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Trace

Poems by

Caitlin Ubl
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Kilkee

The briny squall raging against the cracked backseat window pulls me to the slate morning when your hair, with its modest, flameless fire, belted the climbing aria that turned language into salt, into fiction. Whited eyes trawled the skin of the brooding Atlantic from a beach of jet and gunmetal stone, smoke signals curling to meet the scudding rains, a cigarette’s glowing rim swallowed by the dun.
For Your Age

Looking is not seeing
in the same way that feeling
the air sweep through the swaying
smooth hairs on your arms,
hanging out the car window
in the thunderstorm-colored
June Mississippi night
is not knowing motion,
why you ache with contortion
in the direction of going,
spine folding into a verb.
If I tell you where I’m from
I could say my mother’s name,
describe an ocean, or give you
the exact coordinates of this
square of concrete on which
I stand. But that doesn’t make
for an origin story.
Miscarriage in a Subway Car, Winter 1941

It takes eight beats
to lift her feet from the metal floor.
Eight beats, and she can only muster
a hover. The crater in her back is
the imprint of a butterfly’s wings,
the gift of permanent longing.
Making her way up grimy stairs
toward a sun that is hidden,
she fights the scudding rain
slanting horizontal and filmy white
under streetlights. Center barren,
the song abstracted
outside her orbit. There is
a sibilant voice tugging at her sleeve
with its little, rough-hewn hands.
Dress collecting in blue pools
on smooth hardwood, her body loud
and creaking and firmly there.
Hands carefully dismantle
the compact little kingdom,
the flower forced to marry
the winter and its freeze.
Fissure

The present is withering, folding into the past,  
the last reddish brown leaves having fallen,  
hidden by snow piling into drifts  
to resurface in spring as relics  
from a lost time. That winter  
wore those wings to ragged nets  
as we were left in her wake, a light  
split into many lights, a rock protruding  
from a riverbed, forcing current  
and color and froth—
The day begins its annual dimming over the unfamiliar skyline, icicles forming at the edges of gutters, on the underside of the metal railing on her front steps. The lamps in Rittenhouse Square have been lit for the winter, twinkling bulbs threaded through the spindly maples that line the park. Wind swirls between restaurants and shops, ushering in a sucking cold, a welcome sharpness.
When I imagine
that night, I imagine it bright,
coruscating shards of color
and cold, everything radiant
in a controlled burn,
the cityscape pinpricked
by the most beautiful black stars—
a sea of implosions floating
like dust mites, twisting,
turning, falling in a beam
of streaming light.
Retrospect alone can extinguish
a city, produce a still and silent
rendering. She just jumped.
Way Station

1

The red body of a bike sticks. I rode it without shoes, pedals carving lines into the bottoms of my feet as I passed women with metal in their mouths and children with ankles skinny enough to snap, mouths held open in music, past the hungover side street littered with crushed cans reflecting the cold sun under the wheels of salt-stained Chevy Suburbans. The edges of the summer nights darkening, an eye socket bruised on the edge of a countertop, an explosion of chalky purples and watery blues onto the open plain— I catch a glimpse of her in the mirror, diminutive, reduced to reverberation, to fingertips lightly grazing the nape of a neck, wavering and warping, a string-heart fraying, a perimeter holding thick and dark. Hands clasped around the lace-threaded rungs of a glass ladder ending halfway up the sky, filmy bronze dress lifting to hover around her knees, I hear her still, humming into the vaulted, haunted room.
Sound came from the pen gliding over gorges and ledges across the wide-ruled expanse, midday light filling the cavernous room, unnaturally white for just a few minutes into morning. Do you know where you are? A little lost in transcription, the click of the keys. I remember that bit of unyielding grey sky, frayed to meet the mist above the sea, the water that pulls itself forward and back, driving into the white of its eyes.
The Fastest Way to Get from Here to There

where feet flash beside a field
of wind-brightened water,

a sky tented over mountains
stripped of green. She bends

in the garden, pulling leaves
off the stalk, singing

as the mist burns off the foothills.
Her voice moves through the valley

with its silvery peaks
and lurching, pitching falls.

It touches rock
and leaves it changed.
I can’t exactly remember the smell of sage or the smoky, orange-tinged nights that promised to hold me where my breath ended and my body began. Bare feet on cool, creaking wood produce vibrations that reverberate within walls adorned with paper. Circular sounds, they undulate outward as if their axes were human, becoming moons, spinning, acquiring their own order. I bring the laboring car to a crawl. A foal blinks in the pooled white light, snowflakes casting shadows across its face.
I sat in my mother’s shopping cart as she bought cartons of milk and canned soup, bracing herself for the storm that would fizzle out on our front steps, rain snaking its way through the pavers to the gully, lake bleeding purple into the hills. The chop rose to the flowerbeds and receded disappointed, the limpening bodies of foxgloves resting supine, anemones groping through the blue. She stood silhouetted by the streaks of drizzle in the doorway as I rolled in the muck. Brandishing a forest green towel, other arm akimbo, she beckoned.
Drawn to the swirling center of things, through a horizon blurred pink, through squalls flecked with birdsong, her hand grips the porch rail stained to resemble oak. Wild echoes of helios in her hair demanding consciousness. Her knees dig into the black mulch as she gathers prickly, pale green weeds like a child dives for rings at the bottom of a backyard pool, cerulean, shimmering.
Verbs settle happily under the sycamore tree and rub against one another, multiplying. Fellah sit crosslegged on the fallow earth. Rocky, red, it houses no shadow, populated by the sound of feathers scraping down a fox’s throat. Birds flying overhead rise from the heat. The wind hasn’t worked since I saw her last.
The Scientific Method

