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Power outage, and other poems

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THE POWER OUTAGE
And Other Poems

by

Wendy Oram-Smith

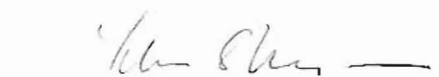
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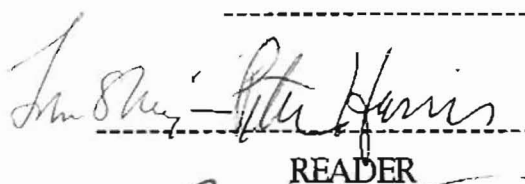
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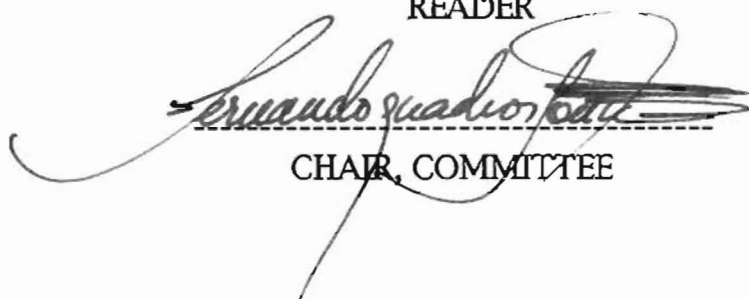
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At The Starry Night Cafe

I watch a couple caught up in the still
rabid clutter of gift giving.
Perhaps he walks her home after work
buying roses at a roadside stand.
A masterpiece of connection.

It only happens at night,
after the men return
to the yellow light of the kitchens.
When the rain-heavy hedges
by the front walk have lost their veil,
and someone has remembered to dry the dishes.

I wonder if he speaks to her yet
like a lover, peeling off each garment
before him, his hands large and brilliant
her white flesh variegated with glittering.

When you think about it the moon
is just another street light.
Why is it then I sit with curlers in my hair,
and when we lay together the fur
between my legs is the only shining thing?

Albino Buffalo

A black hawk is circling
the burial ground, circling
the bones picked clean and discarded.

The Navajo are waiting,
all the buffalo born
have been the color of clay.

In the meantime on the reservations
they build gambling houses and bars
over their remains.

No longer walking among the trees
with long blue needles
where shadows are deep

and without voice,
or hunting in the open spaces
where the grass is strangely green and vibrant.

On a small farm in Wisconsin
dawn comes, the sparse
tree trunks take on color now.

The Navajo gather on the ridge
above the horses, the drums beating,
chanting for the white buffalo.

Prayer bags hang on the weathered fence posts:
into the brown rustle of fall
something dazzling white has been born.

Monteverdi In The Rain

As if acoustics were superior
in the dark, we search
for something behind the lids, glimpses
that can only be read
in the absence of light. We speak with the low
tender part of our voices.
I pull the the bedspread over me
as the street lamp gleams
through the backlit curtains of the house.
Candles quaver in the long shadows
the pines lay down. Water swills
the windows but the raw, resonant notes
flood the night sky,
the toad in the wet grass of an August night,
the gale making its way through the pines,
a swish of cloth: only the sound
a woman's thighs could make.

Lust

In the beginning it's the pea
under the princess' twenty mattresses,
a slight irritation, the scent of overripe
green, the beginning red of poppies,
the stirring of mud and dead leaves.

It must be the feminine
scents hidden in the cotton crotches,
the way we see love
on the streets, the careful folds
of origami, the paper white
narcissus stuffed into a vase.
The way your lovely nakedness
should make me stream-damp
between the legs.

Maybe lust is the delicate spider webs
we skirt around, legs in silk,
the pinch of under wires,
watching the witches' bodies burn,
then there were the sexy things you said.

But always the faint backdrops
of movie screens, the wife asleep upstairs in cotton pajamas,
sheets on the clothesline, hair combed back.
You say not much happens nights in the midwest
stopping me with a kiss. You make me feel like a dancer
caught in a pirouette, ready to don a low-cut dress,
ready to snap the stalk, because you forget

That I know the pleasures
of underthings, the poems scrawled
on napkins and the backs of paper bags.
I have walked through tall grasses
meant to yellow, drinking milk warm
from the udder, the crusty film
still in my mouth. Hallways of bowels
and mildew, the ooze of blood on snow,
the viscous discharge of mucus and semen.

Litter

The moon seemed full all fall,
nights I paced around the lake:
such excess of light and air,
the distances of dirt roads lengthened,
the roles of hay in the fields,
the nude trees standing in the orchard.

The moments grow in me now: sitting
in the darkened afternoon of her living room.
The face of a beautiful grade school teacher
interrogating. A face that shines
and never ages. I had a ribbon in my hair,
my voice brittle and light
as the dried bluebells
I keep on the windowsill.

Once I stood with my younger sister
on top of Blueberry Hill.
In our minds it was Autumn
and the berries were ripe
but we were not to pick them. Our baskets empty
as we drove the back roads home.

