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Slack tide

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SLACK TIDE

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ALLISON ALSIP

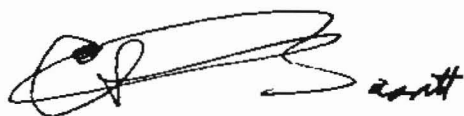
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BOOK ONE

Searching for Fossils

Each day I brush the cliffs
with giant swags of evergreen,
a broom, hidden graves
beneath the rock. I sweep
the tracks and curves,

certain bends in time:
my mother's cursive.
Once she leaned so close
to the postman I saw
their hands touch. At five

I couldn't read her writing.
Tight trails, like webs,
weaving one into the next - -
my shadow pinned to the cliff
is it a cave? Like maps

I fold her letters, the ink,
blooming in black loops.
He understood, carried her
flowers from his garden,
from cliffs where waves

could not reach them . . .
as if I were not there.
Does the sight
of me cause damage?
I chip rock from rock;

tracing and re-tracing
the penmanship of the past.
Once I found a gull,
its wing cracked back
for a pillow. Its body jerked

with each heartbeat.
It was the wheezing;
the coughing; the lung
blood: the sharp claw
of my mother's breathing.

I did not make him leave.
I yanked dandelions

(continued - - no stanza break)

("Searching for Fossils," con't)

from our lawn, snapped
their necks, singing to myself:
momma had a baby

and her head popped off.

As I sweep the cliffs,
fist-fulls of cursive
crumble: I need
the shame in my arms.

When I lifted the gull
it stopped living
in my palm, and with the tip
of my shoe, I flicked
that dirty bird away.

Slack Tide

for my sister

Every summer we patched the holes
in our air mattresses and sprinted barefoot,
like two surfers, over the dry grass

to the Sound. We used twine and large rocks
for anchors. Arranged rags of seaweed
on our tiny breasts and held hands underwater

until they burned, until pins and needles
forced us to hang by hooks: our little fingers.
On shore, the grasses shook their heads.

Mother sat on the open deck, brown
and clean, her skirt bunched high above
her knees. For the neighbor to see? We rocked

above stones, above rainbows of loose oil.
I remember looping twine over our big toes,
casting and drifting, until the anchors

caught bottom. Trawling only our shadows.
It was pure. Two paper dolls bound together,
rocked by ferry waves. Courting disaster,

our eyes shut tight as fists, we didn't dare
let go, drifting in the same direction: waiting
for what came next.

Purple

See, it all happened the day the painter
painted all the doors bright purple.
(Each room in our house has its own door).
Like hands pressing the house
further and further: Will it fall off the cliff?
My mother thinks the doors spontaneous,
planning them for years.

The purple clematis blooms like clock-work.

My therapist stares out the window,
trying to find my mother. You see,
purple eats at me. Outside my window
the purple petunias. Outside my window
the purple cosmos and lilacs. At the door
the purple collars: my dogs pant.

Purple lines the walkways, grows
like fresh picked bouquets. Bridal bouquets.
My mother says she met my future husband.
Shy like me. Purple and I disagree.
Can you tell me a little bit about your father?
Oh, it was dark when he came home:
he never noticed the doors.

Purple trims my every thought.
It's purple adirandeck chairs, candles,
and mugs. Hiding in the tree, blooming
as impatiens, purple petals dropped
like snowflakes from its branches:
a thousand broken wings.

I had two friends: two dogs with wings.
Did I tell you the doors are purple inside too?
They yapped and floated above my bed.
At night I slip through my purple door
to meet my boyfriend: a night flower.

The clematis bends like my mother's back.

Purple pulls me back. Her face,
a patch of perennials, her back arched,
prim roses I guess. Did you know
I like it when he shoves his tongue

(continued - - no stanza break)

("Purple," con't)

deep inside my ear? I shut my eyes,
the doors unhinge and spin
like tops over the lawn.

