

Dark Tourism:

Poems

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Dark Tourism* explores the grief borne of losing a connection to the past. As detailed in the prologue poem, "Baucis and Philemon," the speaker's stories "have been resistant / to [their] drownings" and that refusal to stay buried has "[sent] ripples in every direction." The voices in *Dark Tourism* track the trajectory of these ripples by animating the past, especially through the formal work in the partial sonnet crown that acts as centerpiece to the manuscript. The sonic and rhythmic repetitions reinforce an idea central to *Dark Tourism* as a whole: the things we inherit from the past endure, with or without our permissions, and the speakers seek to interpret this haunting in a way that unifies past and present.

In memory of my grandparents, Bee and Howard Landon.

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“Let me die the moment my love dies.  
Let me not outlive my own capacity to love.  
Let me die still loving, and so, never die.”

— Mary Zimmerman, *Metamorphoses*

## BAUCIS AND PHILEMON

For the visitor, the finest Phrygian wine—  
dry and pert, apple-shaped on the tongue  
but tasting the opposite of apples.

For the visitor met by neighbors' bolted doors,  
we bring blankets, woolen and hand stitched,  
hearth-coals covered with yesterday's ashes  
burning under the weight of dry twigs.

For you, visitor, we offer this cottage on a hill,  
rattled by wind and crusted with pollen, where  
we have lived the life we offer you tonight:

well-worn house slippers, half-burnt candle  
and these stories, long simmering, just  
boiled over, splashing on the stovetop.

Because it has not been easy  
to be alone together with our stories.  
Like kittens in a sack, they have been resistant  
to our drownings: refusing their own weight,  
they bob to the surface, send ripples in every direction.

Come, visitor—the fire has grown hot enough, the soup  
nearly ready. Let us beguile our waiting with talk.  
October has hung herself from the uppermost branches  
of that old tree, and look! In the moonlight,  
every leaf has adopted her trembling.





## HISTORY

At thirteen, my father doesn't know yet  
how paper thin Saturday mornings can be,  
how cranking the volume on the 12-inch Muntz  
in 1972 won't be enough to drown the metal clang  
so insistent on stealing this day from him, how  
stubborn and mean a moment can become.

When his aunt picks up the phone, his life  
will narrow unaccountably, though  
he doesn't know yet: a car accident has killed his father,  
delivered his brothers to hospital beds,  
their insides tangled and bleeding. At fifty, my father  
will pour his sorrow into a tall glass  
and hand it to me, the ice there  
floating like an invitation. What else could I do

but drink, it being so cold, so ready.

## SUPPORTING THE WAR EFFORT

*Boys don't make passes at girls who are fascist,*  
my grandmother said once. She'd been drinking  
so up came the war. Her voice took on an edge,  
Mid-Atlantic and mean like a newsreel announcer  
relishing the body count of enemy dead.  
She described her stationery, the many stacks  
tucked alongside sprigs of lavender  
in an old humidior; how she'd lick each envelope  
with her eyes closed for all the boys she'd never kiss  
dying on the beaches she'd never see.  
*Glasses, I told her. Girls who wear glasses.*  
Silence threaded the moment; I could count each stitch.  
*No, she'd said, That's not how it goes at all.*



## HEART AND GIZZARD

Turkey on the cutting board, air dry  
with the boiling of too many potatoes,  
I am giving thanks.

The side dishes are easy:  
green beans almandine, like Grandma made,  
the same garlic mashed potatoes  
that ushered in late winters  
when Dad would come home early

but the turkey?  
O inelegant meat cathedral,  
my own flesh-Everest, you are  
so much more your own  
than anything I've encountered

and this fact seems to matter  
as I truss the aromatics with twine,  
rub an herb butter beneath the bird's thin skin

and think, without sadness,  
what we are—

this sack of innards I remove,  
heavier than it looks.

