La Esperanza

Elizabeth Tippet
Colby College

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La Esperanza
Poetry by Elizabeth Tippet

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We do not see things as they are.
We see them as we are.

--From the Talmud
For a Girl I Know

I had a friend who used to stroke my forearm, jokingly rub it against her face and rejoice in the sheer softness of that skin. I remember sea glass dangling, an opaque green, from the rearview mirror in her fragile little egg of a Honda hatchback. The gear shift came up straight from the floor, belonging more to a truck than to her little hand. I told her I knew how to drive a manual transmission, then took the driver's seat and taught myself; meanwhile, she told me when she saw migrating mailboxes, said, Perhaps you should swerve. People honked horns. I stalled at traffic signals, and raised my middle finger to those impatient bastards who veered to miss me. She, so shyly excited, would shrink in her seat and hand on cheek, say Oh Lizzy, pretending she could never do something so bold. She did participate in more perverse activities, taking my silken arms
when we would play Pioneer women and pretend
her house had no indoor plumbing so of course
we had to pee in the woods. Publicly, I was always
the brave one, she stood behind me and giggled
into my shoulder blades. Through her supposed softness,
I learned just how hard I really was. I took her
sea glass and brushed it down her favorite forearm,
taking off the top layer of skin. I remember even now, how tender
a wound that was. I remember, we both flinched.
The Morning After

I wish I could write about the morning after, but what I remember most is the night before.

My tea grew cold, I was standing outside, there was snow on the ground and no one held my hands, so they stole warmth from the cup of tea, which went on growing colder. Dance music and I tried long distance numbers while a TV movie played for itself in the background. Talk lasted for hours. No one to tuck me in, no one home at all, so I eased into the perfect pleats and said goodnight to the walls. I woke up and no one was home.

The morning after is what I want to tell you about, this haze and possibilities burning off by afternoon.
Answers to the unquestioned

The heart is a heavy parcel you forgot
to send, and I linger at the post office,
thumbing through the most wanteds
and tapping your favorite song
with a pen that can’t be stolen. Yes,
I know we can’t have everything.
When I call you I have thirty seconds
of machine time and a mouthful
of pebbles: of course you don’t answer,
and only coins are returned. My tears stop
before even the air’s touch, my eye ducts
swelling like a girl’s cheeks while she holds
her breath until just before she really turns blue.
Hanging Up

I've had my time and now
I'm done. My father's mother
talks of little else—except today—
You know your father loved you,
right? Right, sweetheart?
When she seems ready
to hang up, I can't let go
of his mother just in case it is
the last time she will ever speak
of my father loving me.
“We are the mirror as well as the face in it.”
--Rumi
Naked and Drunk In a Car

This insatiable wind won't stop pulling our nipples erect, biting goose bumped skin. I watch fire flies dive toward the vanishing pavement as her cigarette liberates itself. In the glow of dashboard lights, her body's swinging to the pumping, polluting beat.

We pass a corn field under the moon: tractors still, silent reminders of labor and early rest. The car clock reads quarter past three, the wind plays roughly with our hair as we propel ourselves dangerously through the night.
Postcards

The airy prairies of Arizona.  
Three friends, cross country common  
destination. J cannot stop taking pictures,  
C manages the wheel, and I sit in the backseat  
contemplating their world. Through New Mexico  
the mountains imprison us, we are guarded  
on both sides of the road. Bob Dylan plays  
Spanish Boots of Spanish Leather and C says  
he feels like crying. I think he wants to be  
in love, and isn’t. He wants his time  
more easy passing....

Walkway underneath a coastal train.  
They run like children to catch the sound  
as one passes over. So I could read  
Amtrak engine number I stand by  
the pay phones. Remember Dad  
did this? Sarah, here we are,  
his town, four years dead.  
I’ve sent my love....