Claming

There's no one claming the beach
but her husband. He works with a shovel
and a plastic bucket in black rubber waders:

throwing the razors back, keeping the butters.
A shell cracks and the soft insides spread:
a yellow profit in the sand. He calculates,

running fingers through his dark hair
like ideas. He's a toy inventor on his way to
making it big. Making hundreds of thousands,

maybe a million. What mathematics.
A tugboat passes: he shifts his weight
from one leg to the next, wades deeper

into the water, leaving behind the beach
pocked and steaming. Underwater, kelp
is dragged like hair from drowned faces:

shoals of jellyfish hang, immobilized.
Last weekend he bought a boat slip
and five new magazine subscriptions.

He doesn't know what a slip is and for the slip
we do not own a boat. It is frightening,
the current cutting the pass. The tug's motor

catches him in a net: nothing slips through,
not an elbow, a black wader, nor the bucket
for the clams he came to get.

The Inventor

Each night he works alone
in the cave of the garage. The block

of garages, dark except for his:
the door propped open

like a yellow eye for all to see.
The night, a veiled lover

at his window. He hears the tapping:
moths into the hot white light,

The room smells of wings.
He's opening returned games,

checking, sorting, collecting
usable pieces: trying to salvage

parts. *Great*, he keeps saying.
Like a coffin his shadow closes

on the lawn. To the house next door?
He goes lightly on the grass, this time

thinking of his daughter upstairs
watching TV. Who will forgive him?

He blinks to erase the semen-like film
from his eyes, sealing the night.

Inside the moths stop, clinging
to the orange extension cord.

Like a floodlight, or a TV set
life is flicked off, he hears the fizz

and notices the last dots
of brilliant white before blackness.

Before Nightfall

At the swamp two daughters lay roads.
The roads are actually old boards.
The wood is wet and the trees,
up to their ankles in mud, swab the night.

The girls breathe the stagnant air,
in, out, in, out, all the while thinking:
rope swings. The shorter girl is whistling.
On the porch the father calls them back.

Though he no longer sleeps
with his wife, the night is another country.
Somewhere there's a humming,
maybe a frog, a cricket, or the taller sister,

her ankle caught between the boards. Meanwhile,
the girls build forts in the swamp. Will they
run to come home? A landscape
where a father's whistle captures a moment.

After the Argument

Where did you make him go?
I can't sleep. I imagine him
grabbing his pants, wallet,
snapping his belt, his headlights
searching my room.
I picture you curled
like a pink shrimp
on the bedspread, tossed
with giant white peonies.

From the next room,
your screams, in fistfuls
like thrown shoes.
When you get like this,
I dream of cramming a pillow
down your throat
until your eyes flutter,
then freeze over.
Where will I go?

We both sleep on the edge
of our beds. If I slipped
into the still-warm bed
(from his body) and pressed
my spine to yours:
slept back to back
like lovers in our clime,
the garden, in the furrow
between corn and sweet peas,
with the ruddy throats
of morning glories hovering
and whispering to the stones below . . .

I know, I know, I know . . .

I would brush your hair
like corn silk and you
would tell me your story,
now, then, there.
Would I forgive you
if I knew the hurt
in your throat?

(continued - - stanza break)

("After the Argument," con't)

The garden grows wild
outside your bedroom.
You blot out the sun
with your right hand:
the underground face.
Motes of golden pollen
dust the air: as if by dawn,
in this all-weather marriage,
we could open
absolutely whole.

Leaf Cleaning

I am heavy on my knees
beneath the miniature tree
that does not bloom
in the dim living room. I am
cleansing, polishing, sinking
my washcloth in and out
of the glass bowl brimming
with milk and luke-warm water.
It's not a careless combination.