MY HAIRSTYLIST, ON THE RECENT SURGERIES OF A REALITY TV  
ACTRESS

It's not the size but the heft  
and where she'll choose to aim them.  
She's even gotten an offer from Playboy  
now that she's taken care of that chin.  
Not that she wasn't pretty enough,  
but now—well you can just tell.  
I saw her in New York  
when I was visiting family  
and even bundled in goosedown  
she positively shone. You know  
how a revolving door  
can catch the light  
for you alone, standing  
where you are and you have  
to blink against blinding white?  
That's how it was, the sudden  
collision of sunlight into  
something not born but crafted.  
Of course, it's all on the inside, beauty,  
but that's why we can hire  
knives to cut it out, let it loose.

ST. MAGDALENE SINGLE MALT

And here I go again, making an accident of desire,  
of this acres-wide want  
to bring your body close to mine.

I have known what there is of waiting  
and this reaching comes alive inside  
when I read your letters—

and it's Thursday again when you tell me  
in the rigid ink of your absence  
that your grandfather, like mine, drank scotch,

aged older than we are now  
with three ice cubes in a glass tumbler.  
You describe the glow emanating from your belly

when you'd pilfer one cube, loll it about your tongue,  
suck until it would waste away,  
and when I arrive at your signature, I'm left

with a warmth, sudden as a vodkashot:  
a firework blooming

in the night sky of my chest:  
bright greens.

LEDA'S DELIVERY

I hold the child  
near my heart tucked

beneath the rib cage balanced  
on the bladder

as if I swallowed it got big  
with its being

in the middle of me

and now here pinned  
by men in masks

legs spread wide prodding  
they seek

this thing (satellite in my gut

built of alien blips grammarless  
distress from a flooded world collapsing)

these wolves of medicine poised  
above me razor-claws

willing to tear  
at anything coming  
between them and the child

(buried splinter penny in a can)

which is to say

again  
my body



## VISITATION

My cousin dreams the roots of her teeth  
are as long as the tail of a comet—  
she wiggles a front incisor with her tongue

and pulls the whole thing out with slippery fingers,  
slowly, with great pain, the pointed kind  
that feels as if it knows where it's going

while our grandmother watches, offers advice  
on the best way to go about it.  
Her voice, my cousin says, echoes

through the hollow where the tooth rooted,  
where its absence stands as a column within her.  
*Like a wind tunnel*, she says, and I think

of the Science Center, the field trips I took there as a child  
and the hall of practical experimentation

where we'd craft paper airplanes, compete  
with our classmates to see whose was sturdy enough  
to withstand the onslaught of cold air

that blew back my hair, raised gooseflesh  
in tender paths up my thin arms.

*The art of aerodynamics is all about clean lines,*  
the guide would tell us year after year.  
Clean lines, sharp folds. My cousin pauses,

waits for me to speak. I hold the phone,  
grown too hot in my hand, flush against my ear.

## INCIDENT

A sound and a peripheral flash of wing: the egret  
bounces off the oversized window in the den.  
My brother and I rush to see it there—  
egg white and lying on its side, trying to stand  
on stick-legs that can't find the ground  
strewn with palm brush and marsh grass.  
But something irreparable has happened inside  
and it seems to know; even through the glass we hear  
the dry sounds of the creature jerking in the leaves,  
unable to lift its long neck or do more than scissor kick  
against the shrink-wrapped quiet closing around its body.  
It was slowing so slowly.

Dad called for dinner and we ran,  
socks slipping over the cold tiles,  
bodies swallowed by kitchen-smells, our mouths shut tight.

## CHOPPED

I'll begin with the beer we meant to drink  
with thick burgers—he spotted the sale,  
grabbed the last ground sirloin  
hidden among the chicken livers, flashed

a thumbs up and a smile as he  
tossed the slab into the cart, making  
a promise of that metal rattle

while the wheels on worn linoleum  
wobbled shoddy pliés and we moved together

through chilly aisles, collecting grapefruit,  
strawberries, kiwi—the tender accessories  
of lovers' breakfasts, too sweet to eat  
too much of, just right for splitting—  
and other things that, now that he's left,

take up most of the refrigerator door,  
top shelf, and vegetable crisper.

