hole and the universe resets itself with bone china as dark matter is what matters and the swell of the moon on the pond swells then reneges then cowers as the galaxy expands the moon spins like a hula hoop spins on my hips my ball joints and all this spinning won't matter in a billion years my hips won't matter in a billion years as my hips and my body will reconnect to what it was a billion years ago a billion years ago I did not notice the stretching and how uncomfortable this stretching could be and how we were energy then how we were one and how we stretched apart and vied for our place my atoms vied for a place to linger a space to settle my energy wanted to reconnect with other bodies to consume other energies the way I am consuming the reflection of the tilted milky way and the way I am consuming and ballooning the milky way and reconstituting it into a poem a poem that eats the swell of moon a poem that eats and eats a poem that expands itself to its own end a poem that you are now eating a poem that stretches your thinking around my thinking a poem that connects us to one another a poem that lights up the dark matter in the brain like the navy sky set with silver tapers like the silver tapers that signal on the pond like how these signals give significance to the dark

Tulips

for Gilly

A slim green stance
A turn of the head
A fist full of color
Pink Yellow Red

Spring scented silk
Petal pressed cloth
A tulip spreads gentle
Voluptuous and soft

Ohio Spring

The snow is burning.
Daylight's dial spins cold to hot.
Drip. Drip. Dripping. Drop.

*

Earth's lungs moan and groan
as green beaks poke out from soil,
pushpins for posies.

*

Orange-bellied robins
twist and tweet, weave and wait, and
birth sky-speckled eggs.

Pinafores, Pennies, and Pinwheels

were what was happening on North Hill in the late sixties and seventies, and I wore a pinafore and cartwheeled in a postage-stamp yard and spun round pinwheel style, a fruity somersault-quenching summer. My watermelon-sliced print, punch-pink, was salted with seeds, asphalt granules that spit themselves out when they got dizzy. The pinafore was purchased with one thousand licks, S&H Green Stamps stuck in a book that we used at Montgomery Wards. “Monkey Wards” we called it back then, when Mom was alive and smoking Kent Deluxe cigarettes with movie-star elegance, back when every penny had to double, back when I was in love with *The Monkees* and *The Partridge Family* and started to lick stamps again to save for a camel-colored, crushed and plush-velvet vest, gold-buttoned and as gorgeous as a two-dollar pixie cut. Because I wanted to kiss a boy like Susan Day did while wearing velvet and velour, and I wanted to swoon from the kiss like a pinwheel and play a tambourine and pretend that I had more than two pennies, a pinafore, and a postage-stamp-sized backyard. And now that I have more, I wish I could do a cartwheel and pinwheel on a penny.

Why I Talk to Trees

In the Catholic culture
too many kids
& too many bills
In our neighborhood
patriarchal power
ran through the houses
slammed the doors shut
kept a tight wallet
Domestic violence
was as ordinary
as picking up milk
& bread from the store
Wives were slapped
Belts, paddles,
any hand-held tools
were used to *straighten us kids out*
No one talked about it
No need
We heard it happen
the shove, the push,
the tumble of furniture
& then the silence
We buried our shame in brutality
Snowballs became ice balls
Magnifying glasses, weapons
used to burn holes into bugs,
leaves & worms
When the slap storm
came inside, I focused

on the fifty-foot hemlock tree
standing outside
my bedroom windows
I would talk to it
Cry to it
Count its pinecones
Ask it, why?
When it was over
I would go outside
& hug the tree
bury myself invisible
within its soft needled arms
Time passed
Enough was enough
Mom packed up
four kids and her purse
& walked out
From her courage
I learned I was valuable
I learned how to say no
& forgive
Dad changed
not overnight
but with the support
surrounding us
& from those years of violence
he gave me the gift of fear
a refined intuition
a second sight
that would later save my life

Trophy Trees, Street Kids

Have you ever wondered why giant redwoods in Europe never grow particularly tall? Even though quite a lot of them are more than 150 years old, few have topped 160 feet.

An acquaintance who works with street teens once said to me, “They live in a completely different world.”

In their homeland—forests on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California—they easily grow more than twice that size. Why don’t they do that in Europe?

Their location gives us a clue as to why this might be the case. They were often planted in city parks by princes and politicians as exotic trophies.

She did not mean that street teens live downtown and not in the suburbs, sleep under bridges and not in beds, eat in soup kitchens instead of restaurants.

She meant that street teens experience a social reality radically different from the reality of most of those who have lived in a relatively sheltered and stable middle-classed environment.

What is missing here, above all, is the forest, or—more specifically—relatives.

As my acquaintance understood it, this difference results from experiences at home and in school, experiences with adults who are, at best negligent; at worst, abusive and hostile.

No uncles, no aunts, no cheerful nursery school—no, they have lived all their lives out on a lonely limb.

A fundamental difference is in the area of trust: these teens lack trust in family, teachers, peers, police—even those who seek to help them—and apparently, for good reason, given the circumstances from which many of them emerge.

And what about the many other trees in the park? Don’t they form something like a forest, and couldn’t they act like surrogate parents? To let lindens, oaks, or beeches bring up a redwood would be like leaving human children in the care of mice, kangaroos, or whales.

Complete and familiar strangers may seem threatening; home itself may be a place of bitter competition for food and other scarce resources. In such contexts, the advice to “construct a better world” by trusting more seems inappropriate at best, dangerous at worst.

It just doesn’t work, and the little Americans have to fend for themselves.

Longevity

for the non-violent activists & peacemakers

The sugar pine protects its seeds—
its cones are shuttered, at the top of its trees.

Clusters of brown-beige conical scales,
wait for the warmth to open their sails.

Birds, conifers, & wind pollination:
a chittering, a listening, a conversation.

Blooms budge into nuts, into fruit, into food—
roots share sugar in their neighborhood.

Collections of chants, dissent from their tongues.
Spun cloth & round glasses. A movement begun.

Courage accompanies a witness to trial,
marches to Memphis or the Plaza de Mayo.

A Jew. A Kurd. A Russian. A nun.
He faces a tank. She flowers a gun.

A cloud of tear gas. Dogs set loose.
Burned at the stake. Hung from a noose.

Non-violent resistance wears an orange vest.
A bulldozer to body. A chainsaw to chest.

All felled, felled, all were felled;
trees were killed, voices were quelled.

One by one, by two, by three—
their energies surge through history.

A centuries-old stump is green & alive.
Theories have set sail. Seeds & eyes.

Mature Trees

Where I Find My Voice Most Often

is in the sycamore leaves
all of them so sturdy and responsible
hanging on and on through February
maybe March
They at least
have their aeolian music
a centuries-old composition
that chit-chats around the table
without the goodbyes
It's the wind
that nudges and fiddles each bole
and the lake-effect snow
trumpets
each yellow-brown chime
hell-bent on living
until the buzzards return
and the great blue herons
reclaim their rookeries
When the leaves do let go
 I let go too ~
and I find myself
lying palms up

in the leaf-litter slush

a Spring peeper lodged in my throat

Bearing a Poem

for J.P. Maxwell

Chewed on and churned up
thoughts bare themselves on paper
life unedited

Printing the Brooklyn Bridge

Mayakovsky!

