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La Esperanza

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La Esperanza

Poetry by Elizabeth Tippet

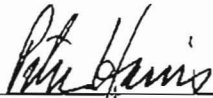
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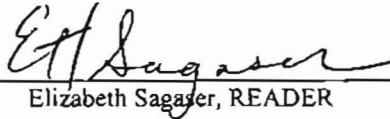
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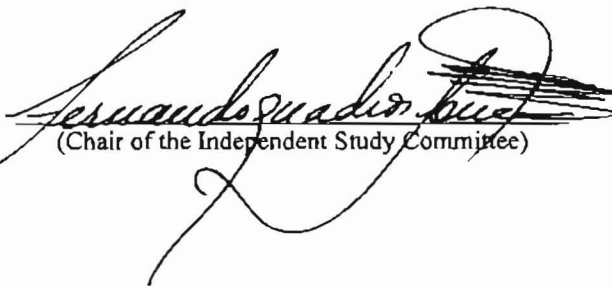
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(Chair of the Independent Study Committee)

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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. I 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 elixir 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 slam
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.