Eggplant, zucchini, and bell peppers—  
onion and garlic, flame and oil. Ratatouille,  
from the French: *to disturb, to shake, to stir.*

AFTER THE FUNERAL, I SEPARATE THE LAUNDRY

to avoid the togetherness in the living room

and to understand how grief does its work  
on a warm morning, how it accumulates

in a pile on the floor like dress socks,  
these pairs of dark trousers, demure blouses.

It takes a moment to sift through, to touch each item  
made warm by a sad body

who spent the afternoon moving  
through air-conditioned rooms, shaking hands  
with other sad bodies. We chose all this

with so much care—  
the muted black and blue, the dry-eyed grays—  
as though looking nice in unison  
could be our last gift to her.

We came here after, to my uncle's house,  
peeled off our pantyhose and trousers,  
exposing the pinched flesh beneath  
before slipping into t-shirts and jeans.

I start with the darks, toss them into the well,  
pockets swelling in the rising waters

in the moment before the cycle starts.  
*Agitating.* That's the word,  
the whole mess smelling of artificial April rain.

## FOR MY FATHER

A young one on the bus—his son is small,  
runs a red racecar across the seats.  
The boy's untied shoelace swings in time  
with the down-low lurch of the bus, the other  
tucked under the tongue of his sneaker.  
Thin January sunlight glances through trees

and onto the back of the father's newspaper,  
bringing local faces to jerking, newsreel animation.  
I knew dads like him growing up,

those sandy-haired scientists and househusbands,  
slight and dry, dropping daughters off  
for birthday parties in neutral-toned Volvos—

the Field Trip Dads and Special Occasion Dads,  
the dads who would pay for ice skating and watch  
from a melamine-topped table, shy in the way  
only fathers can be  
around a wolf pack of little girls.

When my own father appeared, hands in pockets,  
one dimple deepened to see me—my father

who never bothered scraping the iced over windshield  
when he'd drive me to school on January mornings,

but would bundle me  
into the passenger's seat, tell me to listen  
to the brittle sounds winter makes

as the air warmed inside, melting the frost  
a deep breath at a time.

TO BE USEFUL

*One definition of beauty is: aptness to purpose. —Ezra Pound*

The hairbrush handed down  
from your grandmother, the careworn boar's hair  
arranging brunette strands with its teeth—

all that brushing honed a use, made it more  
itself than any other rattling thing in your vanity.

Of and for loveliness, shorn  
against its daily use, sharpened toward  
a single purpose. There,

where the handle has dulled—  
the ghosts of fingerprints, shaped,  
encircle this thing that knows  
better than you how to stand before a mirror.

You are the three-tined fork,  
barely presentable, back of the drawer.  
Teeth ringing while they clamp around you.

## MONSOON SEASON

Unblinking—a downpour that erases  
all but the outline, the place  
where each drop ricochets  
from surface; the car-lined street  
and mailboxes flattened to a scene  
rendered in only the coming away,  
the equal-but-opposite of blue rain. How

after a funeral, hours later—after the casket  
has been taken, the sandwich ring  
devoured or divided among cousins,  
most mourners gone home—

what evidence remains are the men  
standing outside the chapel: black suits  
sharp against the sundrenched sidewalk,  
smoking as if alone.

## RUINING A QUILT

It happens while watering  
the only other living thing  
I'm able to keep alive—the Chinese evergreen  
nodding fat-faced leaves from the end table.

The overflow leaks onto the armchair, onto  
the quilt, folded and laundered. Purples weep  
into pinks through skirt-scrap and denim.

She sewed this quilt by hand  
from shreds of old clothes that once  
held her own young limbs,  
her husband's, the children's. When

she died and the dark parade seeking  
mementos marched through her  
small apartment, I took the quilt  
from her bed, smuggled it into my suitcase

still smelling of hand cream and Gold Dial soap.  
The pattern, water-drunk, grows big  
across the fenced-in blocks, the fine seams  
too frail to contain the flood.

Now the quilt reeks of damp earth and mud.  
Good. It should.