I am here on your Brooklyn Bridge
united with the prudence of pigeons—
their nonjudgmental eyes
sway with the cables that navigate air—
a trapeze artist assessing her present.
Here I step
into anonymity; my Goodwill clothes
hustle and bustle on the catwalk of urban blood.
Below, the East River is a swarm song:
foghorns, boat buzz, and the caw of seagulls.

Beneath these limestone arches,
I stroll with the Roeblings, the sandhogs, the desperate and triumphant,
the climax of Puccini's *Nessun dorma*, the boom of Pavarotti's voice,
the climb of tender notes
nailed by a sixth-grade boys' choir, and the wild
weld of Springsteen's guitar.
I am mud and plaster—
a pour of mortar.
My smile wide as a beam
is frozen and archived
for the rocking chair.
Here I stand
gaping as an old man out of a window,
alive and pinging,
drinking in the dusk and finding my prints fossilized
in the curing cement.

Silver Boots

I had been wearing brown combat boots for six months when Ryan White died.
I shoved my feet into their leather over and over again, hoping they'd be deep
enough to carry my stampede.

My brown hair was Sinead O'Connor short when President Reagan
decided not to visit the AIDS ward at St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village.
He rolled in red-carpet politics, not the red-ribbon kind, until Rock Hudson.

*Michael, when you were diagnosed HIV positive, all the staff at God's Love We Deliver
were devastated. Two months later you were diagnosed with pneumocystis carinii
pneumonia, then you were dying, then dead. I miss your hugs, the softness
of your voice, and the brilliance of your generosity. Your partner Vaughn is still alive.
He lived to be an old man.*

*Casey, when you were diagnosed HIV positive, we all had tears in our eyes. Like the song
by Annie Lenox, "Keep Young and Beautiful," you were so young and beautiful.
Soon you were getting night sweats, then a fever, as Kaposi Sarcoma cancer invaded
your lymph nodes. You grew thinner and thinner, yet still came in to help with our letter
campaigns. Then you died. I miss your presence and perseverance.*

Michael, Casey, Freddie, and Frank, it was the pale sunrises of your fading faces, that charged
me into a five-year frenzy with ACT-UP—a fray that had this fag-hag running rodeos, break-ins,
marches, and dead-ins—after which I'd collapse on my futon, because I did not want to drink the
nightcap of your panicked voices on my answering machine, night after night.

*Monica, this is Casey. I'm in the hospital. Can you come see me?
This is Frank (labored breathing.) I'm on oxygen now. Come soon.
Hi Monica, this is Vaugh. Michael's calling hours are....
Monica, this is so & so, Freddie passed away this morning.
Monica, please call me. I'm positive. Terrified. And drunk.*

And I was frightened, too. And fuming. And frustrated. And fatigued.

Freddie, when you were diagnosed HIV positive, three months later you could no longer have visitors at home. You were admitted to the hospital and died. I don't know who was with you. I miss your laugh, your humor, and your bald head. I hope you did not die alone.

Frank, you were so shy in your brown-eyed blundeness. You were diagnosed HIV positive, and within weeks you developed a rattle in the chest. You were admitted to the hospital where you wasted away. You died within three months. I was glad your parents were with you and finally accepted that you were gay. I miss your bravery.

And when you four died, within a three-month span, my beloved friend John insisted that we go for high tea at the Plaza Hotel.

“Too much death,” he said.

He met me beneath the five-flagged entrance, his legs bandaged and stained.

We entered the Palm Court and chatted gently, but his cough kept changing the subject.

The palm trees leaned in and protected us, provided privacy for the dying.

Afterwards, he reached out to me and we hugged and hugged, but I, I could not let go.

“I’m so tired,” John whispered.

“I know,” I said.

I hailed a taxi and tried to follow him inside, but he shook his head no. He blew me a kiss, but it got stuck in the distancing, among the rush and gawk of shoppers and tourists.

When his taxi disappeared, I could no longer feel my fingers or pulse.

I resigned from my day job the following Monday.

I took off my boots, unplugged my answering machine and packed up my futon, then U-Hauled it west.

John you died two months after I left. It was the pneumonia, not the Kaposi Sarcoma, that killed you. Your partner, Albert, the man you loved, provided hospice care for you. You did not want visitors, I understood. I miss your voice, your laugh, your creativity, your hope, your courage, your smile, your Australian accent, your artistry, charisma and zest for life, for love, for color, and rainbows. The students at Friends Seminary still decorate the holiday bags for clients receiving meals from God's Love We Deliver. I have your picture on my bedroom bureau. Your life mattered.

I can still summon the smell of ammonia and the gauntness of a body.
I cannot finish the movie *Dallas Buyers Club* without a panic attack.

There are AIDS medications now

but ignorance still kills. And here are children in cages at our borders and too many guns in too many hands, and gunfire. Our son is afraid to go to school, worried someone will come with an automatic weapon and kill him and his friends. He's worried that someone might kill me while teaching at the university. The Amazon burns like your lungs did from PCP, like your skin did from fever after fever and AZT.

The climate is warming fast now, faster than scientists predicted, hate crimes are thriving, and many Americans are worried about their water. Imagine. People do not have clean drinking water in several cities across the USA. Ignorance still kills.

Michael, Casey, Freddie, Frank, and John—

I am silver-haired now.

But I kept the boots!

And this bitch is ready to stampede.

Guten Appetit

We devoured the Hungarian sunset at a table of flowers
before the moon wandered in and the bees turned home.

We lived on the edge of a plate. Our sausages and tongues
clattered, lips suspended in air, curled on an onion, on a gulp, on a gasp,

a retroactive sigh that spilled over us. We wandered further into the forest,
trees thin as bowling pins, and into the Alps, where we washed our bones

in arias and the vistas stretched like poems. Stones murmured in our ears.
We, two mules who could not be turned back, only turned on and on.

On the drunk banks of the Vltava River, we crashed, sweated beer,
smoked hand-rolled cigarettes inhaled and exhaled halos and horns.

Our lime-green gypsy bus, shrine to the bohemian gods of lust, plunder
and diesel engines, rocked us to bed, and kissed us goodnight.

In the morning a ray of sunshine pierced our eyelids
where the sand had settled, and we rose on a knife.

Helen Keller in the Cherry Tree (I)

The large crowns of mature trees are exposed to turbulent winds, torrential rains, and loads of snow. The tree cushions the impact of these forces, which travel down the trunk to the roots.

Our last halt was under a wild cherry tree. The shade was grateful, and the tree was so easy to climb that with my teacher's assistance I was able to scramble to a seat in the branches. It was so cool up in the tree that Miss Sullivan proposed that we have our luncheon there. I promised to keep still while she went to the house to fetch it.

The roots must hold out under the onslaught so that the tree doesn't topple over. To avoid this, the roots cling to the earth and to rocks.

Suddenly a change passed over the tree. All the sun's warmth left the air. I knew the sky was black, because the heat, which meant light to me, had died. Fear clutched at my heart.

And usually it is the subsequent gusts that do a tree in, because they catch the tree while it's severely bowed and bend it over again, even farther this time.

I felt absolutely alone. I remained still and expectant; a chilling terror crept over me. I longed for my teacher's return; but above all things I wanted to get down from that tree.