A perfunctory boardwalk sojourn.  
I spun on my bare heel  
and told J I wanted to be someone’s  
six gun shooting star, told him  
then to hug me. His arms were occupied,  
though, keeping himself warm. This cold  
January day all he wants to do is wait some  
more for friends to call a number  
he’d left on machines...
The end of the Bougainvillea Fishing Pier.
We took a panoramic of ourselves.
C has long arms and snaps
a picture. Holding us so closely,
the crossbows of the camera,
and someone’s hair is cut off. We are so close,
you cannot even see we are at the end.
This will help us remember....

Somewhere.
J is sorry he did not hug me
with arms, but I’ve hugged the limbs
of a tree instead, wrapped my body in the itch
of the bark. From a distance, no one knows
I am not dangerous, only a young girl. C knows
differently, but keeps his space. Sweetheart,
from this perspective all I see is the middle
of the night and home coming soon...
Soil and Sand

Dad, we both know your house sits too precariously on this California cliff. I have seen the patio pulling away from the house, damage done by less than even minor tremors. You can sleep through the dog's barking, but I swear one rain drop against the window starts you. Rising from sleep, you place hands on the window, worried about the damage, as if each tiny drop were a bullet aimed at the foundation of this house. When I see you obsess, driven like this, I want to be free as a sand dune, migrating with the winds. Then, I would be free to coast by this house you cannot let go of, watch you on the threatened patio through torrents of rain, holding a raised fist, damning God for being so rotten to you.
What I Want

Good girls can learn the right way to do, to say, even to tame the body’s little earthquakes in covert missions of exploration. Before he loved me I was reading about desire and adolescent girls—new to the body’s rhythms, weren’t they shamed to speak so grown-up. These heady articles made me think of all ‘love’ merely as romanticized biology. Three in the afternoon I felt his callused hands (from his guitar) creeping up my spine like a shiver. He asked me what I wanted while strumming his hands against the flannel shirt he lent me. I had no idea what to do. Still such a little girl, I realized I might as well be wearing Mary Janes and a jumper, spinning around on a slow-moving Lazy Susan, watched by my mother. Confronted, I left silence hanging. I haven’t yet perfected being real.
Denouement

It starts with an itch, you know, as if an infection is building, perhaps in the ear. You find yourself pawing at the spot just in front of the ear lobe and just above the bone of the jaw. The movement makes you realize something hurts. It starts as an itch, mine, not his, which I can assure you was already a full-blown disease. Let me switch metaphors, it is like walking into your house and knowing the television is on, but muted. You don’t even need to look. Soon, it will be the involuntary shiver of need, you’ll be standing there with a placid face that will evaporate, then you’ll be enjoying the loss of poise: a mouth gulping for air, shoulder blades turning inward, bones in the neck shifting and low, visceral moans. Then, release. Every muscle sags: worn, tired, relaxed and done. Finally, we’re cured.
"That hurt we embrace becomes joy."
--Rumi
Attachment

Dandelion seeds
on shaky legs,
cotton winged
for flight, but grounded,
waiting for wind
to pluck them
into the drift
until they’re scattered
to places unknown
by the stem. Yet,
the wind will whisper
this: I know
they live while you
feel they’ve died.
Feel this in grief:
the immediate pluck,
then the knowledge
only of the wind.
The Traveler

Two years, if you ask how long
he's been bumming around on the beach.
You see him, you start meditating
as his body, the color of burnt almonds,
stretches routinely on a vinyl tourist chair
day after day. He says he's in between
jobs, you think, Is it possible to live life like this?
He uses his voice mildly, makes it strangely
familiar, which makes your eyes nervous
and you can't look anywhere but
your knuckles. Even then, still, all day,
you want to sit and listen, not hearing,
rather letting his lulls elixe you like white
noise. You know his sound can hold you
only as briefly as the crest of a wave can hold
its curl. You might settle for watching him
making coffee in his unhurried way or scanning
the television channels slowly, objectively.
But, you probably want some sort of promise
from him, a guarantee of a serenity like his, you want
to know exactly what makes him mysterious,
gentle, alone. You think, maybe you've met him
at the right time. But, you're always thinking like that.
Fantasies