## BAY STREET AT SUNSET

—*Beaufort, South Carolina*

Along the waterways, there's not a boat  
or barge for miles, though a fullness rests  
on the shoulders of the city, so clothed  
yet casual: southern evening at her best.  
The air, its salt. The endless, breathing mirror  
of weather on water sets the stage  
with muted imprecision, making clear  
that memory articulates its phrase  
from slurred syllabics: seasmells and sage  
rememberings of other nights, silver  
as headlights caught in wintered limbs of oak.  
Some nights, this solitude becomes an ache  
to set our watches by—hushed, familiar,  
a thing so commonplace it looks like hope.

POEM ABOUT A CASKET

Nothing so sturdily built as this one  
wrought in maple and oak.

Don't say she waited for this.

Don't say the widow outlived the bride,  
that the silver-framed wedding portrait  
was the only thing, in blindness,  
she would dust with a dank rag.  
Don't count dime-sized cigarette burns  
on the couch or

the number of memorized steps it took  
her slippered feet to shuffle  
from the kitchen to a cold bedroom.

The face there  
unhooked of its suffering—

## SANTIAGO STREET

—*for Auntie Marge*

After her funeral, the nephews remember the house in Imperial—a tunnel leading to a long road, a driveway, and the wraparound porch, a moat of cheap planks and wicker. As children, they'd stay there whenever their parents would tire of their footstomping, their bickering; *our widow aunt*, they'd explain to friends, repeating words they'd heard grownups use, not knowing what they meant. Summers slur as they remember: sunset falling bronze on red brick, which contained something important, having to do with a taste of blackberries. She hadn't lived there in decades, not since Uncle Freddy died and the money ran out and she was swept up, penned within a three-room apartment in McKees Rocks. But that house, its ball field, the neighbor's shed dented from stones they'd throw to prove who was strongest—all those ghosts settle over the reception hall, become almost fit to occupy in the dying September light. The nephews carried her casket today, touched the smooth wood like they would any kitchen counter. Now, they drink together, grieve in the separate rooms of their suit jackets. The youngest said he drove out to Imperial not too long ago; couldn't find the house, the shed, any of it.

## LEFT OVER

Smelling of shit and grass, the whole world is alive again  
just five days after my grandparents die on a highway  
outside of Ortonville, Minnesota.

Mid-March, still cool, and shoots of whatever  
green it is that grows this time of year  
salute in patches throughout the yard. Everything dead

is returned to us, the soggy earth  
filled with congratulation; nothing new except

days ago, somewhere outside of Minneapolis,  
strangers sat in traffic for hours, consumed  
by all the looking and not-looking

as paramedics and tow trucks cleared  
silver wreckage from the road.

The sky blinks its blue: one sky, one blue.  
There is a comfort in that lack of dimension

as every song outside my window—those various sirens,  
a vague thrust of airplanes overhead— carries  
a touch I do not want. It's almost Spring.

II.

## LEAGUES

1.

In one photo, she poses hand on hip  
in fading grayscale, boasting such expertise  
on how to be this young, this windswept.  
Against her father's aging Buick, she leans  
in a white swimsuit ruffled to mid-thigh  
that ties behind her neck, cups her breasts  
like pale, passionate hands. She hides a smile  
behind a wide brim hat, so possessed  
of that easy summer, you cannot tell  
a war is on beyond the border's frame.  
It's 1943 and this slip of a girl  
knows it, reads the papers, passes her time  
writing to soldiers. She bought her first lipstick  
that morning, to kiss each cursive letter with.

2.

Mornings, to touch each cursive letter with  
a fingertip became her ritual:  
just short reports from a brother she missed  
kept stacked and ribboned on the windowsill.  
It wasn't what they held for her—just words  
on training, pleas for cigarettes—but she  
refolded one so much, his signature  
tore clean along the letter's bottom crease.  
The stationery ink, the fact of the stamp  
had transubstantiated thought to something  
real, deliverable to her doorstep,  
solid as that wicker chair she'd rock in,  
the unfinished cross-stitch on her nightstand  
kept to remind her to busy her hands.



3.