This morning following deer tracks down to the lake
I watched a pair of ducks struggling
to lift from the darkened water. When I close my eyes
it is not their iridescent bodies
nor the quick motion of their wings which remain
but the broken stems of the marsh grass.

Poem After The Chinese

The page lies open
before me like a lattice,
but the words fall like petals
from a red peony, spiraling and sighing,
fall like sparks of a lantern
from a river boat.
Just so, this luminous June night
I dream the air swirls with snow.

Cleere's Pub

Each eddy of smoke swirls with the swing of the door
and escapes to join the rain. The first breath of peat
burns like a smouldering cigarette,
so I order a pint and choose an empty table
in the far corner of the bar.

The older couple in the back corner
discuss their Grandson's wedding,
local brewers debate the weeks hurling match
and a lone musician beats the Bodhran
and sings a tune about a sheep
lost in a stand of Hawthorne trees, the way
light comes through a stained glass window,
a group of Hare Krishnas clacking
their cymbals along Dublin's streets,
the hoards attending mass on Sundays.

It's late and I toss ten pence into his hat
and climb the stairs of the B&B,
the bitterness of beer
still on my lips. Light seeps
through the cracks of closed doors
and I imagine strangers reading daily papers,
making love under a pile of blankets.
In this rented room I lie down
and listen to the murmur of draining tubs.

Treasure Island

A man marooned
no longer looks for ships
or believes in the horizon.

He begins to hate
the golden light of the sea.
The primitive takes over,

that aboriginal flash, the cravings
for bright red fruit.
Channels of the savage country.

Tonight it is the stained light
of the locked up wooden church on the corner
that keeps me up past midnight.

From my window I can see
a wooden saint standing inside
and I begin to think there must be clarity in ritual:

The chantings of a Buddhist Monk.
The glitter of Flint's buried treasure.

Nipple

For Debbie

My friend hates the word.
She thinks I say it
just to make her cringe.
But I like the sound it makes
when falling from the tongue.

I think she hates the hardness of it,
the way it peaks and presses
on the mouth, pleading
to be let out. Or perhaps
it's the thought,

the mother's milk, that sucking
child in your arms.
The way they give

the man's mouth shape,
rising up to meet the lips,
molded by the tongue.

Or maybe it's the fingers
passing over them
on their way somewhere else.
The way they rub

against your cotton shirt,
everyone knows
you're a woman.

Periwinkle

I'm a little girl again
standing in Father's study,
staring at the antique medicine bottles
on the shelf

I'm not allowed to touch.
The one in the far corner,
the glass a clouded blue,
is his favorite.

Once a week he takes them down,
dusting and inspecting,
caressing each crevice, each curve,
smoothing the yellowing labels.

I often watched
from the doorway,
hidden by the shadow
of the heavy oak door.

Tonight, thousands of miles away,
I hear your voice, talk of work,
the latest National Geographic, your sports cars,
do not soothe
the little girl who clings
to the idea that tonight
someone might hold her.

Talkeetna

Last night I woke in an antique coin shop in Paris.
The shop keeper spoke no English and kept pointing
to a clock above his head. I could smell incense
and flavored coffees and knew I must get on the metro
to meet a man, his arms filled with asters.

Maybe it's the nightlong daylight of the arctic,
this alpen glow of the Northern skies
illuminating each significance, the focus
on Bluebell and Primrose growing wild.
Everything is a sign. The overturned rock,
the broken branch, Moose scat under a spruce,
bear tracks on the river bed, The first twigs
of the Alder, the wispy cotton of the willow.

The images appear like light through stained glass,
words written with a small brush, the silhouette
of a woman in crinoline. Somewhere the tangy smell
of salted meats from an open market,
and a man lifts me like a bride.

The frantic click of the metro in my ears.
The seeds of berries shining in ambiguous scat.

Beached Whale

A dead whale washed up yesterday.
Children poke and prod its barnacled body.
The woman next door makes clicking sounds with her tongue
as one small child creeps toward the enormous mass,
places her hands on the rotting carcass
and exclaims, "It's dead."

Last month at the funeral I stared
at the made-up face in the coffin.
Her tiny features dwarfed by tints of reds,
blues and blacks. Each stroke and brush
an attempt: Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death.
The fallen petal floating in a saucer
on the kitchen table. The wrinkled wrist corsage
pressed between sheets of paper.

When I first went down on you,
took you inside my mouth,
not tentatively but rough
as the first frost, unrelenting,
my tongue strong and rigid,
You looked at me like an animal
blinded by car lights.

The gathering has begun to thin.
The small girl returns home
with her hands soiled
to question her parents over dinner.

Spending Christmas In The Land Of Enchantment

I walk down narrow side streets
lined with luminarias, thin paper
bags glowing backdrops
for the quivering candles inside,
walk past art galleries, past jewelry shops
to the adobe church on the corner.
Tonight is Christmas Eve
and I will pray, kneeling
on the wooden floor, the scent
of hot wax and ripe fir
boughs in my nostrils,
kneeling beside pink and blue pastel
plastic statutes of saints on the altar.