The redirected power of a windstorm can tear at the base of the trunk with a force equivalent to a weight of 220 tons. If there is a weak spot anywhere in the tree, it will crack.

There was a moment of sinister silence, then a multitudinous stirring of the leaves. A shiver ran through the tree, and the wind sent forth a blast that would have knocked me off had I not clung to the branch with might and main. The tree swayed and strained.

In the worst-case scenario, the trunk breaks off completely and the whole crown tumbles down.

A wild impulse to jump seized me, but a terror held about me. I felt the jarring, now and then, as if something heavy had fallen and the shock traveled up till it reached the limb I sat on.

Evenly formed trees absorb the shock of buffeting forces, using their shape to direct and divide these forces evenly throughout their structure.

It worked my suspense up to the highest point, and just as I was thinking the tree and I should fall together, my teacher seized my hand and helped me down. I clung to her, trembling with joy to feel the earth under my feet once more.

Helen Keller in the Mimosa Tree (II)

Trees don't like to make things unnecessarily difficult.

Why bother to grow a thick, sturdy trunk if you can lean comfortably against your neighbors?

It was a long time before I climbed another tree. The mere thought filled me with terror. It was the sweet allurements of the mimosa tree in full bloom that finally overcame my fears.

Every couple of years, a group of forestry workers or a harvesting machine moves in to harvest 10 percent of the trees in commercial forests in Central Europe.

One beautiful spring morning, I was alone in the summer-house, I became aware of a subtle fragrance in the air. I started up and stretched out my hands. It seemed as if the spirit of spring had passed through the summer-house. I recognized the scent of the mimosa blossoms.

It is the death from an old mighty mother tree that leaves surrounding trees without support.

I felt my way to the end of the garden, knowing that the mimosa tree was near the fence, at the turn of the path. Yes, there it was, all quivering in the warm sunshine, its blossom-laden branches almost touching the long grass.

That's how gaps in the canopy open up, and how formerly comfortable beeches or spruce find themselves suddenly wobbling on their own two feet—or rather, on their own root systems.

Was there ever anything so exquisitely beautiful in the world before! Its delicate blossoms shrank from the slightest earthly touch; as if a tree of paradise had been transplanted to earth. I made my way through a shower of petals to the great trunk and stood irresolute; then, putting my foot in the broad space between the forked branches, I pulled myself up.

Trees are not known for their speed, and so it takes three to ten years before they stand firm once again after such disruptions.

The branches were very large, and the bark hurt my hands. But I had a delicious sense that I was doing something unusual and wonderful, so I kept on climbing higher and higher, until I reached a little seat which somebody had built there, so long ago that it had grown part of the tree itself. I sat there for a long, long time, feeling like a fairy on a rosy cloud.

Eye of Night

The moon
settles in its stretch of sky
silent and luminous
like a poet working
among a clutter of stars.

A mosquito
bites the tender cheek
of a child, sleeping and sinless,
and bloats itself
on stolen blood—unaware
that it has been caught
in the gaze of an orb
that cannot help but stare,

or magnify
the florets peeking out
from sprig-tipped branches
to see if it is warm enough
to greet the sunrise
and leaf the tree in ribbons

or scatter
a thousand strands of pearls
into the threads of darkness
dividing the night into scenes
both moonlit and magical
as the halo around
its monastic eye.

How We Vanished

I.

I left my old maid in Cleveland
churning on a stump
and rode the capsule to Köln,
to land in the pause of your voice,
eyes clear as beer.

II.

The stones of my ancestors
cobble my feet
among deutschen Dialekts,
a steady study of sound
in Aachen's Volkshochschule,
a downhill balance on bicycle pulse,
tires treading streets of imperial rule,
the resting place of Charlemagne
beneath the Aachener Dom,
where at night I waited for you in history
and wondered if we could eat the stars,
feel them fuse us together in the stop of time,
a memory that would warm us
on the cold continent of aging
and help us find one another
again and again.

III.

After you closed Barbarossa's Bier Garten
you counted your money, lit a cigarette and met me.
I walked home on the flaxen hair of your arm.

IV.

We were broke, living our dreams
in a gypsy bus, that travelled the back roads
of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Austria,
and Hungary, waking when the sunrise got too hot
on a meadow of sunflowers, beauty to gorge on. We feasted in silence.
A peaceful contented silence, which later grew between us
as we imagined the cocks crowing three times.

V.

One night my Romanian friend
read the coffee grounds at the bottom of my mug
as one reads tea leaves.
She told me I would marry a man
whose name began with an *A* not a *J*,
and that he would not be American born.

VI.

I told her it was ludicrous,
though I believed in these things,
and that in Cleveland you had been the only non-American
man, I had ever met. We had a good laugh, but a truth crept
in bed with me and lay between us.

VII.

Spring rains began to pitchfork the ground.
Twilight's blush blackened its blue,
and I wearied on Old-World charm.
Charlemagne's bones were dead,
and my American self,
whatever that means, wanted certainty.

VIII.

We parted at the airport and watched each other vanish.
I boarded the Airbus as the stars rose in pools. As the stars
wrung my eyes.

IX.

You called on my birthday.
I heard the familiar pause
as if it were living in me,
but there was a disruption:
A was knocking on my door with flowers
and I told you so, because you asked.
There was the pause.
I interrupted it with my own pause,
then said goodbye.

A Deconstruction of Crooked in Northeast Ohio

On this soil my tree-trunk ankles
thicken with age. The river runs clear, untroubled.
The Paleo-Indians hunted mastodon,
and here in the twenty-first century
I sit on my deck within a kingdom of trees—
a porous wall that sifts and shifts light.
On this land, the Archaic, the Lenape, the Hopewell,
and the Mohawk arrived. They trapped beaver, fed on elk,
wild turkey, and walnuts. They fished in the river—
named it the Cuyahoga
because it was “crooked.”
As a child I searched the muck and the mud, the caves,
and the riverbanks, for arrowheads. Bones. Fossils. Pig iron. Iron ore.
In 1979 Mary Leonard my classmate and her boyfriend, Ricky Beard,
were kidnapped. One year before our graduation from high school.
Their remains were found in 1985. They were stabbed and shot,
murdered. They existed. Crooked bones in crooked soil. Unsolved.
Mary Leonard. Ricky Beard. Someone knew something.
Someone knows something.
I left northeast Ohio in 1985. I had to find my own trees.
Twenty-one years later, I came back.
Found a home with my family. A home to season in.
History in. Live in and love. The previous owners were
European American and Middle Eastern American.
We are Asian-Caucasian American.
Some neighbors said our home stank like spices, sat on the market for two years.
After 9/11. Someone said children can detect negative energy.
We said to our neighbors that our toddler laughed and danced inside the house.
We said the smell of spices made the house a home.
Auden said: You shall love your crooked neighbor with your crooked heart.
We said we needed space to build a nest for my dad.
We moved in. Sometimes politeness is chilling.
Sometimes the suburbs are scary.
We now say we are too busy.
We now say the house is too big.
We say this. We say that.
Still, we measure our home in seasons.
We measure our days
by the spotted woodpecker feather
in the yard or the first leaf
trimmed in crimson.