She practiced at postscripts to busy her hands.  
In summer months, printing thoughts on napkins,  
paper scraps, labels torn from soup cans,  
she drafted what to write the young men  
she barely knew: write any word but war  
in looping script—just something genuine  
to tuck inside a shoe from a pretty girl  
who cares enough to say what's happening  
back home. She used pet names she  
felt for only one: a Navy man, nineteen  
and blue-eyed, trained in deep sea diving,  
who, in blunt-tipped pencil, would write her name:  
the letters leaned together, softly curved  
as if each had a secret the next was dying to learn.

4.

Like each had a secret the next was dying to learn,  
dive helmets perched on shelves, suits alongside:  
the only place where he was certain  
to be alone, the silence dignified  
by functionality: a storage room  
the blue-eyed diver found by accident.  
In the quiet company of empty suits,  
he smoked, considered what the helmets meant  
by staring, forward-facing, caked in dust,  
their foreheads tipped together like lovers.  
Telegrams reported losses: the touch  
between the helmets seemed obscene, absurd.  
He slapped one helmet clear off the shelf.  
The diver thought he knew just how it felt.

5.

The diver thought he'd know just how it felt  
to stand beneath the ocean, gulped in a suit,  
competing currents tugging limbs like kelp  
while he walked: a golem in leaden boots.  
The training pools prepared him for water  
illuminated by bulbs, unalive—  
expecting flat waves of Technicolor,  
he slipped beneath the surface, but the dive,  
its clumsiness, was unlike any practice;  
the water bathed him in its cold tongue,  
invented him anew: a weighted gasp  
at the bottom of a pneumonic lung.  
Still, he listens to, or is, his own breathing.

6.

Above, the sky paled to a pin-up pink  
and he was glad, for once, to be alive  
in New York on a Saturday evening  
with money in his pocket and the dive  
on Monday still an abstract thing, apart  
from this world of wandering rain-slick streets  
with his buddies, blood on their forearms  
sweating from fresh tattoos. Peeking beneath  
white gauze was a dive helmet, pupil-black  
and disembodied, floating in his flesh  
like it had waited for him all his life. It matched  
the others' when held side-by-side, fists clenched.  
The crew stayed up drinking as late as allowed.  
In two or three weeks, they'd be shipping out.

7.

*In two or three weeks, we'll be shipping out,*  
his letter read. She'd nearly missed it, buried  
beneath a plea for a new photo to tout  
at his bedside, saying he envied  
his buddies' snapshots papering the walls.  
He described his tattoo, told her he hoped  
she'd be flattered he had her initials  
concealed among the helmet's inked-in bolts.  
She thought of his arm submerged underwater  
with traces of her trapped inside his skin  
as he dove into silt black, the power  
akin to a St. Christopher's medal, a talisman.  
*I miss you, sweetheart. That's all I'll say except*  
*I think this is becoming something else.*

8.

*I think this is becoming something else.*

Reading the line aloud, it became a hymn  
whose meaning she could almost sense  
in the mouthing of each repetition.

Unfolding his words, she diagrammed the line  
as she'd been taught; in cautious, graphite strokes,  
the branches stretched across the page, alive  
with what he might have meant, so unclothed  
and plain beneath her sharpened pencil tip,  
she felt a subtle shift within her chest.

Not yet seventeen and this first lean hint  
beyond flirtation, bordering on tenderness,  
silenced her for weeks. His letter, unanswered,  
took on the weight and shape of an anchor.

9.

The weight and shape of an anchor  
spread from the tip of the tattooist's pen—  
perhaps a week and change since the other  
stopped bleeding and here he was, back again,  
deployment delayed and feeling adrift,  
his days spent teaching green sailors to weld  
beneath a league of water. *It's a gift,*  
his mother said through the phone, a wilt  
of overwatered flowers in his voice. Once  
*you get moving, things will look up,* she'd said.  
The needle caught. The diver flinched. His wants,  
ballooned inside his chest, diminished  
before the sting in his arm. He grunted.  
*Nothing is going the way I wanted.*

10.