The rituals leave me lonely. The brushing of the teeth, time alone at the mirror leads me to desire. I flatten my palm to the glass for a closer look and wonder, What if that hand were reaching for the reflection of someone beside myself? I could be discussing something serious, or something trivial, I might be sitting knock-kneed on the counter, he could be brushing off a speck of flour from my face while we talked about the walking of the dog. These are my memories not yet earned. I give to others the coupled activities, the dinners and shows to be caught, or the sharing of the perfect idea for Karen's present. I want someone to groan with when the garbage truck comes so early on Saturday morning, someone to fall asleep beside me when it drives away.
La Esperanza

For my Father

Oh, there are still those times I taste a sip of the first drink of the night and return to age fourteen, to Calle de la Esperanza, barefoot feet on cement, margarita in hand. I felt special, the only kid there out of all the nieces and nephews allowed to have the weakly mixed drink, the only one understanding my father as he spoke to me in Spanish. I practiced a clipped accent in the citrus tree bedroom and listened to us laugh at night. But even with his rubias sleeping some doors down in healthy skin and fresh linens, he slept restlessly on the couch. Was his last breath waiting for him in the bedroom? We ate warm tortillas and competed for hours at cards, my skin healing from the California sun. Those deep indigo nights, with barbecue coals electrified, I laid my head on his lap and saw the smoke wander off, carrying away aroma. Now, I wish I could tell myself: Breathe deeply, this will not be forever. When I get weepy with grief for him, I catch my breath and I remember him the way probably only how I do: as always leathered and burnt sienna.
In Progress...
About Time

They say you left me
Cornish eyes, marked by circles
the color of erased pencil marks.

What I remember best
is you following a salsa dancer
in a Tijuana dive, swinging

her hearty hips, then changing
direction when close enough
to smell subtle sweat on the nape

of her neck. I imagine you
found it almost sweet, the way
even grimy salt in my hair felt

after a day with you and the Pacific.
On red flag days, we would battle
waves and rush out to greet

the next breaker, though we knew
it would probably pull us under.
They say, they always say,
you left me. Weeks, months
you did not call me on the East coast,
times I alone would wait patiently,

knowing you’d eventually
resurface. It’s different now,
I’ve left you. I wouldn’t take

you, your ashes, back to rivers
you’d wade into the knee,
flying for fish, catching but

always releasing. I think of you
now, dancing in death. I try
not to think of you any other way.
Full Circles

I come full circle from a long line
of ancestors I have imagined for myself.
I shadow these relatives with a tracing finger,

Who are you ghosts? Why do I remember you
when he looks at me as a study of lines and curves
and the sun’s freckling effects. You kissed the mouth

of too much lipstick when you thought she wanted
to look pretty. Sometimes, man, I tell you, we drink
too much expensive wine and turn up the bass

on the stereo until it trembles across the floor and vibrates
the back of my chair. Soon, he’ll put out his hand
and expect mine to meet it.
The Desert, Dying

Now, pirouettes for days, in torn Levi’s, she slaps at the walls with the two-for-one sale fly swatters. Holding the handles like brushes for painting, she dizzies herself and lays to rest on the floor. The cross word puzzles, finished, the dishes, paper, and the cat’s gone to the coyotes. She planted vegetable seeds where the oleanders used to be. Each day, she grooms the little graves, waiting for babies to spring forth. The desert knows no oysters, she begs the dry earth to lend her pearls, lend her pearls, lend her the senses to remember the way the heat settles in, soft like hair on the legs, heavy like the white shirt’s cling to her back. These days, she is lucky if she even possesses the escape of her face pressed to the hard cement floor of the basement during the days of the most pregnant heat.
Ode to the Routine

Always, there will be
a song on the radio, walking
through your day, or a kiss
left with lips that never
remember to forget. Morning
light, dreams dissolve
but leave a type of residue
only a shower can begin
to wash away. I am not
angry with the air, letting
the masses take it in so
easily, accepting merely
drools of steam for gratitude.
We walk this world, sticky
with flesh, bombarded by
deadlines, ringing phones,
sitcoms. Some say little things
matter most, but only when
the mind clings to one
little thing, places it on
your tongue like a plain tab
of acid that melts like honey,
cherishing each small bud
of taste, as if appreciating
each vein of a leaf in a wide
landscape. I don’t think
to the future. It means I want
something, or everything,
anything.
On Losing My Mind

It was restless, you see, I knew it was about to leave me so I wrapped it in yellow cellophane with a bow of twine and held it, breathlessly, in my arms.