<p>We notice talk among I can even feel the trees, community—and hear them talk the skunks and raccoons, the raptors and the cardinals, the finches and the crows. in spring and in autumn. We notice the first blush of a maple leaf on the deck.</p>	<p>how the trees themselves. sense their sorrow, joy, to chipmunks and squirrels, the deer and the foxes, blue jays and sparrows, We see trees green over begin to burnish</p>
--	---

We notice the moments when the leaves let go.
 They pile and blow,
 bluster and blister,
 scratch and scrape,
 show their beautifully bent
 naked and knotted selves.
 The trees change their voices in winter.
 They become wind instruments
 that whine and howl, shriek and shiver,
 and, in these moments, we light a fire in our fireplace—
 burn dead wood, let the sparks warm us,
 spirit us, lift us, remind us of our
 ancestors and how we are the same.

We watch deer feed on acorns,
 old apples, sprigs and twigs
 poked up through snow. In spring our misshapen
 yard resurrects morels, chanterelles, artist's
 conks, and wild violets, pansies, strawberries, white clover,
 and lion's tooth—and our aluminum frame house
 cracks, expands, and breathes in the heat of the sun.

We notice every curled-green sliver that nudges up
 from the ground. Birds build their nests
 in the birdhouses hung in the shade
 of crabapple trees. We notice
 earthworms as they scent the air—
 after heavy rain. We notice
 the sound of geese talking above
 as they fly southwest, arrow-like.

A crooked formation painting the sky.
 We notice the moon, the harvest, the eclipse, how it rises big,
 distances small. It all makes sense. Nothing makes sense. Mother Earth is everywhere.
 Around me. Above me. Inside me. Beneath me. The earth doesn't scare me,
 the suburbs do. The too politeness. Breathe. Beneath my feet and my ankles—
 ankles lined with their own crookedness—
 my veins—blue,
 bent, and pulsing
 like the Cuyahoga.

Crime Scene

Beneath the oak tree
down on the green
a cluster of delicate bones,
blood smudged and unhinged
separates
two beige-brown wings
severed and feathered
A spasm of orange
sticks between blades

Self-Soothing Among Aggressions

A storm pouts in the west. In our backyard,
the trees brush themselves against one another,
not really against, but together.

Tiny aphids spot the silver maple's leaves,
but their hostility cannot mute its singing.
A green hum held pleasantly.

In the crook of our crab apple tree, I spot a single hive,
a small opening in its bottom, & I hear the bee nearing.
I turn to see its white face. Its large gun-metal body

is spotted in cream. The bee is a bald-faced hornet
& can sting multiple times, assault weapon-like.
The hornet drones my head & I run indoors.

My brother is a non-Hodgkin's lymphoma survivor.
In 2017 he was diagnosed with ocular melanoma (OM).
Approximately 50 percent of patients with OM develop metastases.

Thoughts of cancer weary me to sleep
& worry me awake. The storm cries outside
as it perfumes the air inside with the scent of rain

which slips into my lungs as it laps against the roof & siding.
Its random & relaxed pulse, blueses me back to sleep.
This morning I found the remnants of the hornet's hive

lying among the daylilies—a cardboard cylinder
split open by the storm. I looked for the dead hornets,
but they had flown. I listen to the trees.

Lysistrata in the Woods

Oh! the trees
in their glorious skirts
a culture of color, lineage, & limbs,
autumn browns & red-orange-blondes
organic leaf litter everywhere
light as lingerie.

In the forest, the wild boars have come
to glut on their nuts—to gulp them down
to eat, eat, eat the acorns & beechnuts
to please themselves, plump up for war
winter & its barrenness.

The trees knew what to do
or rather, what not to do.
It had been a mast year & they agreed
it was time to abstain.
There would be no blooming in the Spring,
no pollinating, flowering, or leaf lingerie

The trees held back. They did not bloom.
They closed their limbs, wore bucolic perfumes.
They did not dangle their yellow-green locks
or lime-stained pips.
They simply stood firm, for the good of the forest.
The boars went without, went hungry & reformed.

The following Spring the trees flowered.
Their organs & ovaries turned on their chandeliers
& illuminated the cosmos chartreuse.
A century's worth of wool pods & staminate catkins
 lingered in the light
 & then
 let go

**Finally, Communal:
A Reflection on Helen Frankenthaler's *Canyon***

When I see Helen Frankenthaler's *Canyon* on the computer screen—enlarged or small, with its softer reds—I believe they are decidedly female forms. Though, there is no form or figure, I see them anyway. With the knowing eyes of a mother—yes, I am the mother—I see in these shapeless shapes a subtle rendering of a placenta, a tilted throb of plushness against a uterine wall. Yes. That is what I see in this abstract canvas, or, perhaps, it is what I want to see. And in seeing this, I feel an inner longing and loneliness—the longing and loneliness that comes from my dying each day—as aging takes from me the ability to conceive another child. And in this dying, I linger on the memories of what it was to feel that wild pulse and pull of pregnancy, a movement deep within myself, within my own canyon. An unexplainable place that was, before pregnancy, known only through menses and the gelatinous blood clots that passed outside of me, naturally. That inner space that had to shed itself, a monthly molting, because there was nothing attaching itself to my uterine wall. And so, for thirty-two years my body discarded these cells, a thickness to thinness, inside my canyon. All of these circular cycles were waiting for one single sperm to fertilize my one single egg, and all this waiting and waiting continued for so many years. (How women bear it—this waiting—is an individual thing.) And then one day it happened. I got pregnant.

And my body changed. It began to rearrange itself to engage with and embrace the zygote, then the blastocyst, then the embryo, then the fetus, and then the baby—our baby, my baby. Though when another woman says, “I got pregnant,” I find it quite awkward—humorous even as in, I got a car. I got a coat. I got groceries. I got pregnant. It's different from saying, I *am* pregnant. And to be honest, I probably said it both ways because I was so happy, I did not care

how I said it—and I found such a freedom in this blind and blissful place. Pregnancy made me hug strangers or tear at the eye over anything or nothing. It is a communal feeling in that sense. There was no way to shape or contain my gladness. I'm going to be a mom! I'd say this, and there was a certain appreciation among women and among men too. I was carrying the next generation and people could relate to my joy. And in this way my pregnancy was public, a shared experience, a shared hope. After all, a woman rarely can hide her baby belly. And only once did a stranger come up to me and rub my belly, when I was about eight months along. Sure, I was looking ripe, maybe even inviting. My hair was long and thick, and I was glowing, yes, glowing, and everyone wanted to touch my magic, this miracle of life developing inside me. And as it was near Thanksgiving and folks were feeling generous, perhaps I was too. An elderly woman had been eyeing me and walked over to me in the grocery store. She had a tender look in her watery eyes. And she asked me how far along I was, and I told her. And then she reached over and touched my round, hard, abdomen as if she was remembering. I let her do it. And I would let her do it again. Somehow, I felt my dead mother's presence through her and through her touch. As if my mom were using her to connect to me. Either way I felt connected to her and her to me. Just as I feel connected to Helen—I want to call her Helen now—through *Canyon*.