Nothing was going the way she wanted.  
Hanging the wash, her mother came across  
her report card in a skirt pocket, hunting  
for loose change to donate to the Red Cross.  
She failed a class, the teacher's hasty note  
declaring her *sullen, inattentive*.  
Her brother hadn't written, and it felt  
like three summers ago, when he dove  
into the quarry from the highest bank.  
The time he took to surface. The surfacing  
itself unfolding in stages. The way he sank  
under once more, wiped water black as ink  
over his forehead, into his hair. How  
she understands that waiting better now.





## FABLES

The creek edged Grady's Run Road,  
slipped, wan and thin, by the music store  
through rusty tunnels, finally yawned  
wide behind the Eat'n Park which is where

the little boy disappeared.  
Each time we passed that slick ravine,  
where the slow rush of river elbowed  
the parking lot near that large-knuckled oak,  
my mother would say the same thing:

*That's where Joey Walsb's little brother drowned,*  
in the voice she used when reading me to sleep  
because this, too, was a familiar story.  
A thick wood. And pink-cheeked children

lost in thin midwinter light.  
Wet sneakers, a tumble into cold water.  
Hoarse yelling in the dark.  
These stories have no beginnings, but ends  
so repeatable, so easy to carry,  
you find yourself saying in a hotel bar

*Once, I knew a little boy who was swept away  
and the brother who watched was ruined.*  
And when the creek bed dries in August,  
we roll up the windows against the smell  
that seeps from fissures in the shallows,  
those fragile insect canyons  
dank and subterranean. History.

DESCRIBE YOUR GRIEF

—after Tom Hawkins

It's like I've been locked out of my house  
so I buy a plane ticket to Prague

where I tour the city with a group of strangers,  
carry my wallet and passport in a knife-proof purse,  
my heels wearing to nubs on the cobblestone paths

and when, over the weekend, we visit Terezín, *a city  
built for the Jews*, the guide describes  
the artists and musicians who died starving, and how

when the Red Cross came to assess living conditions  
every shop window was staged with bonbons and croissants,

the soups offered to the visiting representatives  
thick with endive and radishes, and when

one young mother was questioned, she said: *Look around,  
be sure to look around.* And the visitor explained: *Wartime conditions  
make life difficult for us all.* But this is not a death camp,

it was a camp for the living that stands now  
in memory of the suffering housed here,  
and the dark tourism of our coming,

the money we've spent to walk these avenues,  
to crowd and animate them—we trespass, we do,  
and as exiles from the lives we'd rather be living

if only my front door, the notion of home,  
hadn't been locked against me.

## ORNITHOLOGY

*Only two eyes between them*, someone says  
of the Barred Owls  
students are releasing, rehabilitated

after being hit by cars, left dying on roadsides,  
so ridden with parasites

it took a molting cycle's worth of waiting  
for the feathers to right themselves.

In their boxes, the owls seem to recognize  
an arrival, that their months-long push  
past suffering has amounted to

a drumroll. Someone wonders  
aloud *what they'll remember*  
from their time spent among us.

A flash of headlights, bone-deep thud

and these upright scientists  
pacing cageside, prodding, clipping,

waiting with them for this moment, now,  
when the professor's hand  
bends back the folds of the box

and all at once, a swoop and stumble,  
gust of birdwind.

## INSIDE THE DIVE HELMET

A peach pit, a rattling.  
Murmuring bloodsounds  
in the plugged ears, echoes  
of the contained body.  
Chokehold: no nodding, just  
thumbs up or down.  
Dark, then darker.

Packed sand  
under leaden footfalls.  
Slow limbs, an eye  
to the life line. The minnow  
on the hook, lost earring.  
Rogue tetherball, dragging  
fish shit, flesh-anchor.  
Not Hansel, not the hand  
breaking down the loaf,  
but breadcrumbs, the scattering.

## ACCIDENT

Driving down I-95 toward Columbia,  
so absorbed in the sneaking sound  
of cement rushing beneath balding tires,

I hardly notice it, the red SUV  
heading northbound across the median  
suddenly airborne, somersaulting,

a high-top tennis shoe flipped  
from some unseen teenage foot.