It's my allowance. The leaves,
so fragile if snapped, would drip
with clear liquid. I bathe
them one by one; one,
I rub near the base, like a secret,
between my thumb and finger,
as if trying to separate dollar bills:
so I'm eleven again, on business,

with my father in New York.
His navy suit walking ahead of me,
his legs cutting the sidewalk
like scissors. We say nothing.
On the ground, popped balloons,
or bubbles reflecting the world
with their creamy insides:
dozens of used rubbers. Blooming
white-orange, cheddar-pink,
and big-purple all over the sidewalk.

For if we said nothing,
they could be nothing.
More likely, they're like a father,
after dinner, leaning on the knob
outside the bathroom, listening,
to his daughter bathe. Ready to enter,
to see if she is all right.

In the living room I kneel
beside the tree. The leaf
in my hand has turned white
and the milk has sunk deep

(continued - - no stanza break)

("Leaf Cleaning," con't)

into its veins, fanning,
like life-lines, love-lines . . .
I dip my hand into the water
and stir the bottom silt
like wind. A wind
strong enough to shake
a sapling into blossom.

At the Marketplace

Did you know the slap of wet meat
still makes me jump?
Jellyfish still frighten me
and the bruise, the blue-black ocean

I test before entering. In salt water
my eyes become filters. Between words
I hesitate, inhale, dive deep
beneath the unsaid.

I search for bubbles of your breath. Father,
I do not want to kiss anymore.
Behind those cans of beans,
gin, and coffee - -

Where were you? Hands behind
my back, I learned to dive
until you rose to the surface
with the dead-man's-float. How sudden

the past becomes the present,
how unexpected: a patch
of cold water. Father,
you never let me kiss you

on the cheek, it always had to be
on the lips. Meaning?
The daughter surfaces, screeching
and wet. The father wipes clumps of hair

off her forehead, cradles her.
Did you know I butchered jellyfish
in the prop not knowing
they would live and multiply?

-Dedicated to Cassidy

The River

As a girl you floated, face-up
in the crowded public pool. To feel
your body go slack, to witness
the distorted reflections
of the bending evergreens.
To hum and listen
as if your own voice
were another child's singing.

Now his quick fingers circle
the tips of your nipples
and you hold your breath.
Now you lay closer to the river
that terrifies you more than the canal
behind your parents' house.
The canal with a current
fast enough to kill.

He bunches your jeans down
around your knees,
tells you he's never felt you so . . .
the grass grows slick
and you feel it
sliding beneath you
pulling your body in waves
to the river.
Someone else is singing.

The Dragonflies

Together my legs shiver
like seconds. For hours,
on the cement porch,
I sit. The man next door
is playing the saxophone again
and around me, a light snow
gathers in white mounds,
permanent as Patagonia.

I am just outside Portland.
I wish I were in Idaho
in a rented row boat
on tiny Lake Wykersham
in August. I can taste
the chemical that kills
the acrafoil, that turns
the green lake ice-blue.

I see the electric blue dragonflies
fucking in the air. Their bodies
hovering over the tainted water,
so close, they seem
not to move. Maybe I should
have screamed. Moaned a little?
I remember how I waited
in the freezing green water:

the long moments before
he turned his back, and I
scrambled up the bank;
and how he pitched me
his beach towel, grinning,
as if he'd never been
disappointed in all his life.

I am too timid. It will pass.
15 degrees: nothing
takes to the air, save
the hot breath of Scott Paper
and my neighbor's
long white underwear.
He's someone I could love.

(continued - - stanza break)

("The Dragonflies," con't)

I am riding the clouds
and chewing the fleshy parts
of my mouth, bleeding,
licking sulfur crystals
from the air. My palms burn
on the cement: the temperature
of the moon. I believe in
love at first site

and the electric blue dragonflies
hanging over the water
with their heavy,
three-inch bodies
and veined wings,
thinner than tracing paper.

BOOK TWO

The Luncheon

You should know before entering,
I double-check my face
in my mother's paned glass doors:
lift my eyebrows ever so . . .
I divide into a hundred little squares . . .