The point is that after so many years of preventing, then after years of waiting and wanting, my canyon was alive! And then I got sick. Wow, did I get sick. And again, I laughed because I got so sick, but it wasn't morning sickness like people told me it would be, it was noon until night sickness. And I was so tired with all the growing inside—with all the cells dividing into spine and brain, into feet, hands and toes, into fingernails and eyelashes, into pubic bone and sex organs—that I would collapse into bed every night at eight p.m. and sleep ten hours. Imagine! This six-hour sleeper sleeping for ten. Yes! There was growing going on, and I began to rub my

belly. I massaged my belly unconsciously, as it grew beneath my palms and fingers—as if I could soothe my baby in its embryonic sac—my baby floating within the thick muscular walls of my uterus. And there was this feeling, an unexplainable wilding and pawing of the baby against the inner flesh. The flutter and kick of what was maturing inside my womb. All of this complex expanding of one egg and one sperm—all this softening and swelling—was inexplicable. And then it was time. Our son was born.

We wanted our son to have a sibling, and I wanted to feel my insides flutter and fly again with the same wonder and warming of life. And I did get pregnant again. And the joy was the same. There was a shared excitement and the expectant taste of deliciousness—before the nausea set in. I began to rub my belly with the instinctual stroking that was nurturing for my baby and me. And then something went wrong. There was no heartbeat. The doctor said that my baby had died, and the light inside the exam room shifted—shifted from cozy and expectant to dull and listless. Maybe our baby had felt something like this too, felt the fear well up when its life began to thin itself out. As I write this, twelve-years later, I am fighting back the tears that gush up from my decidedly empty grave—a canyon that is now blue and thick with winter’s clouds, a horizontal anguish that edged my chasm in the deep slate of sadness, except that it was not a shared sadness—but a private sadness: people said, “Don’t talk about this. You can try again.” And all these well-meant thoughts were being said to me as my baby began to break up inside, began to shed itself, away from me in a continual flow of gelatinous blood clots. My doctor had offered me a D&C, but I refused. I wanted to keep my baby inside of me for as long as possible. Sing to it. Hum to it. Although it was dead, I wanted to feel his or her body bleed from me in the same uncontrolled chaos of Helen’s painting—with its blurring of borders, a spill that could not

be contained except within the soft despair of my vaginal walls, hugging the baby goodbye as its shapeless shapes slipped past.

And I was envious—a bit green—of all the pregnant mothers I would see. I would blink tears back so the mothers couldn't see my sadness in their own jubilant oblivion. I became like a willow tree, bent gently over in grief, even with my son in my arms. The miscarriage, and the later miscarriages, became a solitary experience, a sadness deeply rooted in the loss of hope, in the loss of dreams, unable to be articulated until now.

After I had lost two babies, we gave up trying. We were spent. And so within *Canyon* [for me] there is heartache. I was forty-six, and I of course was thankful for our son, but focusing on our gratitude for him was merely a distracted effort to mitigate the pain. My husband and I tried to share our mutual sadness, but it was like trying to catch and hold raindrops in a rainstorm. Eventually, he was tired of standing outside, while I had to stand in the puddles. Each bloodletting became a process of disruption. A loss of control. And in this grieving process, our children became decidedly gendered and genderless in this separation—as we wondered, was it a girl? Was it a boy? Is this our son? Is this our daughter? Who cares? They are dead! And this tortured us for a while until we came to a place of acceptance, which wasn't really acceptance but a space of going on and doing. Of going on and living. *Canyon* reflects this too. An unspoken woe. A weeping. And a loss. And there is desire too—my unfulfilled desire to have another child—and thus the desire of longing. I remember the old woman again. I see her now touching my pregnant self. And I wonder where she is. I recognize myself in her as I gaze at Helen's painting. I recognize my remembering and my own aging, an awareness that my life is passing by.

I look at *Canyon* again and see the tiniest bits of threading bordering the blotch of pinkish red, like the wee legs of a centipede or the feathered fringe of a bird—all of these dashes wanting to move and to fly. And this too captivates me as I wonder what Helen's intent was with these fragments. Was it some type of extension—an extension of life reaching downward, upward and outward? An attempt to expand life. Maybe this painting resonates because these hundreds of lines represent energy, an energy that tracks itself outward, as it moves forward, as it looks for a place to attach itself. I am mesmerized and cannot look away. I feel the connectedness between the mess on the canvas and the muddle of life, the longing, the blissful, and the loneliness in me. This spill of color is not alive, and yet there is a fusion going on—a fusion between the painting and me—an intuitiveness that touches my pain and helps me to make it visible. A shapeless shape. A formless form, but communal. Finally.

Twilight Trees

Tree Sleep

[illegible]

an infusion of song silence and sigh
and my breath becomes one with the oak, the elm, the maple, the ash, and conifers
with all the trees
and the sun
as shaman
cradles my wounds
to scab and scar
in decades of rings
an entry of openings
that flower and bleed
each tendril and twig
a samara that
spills its spores
The pale of my palms is green
The pulp of my lips is green
The lobe of my ears is leafed
and I think
in tree
and I dream
in tree
I am a mere rustle of flesh
tranquil as this twilight

A Slow Suggestion

There is
the sun
the day's yeast
a slow suggestion
of seeing differently
what a swarm of stars cannot show
an expected full
all photosynthesis, chlorophyll,
an absorption of sunlight's reds and blues,
color cues for leaf and fauna—mirrors of green to sieve the shine,
change water and carbon dioxide into food. Yeast, a single-cell fungus,
left on its own consumes, rises, spreads, changes, feeds—inwards, outwards, a slow glimmer-
gleam, a patina of light poised and directionless, a clouded shroud that transforms and digests the
diffusion of day as day becomes dusk, dusk becomes dark, a distortion of shapes, a blurring of
lines, a thickening of thoughts. An owl scowls in the threads of moonlight as nightfall frightens,
softens, and forgives. In shades of stillness the imagination invents, and shadows
allow the primrose to slip its shield and age in obscurity beneath the eyelids,
beneath the sheets, beneath a lover's slump as midnight meddles with mood,
as Venus sighs her sonata, as a forty-wink death snores,
as brainwaves light the lull and slumber sleeps
in the hull of a dream

There is the moon,
the night's yeast,
a slow suggestion
of seeing differently
what the sun's
blind burn
cannot
show

An Autumn Composition

On this whisper eve
I hear the pine needles
sowing a carpet
for themselves underfoot.
The shifting shadows
speak in secret
as the moon presses its polish
on the crisp page of autumn air
and the crickets sing harmony
to the toasted leaf waltz.

Blood Birds

February ends on a full-mouthed requiem.
The silence of a frozen birdbath
sits on me as I ramble beneath an Airstream sky.

My ears perch on the steel churn of Lake Erie.
Its violent foam and froth dredge
up the dead to bury them again.

A blistered oak leaf limps
towards me as if it has something to say.
I cast the stillness of a cow eye on the leaf

and sense the spirit world
standing near, tarnished tree trunks
that move in unison—a directionless

funeral pyre of oak, birch, pine and maple
that beckons and blows the leaf
forward to the space where vision vanishes,

to the earth and into the ash
of Sunday's dead palms, Valentine roses,
groundhogs, Fat Tuesday revelers.

I carry my relics indoors,
the carcasses of unborn calves,
cinder smudged and planted

in the drizzle and the freeze.