That's all I take in  
before I'm a hundred feet away  
but I can feel  
the heavy crunch  
of the landing, see flames in the rearview,

a caravan of cars piling along the shoulder

but by now, I'm a half-mile gone,  
can barely make out the smoke rising.

I turn down the music, listen  
for the boomerang sound of sirens

and hear only that highway slither  
regain the rhythm of its southbound music.

## AT THE RUINS OF OLD SHELDON CHURCH

Under a Carolina frost, winter  
remains standard: a subtle sag of palm frond,  
the marsh grass crunching underfoot.

Could anything care for us in the way we need  
when we most need it? Perhaps it's in forgetting  
these southern sunsets—the renewed surprise I feel,  
sky weighted with orange and magenta.  
A taxonomy of want becomes clear here,

my understanding of it bright  
against the light shed by the December sun,  
where clarity edges each lengthening shadow:  
the thought that my dead gather

just behind that thick curtain of salt air and Spanish moss,  
the one that drapes between live oaks  
bordering every road between home and Sheldon,

this place that has suffered burnings of her own—  
plantation lands fallen to disuse,  
columns threaded with kudzu  
green as a mind unripened by sleep.

## IN THE DIVERS' TRAINING VIDEO

*He has only his common sense, his technical knowledge and his diver's dress to help him. And his common sense will quickly teach him that his dress is his only weapon against the danger he may meet.* —*The Diving Dress*, 1944

He steps into it, this elephant-skin suit, pulls it up to his waist before his buddies take over, slip his arms into the thick fabric as if he were a sleeping child being tucked into pajamas. He is camera-ready, upright and handsome, the kind of man who rouses women to perfume their letters. The voiceover details the dangers of pressure while diving: crushing of the body, internal bleeding from the lungs, blown eardrums. They strap and latch him in, grab at his breastplate and jerk, but his eyes remain focused on something off screen. A wind rises, rustles his hair. His buddies put rubber tubing around his wrists; inside the suit, the man's body becomes a planet breathing deep of its atmosphere. The narrator names each part of his helmet as the wind picks up, tosses debris across the deck, knocks a sailor's hat off, but the diver was paid to sit still, to look strong, so he does.





becomes a necessary kindness.  
We were both hungry, Nathaniel—

for that watercolor quality  
of someone who could tinge the nights  
that too often ripple starless black upon black—

because the color is up there, sheathed:  
navy and indigos. That particular shade of violet.

PURA BESAKIH

*—The Mother Temple, in the village of Besakih,  
is the most important, the largest, the holiest  
temple of Agama Hindu Dharma in Bali*

1.

Day pinks to night behind tall spires.  
From where I stand, faraway palms  
line the coast like pencils shoved  
tip-down into sand.

Those distant villages rushed past  
the windows of the old Jeep  
on the drive to this temple spilling

stepped terraces and courtyards of stone  
in piecemeal overlap,  
whose narrow lanes I walked with head bowed

not in reverence but caution,  
worried that the overbites in the brick pathways  
littered with basket offerings of rice and flowers

might catch my shoe and throw me  
back down all those stairs.

2.

When I was a child, my mother had a way  
of knowing

what kind of school day I had  
by how I carried my body through the door.  
When my spine curved beneath my backpack's weight,  
created a question mark

against whatever small cruelties I'd suffered,  
she'd click on the television  
and offer to French braid my hair.

Slow strokes with the wooden brush  
made it easier to talk:

sitting on the floor before her,  
forward-facing, eyes on the screen,

we could pretend the catches in my voice  
signaled only the tug at tangles in my hair.

3.

Here in Besakih, the gods, I'm told,  
played a shell game with the temple

when Mount Agung opened her mouth  
and sang a thousand lives under  
with a black-and-red aria  
missing these slopes by mere yards.

In surviving, the temple has become  
the revered mother, great protector

though the echo of that eruption remains  
scorched against a backdrop of green.

4.

*I think you should step outside,*  
my father says through the crackle  
of bad cell reception.