I'm still here, in line
for this house. The rose print saucers,
(priceless) the sterling silver cow
that spews milk from her mouth.
It all runs in the family.

My mother laughs, cautiously
as if sex had just been mentioned.
A laugh with water
wrung so tight out of it, it burns
in your hands.

My mother's an expert
with the mud mask. Her sister
works for Mary Kay. My father's sister - -
an actuary. I worked hard as a girl,
putting dirty glasses back in cupboards.

I obey myself completely:
skim garnish off my gazpacho
and lick the knife like a cat. I'm good.
Five pink rayon tulips decorate the table:
pure pruned desire.

My father's dead. He died last year
clutching his heart on the dance floor.
Now we're all women.
My aunts stick Kleenex up their cuffs
like price tags. I select a saucer.

Oh, no, not that one.

My hand excuses itself
from my arm. At the table I worry:
will they open, bow their heads,
the tulips, allow the tasteless
yellow pollen to flake like dandruff

(continued - - stanza break)

("The Luncheon," con't)

on her black dress? At the funeral
my mother wore her red lips
straight as sirens. When I get home
I think of kissing all the green tomatoes
on my window sill.

The Ole Curiosity Shoppe

Way in the back, both jars sat
on top of the organ that played
"This Old Man" for a quarter.

I didn't think much about the pig
in the jar with two snouts.
We'd come to see the gooey duck,

twenty-five pounds of neck
and a shell in a jar with water.
I came with my mother,

who gripped my hand so tight
I smelled oranges: she squeezed
them right down to the rinds.

Though the pig's thick skin, piled
in layers around the bottom of the jar,
hid its legs. I remember the squeal

when a pack of boys discovered
two more tails on the backside
of the pig. Who turned,

but my mother, her green eyes
darting from the boys, to the pig,
to me. By now I was spellbound.

The pigs eyes punched shut, violent
its body to remain forever
the same size. What was I wishing for?

It looked bleached, sickly like skim milk,
everything but the two snouts
pressed pink into the glass.

Piano Woman

Tonight the moon
is a clipped fingernail.
In her upstairs room
she wears her face-skin
still well-creamed. It is late.
Lights no longer caravan
below her window.

In the west her children sleep.
She plays the Baby Grand,
such agile fingers, she says,
do not gather dust. Nor children.
She maintained her family
like an art: tight laces,
waxed floors, and full-hour

lessons. Back humped,
she flicks her tongue
between black and white keys:
sweeping music, like dust,
into a pan. Her hips hurt.
Deep inside she rises
against it. Her thin face,

straight, unlined, no marks
of pain. A breeze enters,
lifts the lace curtains:
the sharp giggle of a child.
Where is the woman
who clipped finger nails
so short before their lessons

they bled for hours?
The warm-up scales,
string after string,
climb her necklace,
until they fly off the keyboard,
catch mid-air and scatter
on the hard wood floor,
as would pearls or a cheap gold clasp.

Laps

To the pool she brings these legs,
slick as razors,
the blue snag of chlorine,

and the white linen, the sterling silver jewelry of late summer,
and the night he peeled her palms from her thighs
and kissed each one like fruit.
On the cold cement, a rind-felt earth . . . goose bumps.

She covers her inner thigh
with both hands and thinks, how perfect
she would be without it.

Never has she felt so heavy.
Steam rises in wisps, easy to breath,
she aligns herself
with the thick black stripe on the bottom of the pool.

Stripped of everything,
she scissor-kicks her body to the other side.