In the dripping thermal terrene
a cold mist energy comes in the window

and marries us to the dormant fly
spiraling down kamikaze style,
to the albino bit of ladybug

that sits on the lip
of my coffee mug trying to retune.
And beyond the window

a spoonful of cardinals
alights on the branch of my backyard oak.
Blood birds, twittering.

Catnap

Here I am dear bedroom
and bed! after the wind of day,
to wiggle my toes

from woolen socks
and cast off
these stubborn shoes.

With one slow swivel
I sink into sack,
my body flush with the floor.

The crinkle of sheets
uncoils my cheeks—
a cuddle purrs from my lips.

I nestle and nuzzle
as a vole in a hole
into the fluff of pillow.

I fold my eyes up
beneath the quilt's tuck,
and nudge my noggin' out.

Self-Portrait as Balmungo Garden's Deodar Tree
in memory of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham

I look
in the mirror
see my drooping breasts
the left one and the right—
the wattle of my neck
is wrinkled, sloped between bones
and beneath my upper arms, nuzzled next to my pits
two flops of skin
that sag towards winter
All ancestral
an orangutan without the pelt
No, that's not it, really
I look
in the mere
see an upward spine
a series of limbs
pendulous branches
arching gracefully downward
a cascade of greens
open and closed spaces
that embrace the air, shelve the birds, catkins, and cones
my white facial hairs stuck out, grown in a whorl
This is it, really
I've always had a weeping habit
I've always admired the snow

Changing My Shoes

Our tire
swing
hangs from a rope
from the broad branch
of our cherry tree
Its empty frame
romps in the wind
waits for a memory
to pulse it back and forth
among the dying
yellow-orange-reds
a seasonal tick-tock
that sticks to my shoe
And I am clinging
to the summer's blues and greens
cornfields, gardens, parsley and peas
Lake Erie's slate and a popsicle's blue
Do you see them in the distance?
I am trying to recall the days
when sickness did not blow
into every window
days when the world was as generous
as the neighbor's cookie tray
and life, ever so briefly
was a golden dapple of sunlight
—but it never really was
The wind was always trying
to catch its breath,
trying to exist

between storms.

And I am trying to find
a comfortable pair of shoes
for a walk among the dying
before the next shroud of snow

I Am Not Ready for Spring
for Dad

The blues of summer
recline in the fabric
of Dad's La-Z-Boy
embracing him
as my mother's arms once did
when she was alive
as my arms once did
when I was a child
when he was summer and I was spring,
a mere shoot of green
watching, growing—tall and tan.

Your yellow summers
melted the years, popsicles and butter
pools of dreams
on hard pavement—greening
routines, work, bills,
birthdays, holidays
stirring a temper—a flare
in time washing up
grain by grain, casting a glare
upon your glasses,
images in the tide.

The ginger-reds and pumpkin-browns
of sun and leaf fell fast
late in autumn
surprising you—with the sudden death
of your beautiful wife,

my beloved mum. Your name
her last word,
rings through naked trees
shaking in grief, raking the vibrancy
of your heart, a pile of thoughts
squeezed shut,
unable to utter her name—
as the sun fades
into the stretch of shadow,
the unflinching blue—
of a January sky
distilled crystals, shards of glass
caught in the light
of a late winter scene
welcoming you,
well-worn and slowing
steady and steadfast,
morning upon morning
waking to a routine
your kitchen light on
—a beacon of hope
and relief to me in early dawn—

because I am autumn
and feel the creaks
that have tenderized
your face, an etching of wrinkles,
a stud of whiskers
shaved off
once a week for church.

I came in to say goodnight,
bending to kiss your forehead—
“I am ready,” you said.
For what? Silence.

Since then, I peek in daily
after good morning
before good night
and sometimes find you bathed in sunlight
head slumped against your softening form—
and I gasp,
at the heart that may have stopped,
until your chest rises
on the hum of your living
a soul simply at rest
silent as a seed—a seed remembering
the warm beckoning of the sun
calling it forth—to burst itself
and sow again, spring’s eternity,
flashes of purple, orange, and white,
a crocus in the snow.

No, I am not ready.

Nurse Log

Borrowed Sugar

*"So, these were not stones, after all, but old wood."
—Peter Wohlleben*

I stand in a five-foot mouth
teethed in ruins & rocks
moss mums them & quiets their story
tief in der Eifel
within my left palm I roll two stones two meditations
oiled in calm
my right hand curiously scrapes one with a knife
& I am greeted with a shock of green
wunderschönes grün
summer green trees, grasses, & caterpillar
gemstone green jade, emeralds, & tourmaline
chlorophyll green cockscomb & spider mum
the stones are not stones at all
but relics a five centuries old stump
five centuries dead
dead & green
green & alive
alive & generative
the moss continues to hum
prays in the circular
what has kept this stump alive? what has kept it green?
something in the surroundings
stands at rest
stands obvious

as a canopy of hearts murmurs
as a cluster of beech trees murmurs
as a violin as a human as a heart
why, it is the beech trees!
their thick nicked selves
silver & graying
pitted & trunked
elephant legs lodged in a haze of violets
lodged in a litter of blooms
their interconnected roots webs of woven fungi
weave & breathe & pump sugar
into the stump's remains
for the social interest of the trees
to feed to suckle to serve
the soil & sow worm
the fungi & forest floor
the pill bugs & ivy
the litter & lavender
the ecosystems & themselves
for centuries & life
circles cycles rotations spins
tief in der Eifel
a universe rests
and rots to humus
a stump sips sugar
& generates violets

What Remains

in memory of Barbara Marie

You left your voice in a seashell.
For five days, the distant moon cleaved the cold
as Canaan prepared for your arrival.
The tulip tree fell in the park.
Lake Erie sank the sunrise as January wore Siberia
on its shirt collar. I hunted for comfort at Edgewater Park
and begged the naked trees to hold me.
I pressed my bare feet into their roots.
My blue toes, burning like matches, staggered home
to the red blink of my answering machine.
“Mom’s dead,” someone said. “Jerry was with her.”
I went to bed with the snails
crawled into their husks—grief-sewn cavities
of grace, resonating sound. Yours
had been the only voice to smile my name.

Not from a Tree

Kevin's Aubade

He was
the vesper
that sat on evening
an inhale
that flared
into the sun
his life
a long pause
on the edge of the stepstool
squirmed nervously
unseen
unknown
dreams went
unfinished
unbuckled
unbuttoned
too fast
too smashed
too stoned
too stiff
to care
too cruel
as mule
as porn star
as son
as con
as thief
as thing
as boy-toy
every cliché
all camp
all swag
every trick
every john
a pillage
a pound
that bloodied
& bruised
became
a whistle-blower
church goer
fifteen-years
sober

lover
friend
friend
he penned
his tale
and then
he slipped
and then
he bound
the belt
knotted
the noose
and pushed off
to end
the exhaustion
and greet his god
in free verse.

Beneath a Stretch of Wildflowers

My friend and I
saw the dead beagle in the road,
a terror in its eyes.
I turned on the flashers
and braked to a stop
along a stretch of wildflowers
just east of Tiffin, not a house in sight.
I popped open the trunk,
unloaded the shovel and two brown paper bags,
things I started to carry after I hit a blue jay
on a steep curve—unable to stop
but unsettled by the sound of its frightened feathers.
We waited for an opening
between the cars, the wheel and rush,
then walked over to the body
which was twisted away from the head.
I shoveled up what had been whole and living
and rushing too
and carried it to the roadside.
My friend opened the paper bag, and I laid the beagle in.
We placed the dog's body beneath a shroud
of Queen Anne's lace, chicory, and buttercups.