The man next door was watching, so I learned to carry it with no more emphasis or exaggeration than the shuffling of shoes. I am quite mad with my arms. They opened easily and it left. The neighbors, always watching and whispering into the bed sheets at night saw me laugh as I presented it to a lover, for he loves and hates me equally.
Ode to Black and White

Every house with a veranda
and vintage jam jars for loose coin,
pillows and plush ottomans, socked
feet and linen pants, living rooms, no
television, Cat’s paws would always stay
tender, the pot roast would never burn, nothing
but black and white and actions accompanied

by Sinatra’s songs. Perhaps white bordered
photos in hand-made frames, lofty goals
instead of pipe dreams, and regrets no more
painful than a child pulling on your skirt.
Longing for days lost could be cured
by a sharp memory of the dead, induced
by the reek of bourbon on other people’s breath.
The Forecast

My mother will not drive
once she sees the first flake
of snow. She always exaggerates

a storm’s forecast, information
gained from watching the weather
with a finger slowly flipping

channels, the remote control she holds
like a gun, aimed precisely
and steadied with two hands.

I choose channels haphazardly,
half-awake, but swiftly, glancing
quickly for my choices, but

she’s awkward with it all—
the machines, cars, phones,
and when she gets frustrated,

I think she is such an old lady.
Then, I look down and notice
my hands are like her hands,
piano players' fingers, long
and slender, but I chew my nails
down to the skin. When she's just
worn-out sometimes she presses
the heels of her hands against
her eyes and nail's perfect curves
touch her eyebrows. Those fingers
alone could domesticate tangles
in my hair as a child. Now,
trying it all on my own, I feel her
behind me somehow, perhaps waiting
to help me raise my arms in defeat.
Excuses

Maybe it is the fact I always lose my wallet and forget parking tickets that makes my mother swear I am the most irresponsible person on earth.

I’ve heard people in love walk around differently, as if pleasantly struggling to keep a straight face when picked up by the cops for some inane prank. If I were to say, I’m in love it wouldn’t work. I can barely sit still through previews in a movie theater; she knows I tire of people more quickly. But she is dumb to the fact that when I bounce a check, my stomach drops, and when I drop my wallet in a someone’s car, I slap my head against the bathroom mirror gently, so she can’t hear.
Starting Over

Imagine buying fish from convenience stores
in San Francisco then, wandering home
to tempered pine floors and a ceiling
of rented tin. This is my new horizon.
The unhinging of us all sometimes:
imagine misplacing apartment keys,
little league baseball trophies, or even
worn copies of Buber’s I and Thou. Now, even
if I lost these things, I still have murals
of memory, piecemeal montages
of our travels. Whether Iowa or Route one up
California’s coast, these images are the mountains
of my new vistas, the scenes I love
remembering on empty floors with bare feet.
Mortal Dreams

My sister said, *crying out or laughing,*
*I thought I heard you in the night.*
Crying out, I picture an angel, wings
shriveled and limp, sleeping with
desperate knees begging for the touch
of the chest. The curtains would be
reaching inward on icy breezes.
Paralysis. White, the color of night’s
vision, and visible escape of breath.
Laughing, I imagine wings wide
and lavender bed sheets, captive
only to the mind’s random replays.
Outside, branches of trees rippling like
wind through hair. Truth be told,
she only heard me coughing. The torn
screen lets in mosquitoes and I toss
around listlessly, the cat scratches
in his box and the damp yellow sheets
lead my legs clumsily in a tango.
I was coughing on mortal dreams.