Yesterday my father took me to the Pueblo.
We paid five dollars each at the gate
to see them dance. We gathered
gawking at the colorful costumes,
Head of Wolf, Eye of Eagle, Body of Deer.
Driving back we were silent,
staring at the clumps of sage
at the side of the road.

This year we're staying with an artist friend.
She says she paints the people
of this land, captures the brilliant
colors, their terra-cotta skin.
On my way back from church,
I wonder when she will paint
the Hopi girl with the big eyes
selling her mother's best blanket on the corner.

Easter

Visiting my Mother's friend
in the hospital, the gown
she wore so thin, and that same blue.
Not the sharp violet-blue
of the blue wind flowers
in our backyard, but the pale blue
of the Robin's egg
I found dashed on the pavement
when I was five.

I have never forgotten
the way she looked,
how small and out of place
in the big metal bed,
the way the blue gown hung
on her shoulders.
I have never forgotten
that stirring inside me,
Mother's command to give
the flower we picked
from our garden.

Poem For Emily Dickinson

All you wanted
was to take a ride
in a sleigh,
with the snow
coming down filling
the spaces
between this house
and the pine tree outside
your window.

The crack in the door
let out just enough
light to see
his face, but father

didn't even know
you feared
his touch.
All you wanted
was the snow, the boy
in the doorway
and a sleigh
plunging downhill.

Second Hand Gifts

Late afternoon light
between peach trees. No movement.
If only I could get down to that,
the few essentials: the loose gravel
underfoot, homes of small animals,
the fern's unfurling leaves, crevasses filled
with earth and small stones.
After that how clear every leaf becomes,
the haze filled spaces in the forest lighten.

Walking to the lake last June
the steady rain made girls of us,
our hair in ringlets. Reminding us
of a time when our names were not our own.
You gave me flowers, two armfuls of red iris
backed with fern fronds, and that red,
that was the red of parrot feathers.

The Power Outage

Dressing in the light of the oil lamp,
I watch the flame
flicker and float over my bare skin,
lingering on the curving places
where breasts meet stomach,
where hips meet thigh,
revealing those places pale
from my swimming suit.
Splashing my face with cold water,
I think of the Amish woman I saw yesterday
in the horse drawn carriage by the side of the road.
As I drove past miles of farm houses and churches
on my way to the strip mall filled with outlet stores.

She wakes every morning to the half-light
of the oil lamp. Washes herself
with water heated on the wood stove,
as her day begins slowly with field and sky.
Many times I want to be that woman,
living on the family farm.
Tending a small garden near a field,
the munching cows in the pasture.

I dream of cool mornings in early November,
the dense grain in the field
the yellow waves,
every wheat head throwing off light.
Hand sewn curtains hung in windows
and smells rising from the kitchen.
I wish for the mellow beams of the oil lamp
to return to my naked skin,
forgetting the wood must be gathered
in the frigid morning air,
the water pumped from the well.

October

For David

Driving down these roads of dirt
the shadowy sunlight
lingers on the details:
I can see the grinning
Jack O' Lanterns perched on windowsills,
the carefully raked mountains
of fallen leaves beside driveways.
Mottled cornstalks hang
from front doors
and a family of four has dinner
around an oval shaped wooden table.

The Aspens should be changing
where you are,
those heart-shaped leaves
that quake with the wind.
I always loved the way they stood out
against a backdrop of evergreens.
Here crimsons, oranges
and ambers color the hills.
The sun sits
behind the maple, beside the road
If you were here, it might catch fire.

In The Observation Car

Searching for a letter
tucked carefully between the pages
of a worn-out novel,
she looks at me through the lattices
of her unbraiding hair.

Written on rice paper
the color of her cotton dress.
She reads quietly
as the train crawls past ash trees.
A possible invitation,
the strange characters

Scratched in bone-black, bleeding
through the delicate paper.
I remember seeing a couple
in the lit window across the street
watching me from their unmade bed.
From where I sit
in the unlit car the words are insects.
I follow their flight by glimpses:
shining rice fields somewhere in Asia,
the summit of a mountain,
the young leaves of the Neem Tree.
As she reads, her hands smooth
the pledge of tulips red against her dress.

Westerly

Somewhere a woman is returning
to the summer cottage of her childhood.
She leans on the green painted railing of the balcony
remembering small rooms with varnished floors,
windows opening to the sea.

Knocking on the doors of stranger's houses
she will talk about the red geraniums
planted in the window box, the way
they compliment the pale weathered wood.
The garden her mother planted
around back, now overgrown.

It is nothing like the photograph
she keeps by the bed. That lavish gleaming,
the sheen of water on her brightness.
Blades of light falling into her
as she bathed each morning
and braided her hair near the sea.

She can almost hear her father and mother
speaking to guests in the living room,
and then there is the smell of wood smoke from the kitchen,
the breath of the barnacles, wind chimes
off key in the alcove.

The familiar image from the picture window
is before her now, the rigid body of her father,
her mother's withdrawn embrace, her wrenched face.
She hears little fallings and shiftings
in the undergrowth, animal stirrings.
Everything pierced by her presence, she listens
to the wind through the pines,
needle after needle as she turns to leave.