Chant of the Daffodils

At the foot of the linseed tree
I see a cluster of five daffodils
toe themselves out of the ground
to stand on their own horizon;
unopened buds, solemn and emerald green,
point at the sky, prayer hands surrendering.

On day two, the daffodils hunch over,
the weight of the world is upon them,
as is an overnight snow
that crowns them white.
Stooped necks watch cars instead of clouds,
people instead of branches,
landscape instead of vanishing prayers.
Their hands become lips
and open on a popcorn yawn that stretches
like a paw—rabbit, dog, or cat—vulnerable.

On day three, the five daffodils open
with crepe paper petals, mouths of clarified ghee, sing,
find their purpose. Each tongue a poke of ruffled sunrays,
the color of a harvest moon chants a *hello*, an *amen*,
a joyous *alleluia*—even as they begin to die,
their unheard words wilt on lips.

Some people are brightest just before death,
flowering only to kiss us goodbye.

A Love Letter to John Jones

I am sitting with a picture of John and Albert on my desk. And after two or three minutes, what happens inside my body and brain is a redness—an angry firestorm—a storm of sounds, smells, and sights.

There is the sound of protest. The chanting: *Silence Equals Death, Ignorance Equals Fear, ACT-UP!* There is the sound of coughing—a relentless cough from the AIDS-related pneumonia. And there are the smells of ammonia, urine and feces. There is the sight of emaciated men lying on cots in the hallways at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Greenwich Village and the clinging eyes of my dying friends as I moved inside their hospital room or apartment.

When I sit with the picture of John and Albert, what happens inside my heart is a bloom of begonia red—a loving cloudburst—a gratitude that gathers speed.

I hear the sounds of John’s voice and his laugh. Both friendly and booming like the church bells marking time. And I can smell patchouli oil and fresh paint. I can see John’s smile and his eyes, blue and clear as a summer sky. I can see John standing with his various art projects.

The picture of John and Albert was taken in 1994 at our annual volunteer party—a party to honor all the volunteers working with God’s Love We Deliver (GLWD), a non-profit AIDS service organization that delivered highly nutritious and expertly prepared meals to people who were homebound. Among so much dying, hiring a photographer to capture a moment of joy—was a big hit with our volunteers.

John and Albert were volunteers at GLWD, and John and I became fast friends—a friendship that lasted until his death. The physical picture of John and Albert sits on my bedroom bureau, a makeshift meditation space, with five other photographs of people who have died—

people whose lives significantly influenced my own—and continue to inspire the choices I make. John reminds me of courage.

When I quickly look at the picture, I can hear his laugh. John was effervescent. He had a particularly wonderful laugh—a laugh that rang from the rafters of his rib cage—a laugh that was genuine, hearty, and endearing. His laugh was contagious too. Because he was Australian, there was the lovely lilt of his accent that surrounded the laugh, brought it into focus, adding a musicality to it. And this has me wondering about how a person hears an internal sound—a voice, a laugh, a song—when not really hearing it but seeing something that reminds us of it, like the picture. How is it that an inanimate object evokes our senses and memories? Strange, yet wonderful.

An Inanimate Object of Art

When John became sick, I was beginning to burn out. I had seen too much death. Too much sickness. Five years in this line of work was a long time. I needed a change. I told John I was quitting and moving west. He understood and wanted to do something special together before I left. He suggested we go to high tea at the Plaza Hotel.

As we chatted over our tea and cucumber sandwiches, he gave me a box. Inside the box was a crystal Hershey candy kiss on a black silk string. He wanted me to remember how much he and Albert loved me. He said that if at any time I felt lonely or sad I should wear the necklace—wear that kiss around my neck and remember that it was from him.

I still have it.

John died in June 1995, four weeks after I left New York City. I was not with him, but his spirit woke me up. I sat up in bed and talked to him. I told him I was sorry I was not there when he passed and that his life had made a difference to me and to the students at Friends Seminary

where he taught art. I told him I would never forget him. I haven't. The experience did not last more than a minute, but I knew it was John. Later that day, my friend Susan called to tell me that he had passed during the night. Albert was with him. He did not die alone.

The Physicalness of a Picture

In the picture, John is with his partner, Albert. The picture is five by seven inches. The photograph is framed in faux cork Pottery Barn frame that mimics cork but is actually manufactured plastic made in Thailand. (The frame was a wedding present.) The backdrop for the photograph is a red wall with what were, I imagine, balloon bouquets. I count nine of them. The colors were red, turquoise, and white. The makeshift studio incorporates the colors into the frame. The turquoise and white balloons are easily seen, the red balloons, not so much. The only real indication of the red balloons is that the photographer's light is reflected in two of them. The white balloon skin is see-through, like a flimsy negligée. The physicalness of this picture is a tangible thing that I use for remembering. Like a rosary bead or touch-stone, looking at the picture focuses my mind's energy on a moment, a person, or a place in time. This photograph is proof that John existed, Albert existed, and that these two men loved one another. It is a reflective surface that takes on value by the viewer as I bring its worth to life in words.

The Portrayal of Belonging

In the photograph Albert stands next to John who is seated on a barstool. Albert was about six inches shorter than John. Thus, with John seated on a stool, their heads are about the same height and are nuzzled into one another's. Albert's body is slightly bent into John's, as John's body is bent into Albert's. Albert reaches behind John's back to lay his hand on John's left shoulder. Albert's right hand mingles with John's hands, and all three are clasped upon John's knee. Their smiles seem to match. Both mouths the same size. Their facial features are

also similar. Their round-tipped noses balance their faces handsomely. Their hair is short and cut in a similar manner, as if to show off their widow's peak. Albert's hair is thicker and darker, and, in general, Albert's features, eyes and skin tone, are darker than John's. Both men beam, their eyes half closed. These are authentic laughing smiles, probably caused by a joke the two shared between them. These two men clearly belong with one another and to one another. Their positioning in the photograph is one of a union between two people. A partnership. A bond. A loving that is comfortable and authentic. Their body language is entwined as if they are one being.

Their outfits also match. Both John and Albert are wearing blue jeans. Albert's are night-sky navy and John's a summer blue. Their tee-shirts have the same words, "Industrial Strength," and have above and below the words a single red horizontal stripe. John's shirt is black, and the letters are white. Albert's shirt is white with black words, and he has the short sleeves rolled up, almost like cuffs on a pair of dress pants. John is wearing a red AIDS ribbon pin above his heart. I do not see the AIDS ribbon on Albert's shirt. John is also wearing a gold ring on his right hand's pinky and an earring in his left ear. I cannot see John's ring finger on his left hand because the right hand is covering it.