I'm at work, standing in the small kitchen  
where I won't be overheard

and I will not step outside: because it is March,  
because it is raining and because

the silences between my father's words  
pulse as if in Morse code, warning me  
if I step outside, something will happen  
that cannot unhappen.

I hear my mother cry, an alien sound.  
A curtain rustles. The thing behind it moves,  
about ready to declare itself.

5.

I feel no closer now to what the guide  
promised I'd find here  
than when I pressed the crumpled rupiah  
into his hand. The lotus throne is empty

and if the temple aligns along an axis  
like an arrow to my heart,  
I stand left of center, bull's-eye adjacent.  
That heart, still thudding from the ascent,

does not leap at its closeness to God, flutter,  
or even lean heavy against my ribcage  
when I receive a daubed blessing on my forehead.

Dumb muscle, it huddles deep, collaborates  
with the lungs to keep doing what they do.  
The whole mess stays still, thoughtful,  
tabernacled in my chest.

6.

Even at this height, I hear

the low buzz of gamelan singers, unfamiliar music,  
a persistent chant. It jangles together—

one thick braid of sound  
that cracks like a whip,

stings through my body from tailbone to sternum—

7.

*Orphan orphan oh God I'm an orphan—*

Taking the phone, she can't hold it back,  
my mother who has become

at once a daughter, a creature I don't know  
who frightens me as she bellows

this new birth she works through, struggles  
to name or own,

to apply language to

this loss that bears down on her  
as though she can try it on—

a pair of iron shoes made hot, searing,  
that she will have to wear, walk in,

that will shape her flesh against itself,  
break her in for a perfect fit.

8.

Breathing thin, fragrant air,  
I take one more look

before beginning my way down, knowing  
I've never been this far above the earth  
with only my own legs to stand on.

I wonder what I carry back  
aside from a dizzy shiver in my thigh muscles,  
this tremendous lack, and a desire

to have my mother here, to sit on these stairs  
alone with her  
and let the electric hum of cicadas  
in the fire-worn forest speak for us.

The guide empties my hands  
of their floral blessings, thumbs a bit of oil  
into my palms, tells me  
to let the sky see what I hold.

Looking, I see only how pale they are,  
how naked they seem—

as much as Besakih's wide stare.

## SKY BURIAL

Walking after dinner, I find a turkey vulture  
on the side of the road, one wing crumpled  
beneath its head, legs tangled among pine needles.  
Someone must have dragged him here, away  
from the insult of other cars. The day  
has already taken its bites of his taloned feet  
and featherless face, whittled to arrow's point.  
The split belly reveals a mess of red, flecks  
of whatever he was eating when he was struck.  
A marriage of entrails, a togetherness—  
carrion digesting carrion. And there,  
at the center: that knucklebone heart,  
little vitamin of the soul, waiting  
to be plucked, taken back.

## THE TIME MACHINE

After they're dead awhile and the clutter  
of clothes and shoes they won't wear again

begins to insinuate itself  
upon the coatracks and inside the mudroom,

it's time to bury them properly.

\*

*We can't just leave them here—*

my mother says, madcap, as she snatches  
from piles set aside for donation,

thrusting each sweater into a plastic bag  
with starving hands—

and, being so invited, these trench coat ghosts  
follow us home.

My mother drapes them  
over sturdy wooden hangers,  
granting them shouldered shape.

They become silhouettes  
leaning into one another in the hall closet,

arm to arm to arm,  
until it feels impossible  
not to gather the sleeves, hold them  
bunched in a bouquet.

\*

And the smell, each and every time.  
That throaty evocation  
of thrift stores and sun-hot sequins,  
an edge of bodysmell and cedar—  
the deep indoors, a scent of cloister  
kept fresh and ready  
behind the closed door.



Looking for the vacuum cleaner,  
I am slapped full in the face,

spiral back to an apartment  
long since sold, where I was a child  
treading in thick socks down a steep stair—

and I stood like that  
in the hall for a moment,  
hand on the knob, the light

bathing my face, almost warm,  
before shutting the door.

One sleeve, caught in the jamb,  
rustles with my leaving.