Working at the Cherry Plant

I am eating the cherries again.
I wear bright red lipstick
and let one curl escape
my hair net so it dangles
before my eyes
when I lean over the belt.
I admire the forklift drivers
and people who can multiply
large numbers without paper.
The owner passes:
I don't ask for my raise.
He stumbles on the step
to his office, and I
let a couple of bad cherries
slip by. Behind me,
the man on the catwalk
flirts with the redhead
grabbing her clipboard.
The cherries shake.
They are the color of liver.
A river of liver I think,
like a doctor, I try to remember
which side my liver is on.
Sometimes, in my plastic gloves,
I dig my nails deep
into the seams of cherries,
and peel back their skins
like gifts. I suck the pits
until they are dry
and slivers of wood catch
in the fleshy parts of my mouth.
Before going home
I drink from the hose out back,
pour the turpentine,
and wash the stains
from my hands.

Bleeding Woman On a Street Corner

No one hears
the ugly woman mumble,
the earth is flat. So
she folds her legs
into her chest,
as she would bed sheets.
She picks a page of newspaper
with the least black ink
and wads it into a ball,
hesitates, lifts her skirt
and swiftly wipes
the insides of her thighs.

She moves deeper
into her crotch. Dark,
russet ribbons of blood.
She wipes until the color
turns rose, until it is
a blush, she wipes
harder until the newsprint
returns without color.
Half inside her own body
she holds a ball of newsprint,
and feels the new heat
of rushing blood.

Polling Booths: Mayagalpa, Nicaragua

Outside a girl guides her bicycle tire
with a stick over the earth, and a boy,
maybe her brother, sells warm soda
in plastic bags, while all the men smoke.

The line wraps around the last corner
of the schoolhouse, belting some tensions.
Inside a woman is voting in her best
sundress and thick black heels.

A wind flies through the wire
of open windows and catches the frail
plastic: the dark curtains cling to her figure
like a body bag. Even without voices

her head throbs; machine guns firing
on the Honduras border. Her hand
hesitates before checking the red square
her husband checked before her.

She remembers a bar and her son drunk
with hatred. Dressed in red, ready
to kill for the *Revolución*. Quickly,
she stuffs her ballot into the slot

and walks past the table of *oficiales*
and two black guns. Outside her husband
waits. She smiles to him and he
shuffles back to the banana fields.

She takes the long way home
on the beach, all the while thinking
of her dead son and the brilliant reds
of sunset on the saltwater lake.

Leaving Ometepe, Nicaragua with the Ballots

On the lip of the boat he sits,
feet dangling, inhaling what's left
of his first cigarette. The soldier
stares towards land: the boat stops

as if an anchor had finally caught bottom.
On shore, the people look
like quick dabs of brown paint.
The boat pounds through the chop,

away from the black lava beaches
covered with sharks, away
from the tiny island sold for votes.
Below deck, men bail saltwater

from the ship's wooden belly.
The cargo: bundles of ballots.
The waters, silent like seeping honey
into the wet cavern . . .

and the plastic jugs throwing water
left and right and left . . . nowhere to put it.
Why do waves smash themselves to death
on the sides of the boat?

The soldier walks into the bow.
An anchor-chain forever unraveling,
the wind, whitecaps foam
like scars over the water. White peaks

of knowledge? The boat's wake widens
above his silhouette, sweeping the chop
and debris, leaving a trail
of planing whirlpools to hit the horizon.

The Day After the Elections, Nicaragua 1990

The early morning tastes of *maduros*,
hatred, and the gritty smoke
of the rekindled stove. A woman works

in a sundress, knotted at the bottom.
When she passes the cutting table
the chicken thrashes, tugs at its foot:

twine binds its leg to the table's.
In the hills, soldiers wake, pull themselves up
by their rifles, and stare down

at the smoldering banana fields.
Flies circle the cutting board, every so often
landing - - pools of blood, claws,

and dried fat. The kitchen is dark.
The box is where it always is:
past the filthy sheet that acts as a door,

under the bed. The President's voice
crackles on the radio: an echo muffled
by birds shooting from a tunnel.

She drags the box from the blackness,
over the well-swept earth,
to the kitchen, She lifts three guns

from the box, kicks the cardboard
under the table, then eases her body
into her rocking chair and waits.