What I Choose to See, Hear, Feel, and Remember

I met John over the phone when he called the offices of God's Love We Deliver to say that he was an art teacher at Friends Seminary in Manhattan, and he wanted to get all the students involved in a project for people with AIDS. As we talked about how we could accommodate so many students in our small offices, I watched a load of delivery bags being unloaded from a truck, and an idea came to me. What about having his students decorate the meal bags for our holiday delivery? I mentioned this to John. He liked the suggestion and asked me a few questions. Voila! The idea was born. The students, with John's help, would decorate over 1,000 meal delivery bags, and in this way all the students could participate. Over the years, photographers started photographing the bags because they were so beautiful, and we used the photographs to create boxed holiday cards that were sold to benefit our non-profit agency.

When I look at this picture, I feel more joy than sadness. Albert and John had one another, truly loved one another, and were living complete lives—before the suffering began. Perhaps that is my own narrative, but it is also factual. After his HIV diagnosis, John lived to his fullest. He lived in the moment, with self-awareness and service to others. He embodied our agency's motto: "Service is Joy." And in his service to others he left a legacy at Friends Seminary School in Manhattan.

John and I worked with the students at Friends Seminary to decorate holiday meal delivery bags for three years. After his death, the school continued the annual tradition and it exists today, twenty-seven years later.

And this brings me to community. I also feel joy for the community of which I was an integral part. Not only with GLWD but with ACT-UP. I can see myself and hundreds of others wearing cut off shorts, white tee-shirts, black jeans, combat boots, and whistles. We carried

megaphones, banners, and effigies. We were a community. We were activists. We were caregivers. Mothers. Fathers. Lovers. People with AIDS. We had a mission. We had a purpose. Night after night. Day after day. Until the FDA began approving funding for research, the use of new medicines, new definitions for women with AIDS, and, most importantly, supporting both local and state research institutions. We marched until too many of us died. Until too many of us, burned out.

If John were with me now, we'd drink a mimosa before heading out to another non-violent protest. We would discuss which cause to put our energies towards and we'd do it. We would discuss and laugh over the fact that my partner is an infectious disease doctor and treats people with HIV and AIDS. We would have talked about how amazing it was that my partner and I met where we lived in the same apartment building in Cleveland. That Anthony literally was *the boy next door*—well, two doors down. Life is funny that way. We would have talked about aging and the privilege that it is to get old. Maybe John and Albert would've come to one of our son's grade-school plays or high school cross-country meets. I wonder about these things. And as I wonder, I am smiling. (And as I am typing my cell phone rings. I look at it, and the number identifies a caller from Australia. I do not know anyone from Australia, except John. He's reaching out to me even now. Thank you, John.)

Anyhow, we would have talked about all the new medicines and how we fought for them. And how the scientific community has found therapies to assist in the prevention of HIV transmission. That being said, ignorance is still an issue in many parts of the world, as is the socioeconomics of who has access to the medications. Homosexuality is still taboo and punishable in many parts of the world.

As of 2018, 37.9 million people are living with AIDS worldwide (WHO).

Socioeconomics still plays a vital role in who dies and who lives. The numbers are sobering. The story of why and how, and who has access to medicines and education is an age old one, one to be explored in other papers, but not in this love letter. John would've understood these issues.

John, you were my friend. You were courageous, loving and kind. How I miss you and miss sharing my life with you. Your commentaries on music and fashion. Your ability to mix a good cocktail and be gracious to those you disagreed with. Your positive attitude is desperately needed today, and I could sure use one of your hugs. I wish you could meet our son. Thank you for your life. You mattered to me in life. You matter to me in death. Your life had significance. I keep your essence alive by writing about you, thinking about you, perhaps even misremembering some of the details. It is your story. It is cathartic to commemorate you. Speak of you. Be with your energy as I write. It is my act of love for you and to you.



Bird Call

“One striking aspect of The Goldfinch is the simplicity, even austerity, of the composition. Yes, the bird is chained – a detail which meant that, in other Dutch paintings, they could be symbols of captive love.”

—Alistair Sooke, BBC 2016.

When Mom died the sunflowers climbed out of her eyes and into mine.

The bits of green earth that spackled her irises
softly sunk the flower’s roots into my muddy sockets.

Ever since, I sense more clearly the evolution of a thing,
particularly this morning, when I heard a bird call outside my window.

Expecting a visit from Mom—by way of a cardinal—I instead spotted a goldfinch
alighted on a cone flower, which at first reminded me of the callousness of Fabritius’s painting.

But this bird’s pale feet pogoed from cone flower to sunflower then onto a black-eyed Susan,
where it settled hungrily, became medieval with the crown and seeds,

picking and pecking and knocking them loose, so as they fell, they were lit by the sunrise—
a spray of sparks sowing the soil.

The goldfinch shifted, twitched its head to look at me and generously decided to linger.

Three Teaching Moons

Three tomatoes line the counter.
Their stems, fringed and naveled,
curl gently upwards as if waiting
for me to hand them a ball, a bowl,
the world.

The kitchen light casts a small moon on each.
Three white moons shine on the curve of red,
on the skin that speaks softly, as if it is night,
as if we are in the library, the coffee pot quiet
as it steams and gargles its grinds.

My rabbit watches. His albino eyes pinkish-red,
round and purple. His irises widen or shrink
with the light or the fright of a sudden move.
He is still as a chair, a silence focused on the breath,
the seed, the pulp, the skin, the vine.

And I pick up the tomatoes and consume them,
their cloister of calm, their abbey of alms, each bite
a moment of thanks, simple as salt and pepper,
as complex as the universe

and how we wander from thought to thought
beneath moons, stars, suns, kitchen lights,
and how we live on the earth, on the seas,
on a belief.

Cross Pollination

I was born red and quiet,
a sunflower colored wrong, but right.

I stood as a skyscraper
only leaning, never leggy.

I wanted to study
the freckles on apples,

variegated veins on a leaf,
keep my face towards the sun,
not let my head slouch restfully.

When the butterflies, bees
and beetles arrived,
my brain was infused
with a crisscross of pollen.
Words were left on my petals;
ideas circled my discs.

And then, ever so slowly,
my blooms budged into seeds.

My hefty head began to droop,
my ray florets to crimp and curl.

Death, a nudging impossible to escape,
made its inevitable journey back to the soil,

collected what was unspoken, unheard.
Words fell to the ground as the days, once endless,

grew short,
shorter.

Every pollinated plant bears the fruit of grief,
even in a field of sunshine.

Notes

There is one line used in “A Deconstruction of Northeast Ohio” that is borrowed from “*As I Walked Out One Evening*” by W.H. Auden

“Foot Printing the Brooklyn Bridge” is inspired by Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poem “*Brooklyn Bridge*.”

Texts used for “Helen Keller in the Cherry Tree (1)” and “Helen Keller in the Mimosa Tree (2)” are from *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben and *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller

There is one line used in “Longevity: for the non-violent activists & peacemakers” that is borrowed from “*Binsey Poplars*” by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Texts used for “Trophy Trees, Street Kids” are from *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben and *Social Trust and Human Communities* by Dr. Trudy Govier

There is one line used in “Why I Talk to Trees” that is the same as the title of the book *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker.

This collection is largely inspired by Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* as well as the conflict management theories taught by Dr. Patrick Coy, Dr. Karen Cunningham, Dr. Landon Hancock, and Dr. Jennifer Maxwell from Kent State University’s *School of Peace and Conflict Studies*.