Red rimmed hours spent
discussing what it isn’t,
boys setting off dinky
fireworks in the woods
behind the industrial park,
popping sparks of green
and pink, a fleeting
hiss swirling from the tip
of each flare. Braids
loose from her brothers’
pulling, not at all pretty,
she catches herself, faint
in the window that looks
out onto the pines, their
shadows already beginning
to climb the walls of the house,
brushing against the glass.
Zenith

A bullet slowed, a rotating curve of silver
flanked by spirals of air swimming backward
in ribbons as it turned. When it came, it made
sense that the breaking bloomed outward.
Slender-stalked flowers of carnation, purple,
azure, or speckled with gold, opened themselves
until waves of color crashed down the garden.
Proof of a mistake that articulates the pain,
your eyes fixed on the backlit greyness
out a window rusted shut.
Tendrils of breath sweep the surface
of a lake frozen over since November,
shine darting across its skin in smooth,
unbroken sheets of white— This is the kind
of cold that stills even the cats who wander,
that freezes the filmy layer of liquid
in front of a person’s eyes, making the earth
seem as if its core is solid silver, encircled
by etchings of bluebirds in halting flight,
still more fluff than feather. His eyes
grow heavy and fall forward, glass orbs
shattering on pavement. I collect the shards.
Tyrian purple, the imperial dye,
running through my fingers.
It’s sort of hopeless to speak
this way, shouting over
the sounds of siege,
the fear that no one will know
that color once bloomed
in the pillars of people,
in the gardens in greenstreets,
ripples still ringing outward
until the room is swirling
with what would be smoke
if there were fire.
I Mostly Pity, But Sometimes Fear, You

steelstrong wire
    razor thin wanting
breathing its breakage
    into flesh
you
    longing to be changed
by what you
    enter

scent on your collar
    cloying
    a plea of crushed lilacs
extended for praise
* 

your turn toward possession 
time glitters in cupped hands 
clean and cold no space between 
your fingertips for breath 

a minute more of night today 
a minute less of morning
Skid Marks on the Pass

As if a hand dropped curves of pavement out of the sky, a firmament shielding the waters above from the waters below, cleaved apart as the tide shifted, the road lifts a path from the rocky ground, cars hurdling forward, caught in the crash of time: grey, with a force behind it. Silver motion slowing along a gradient, the neck of a bird turning weakly in the ambient cold.

The car claws at the path, scrambling across the night in its blackness. Hold it down. Metal folding around an oak, the storm broke, the doors flung open in sound.
Holding

hair dark on a pillow

fingers tracing peaks
and valleys of light and bone

figures carved out of the dark
by a fluorescent street lamp that flickers
every four seconds, my throat cavernous,

wind disappearing into its alcoves,
chipped grey slate soaked dark in the rain
the color of the cool steel my father welded
in silent blooms of orange flame, the heat

prompts the return of the chorus, tenor too flat,
everything sped up to match the motion
out the windows, crown of my head

bowing to your chest, careful,
clouds that move quickly,

night in a blue sky
What Madden Brought Up the Lane

Everything happening now will be a memory, everything about us, from the moment you extinguished the embers still orange, doused them in salt-water from a red bucket smeared with clay, on. Smoke pooled around blackened dogwood bark, billowing upward and away from the spitting, hissing salt. Everything about us was written in that ash. You tried to convince me that stories could be stacked vertically, script spiraling skyward from a point that winds and stretches on a plane with no sequence, only depth. When birds quit their perches, they leave bits of themselves behind in the catching crooks of trees—a mottled peel of eggshell, a snowy tuft of down. No history on paper, no silver or imitation silver, just feathers and flecks of light swirling through the understory. I cradle your cracked hand, weightless, soft, in my lap, and we watch the world sparkle in downward motion. Something with time is happening in your body, the grey seeping from your hair, as the smoke threads its tentative way under the closed door.
The Moment Peels Back, the Sky Pink Underneath

A patter of languages, of variable pitch, floats like dust falling to rest on the wind, the trapped glint of viridian, mourning the sea, a trawling net bundled in heaps on the pier. She moves neatly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, straightening the crest of the horizon line with her hands, stopping to gather the hem of her dress as she steps onto the railing. She does not yet know what it is, the mass of grey tendrils thrashing far beneath her, eel-like, writhing in the brine. She follows the arc of a single snaking body, coiling tight and coming apart, a plane and the shadow it casts cutting through the near-bursting corpulence of purpling thunder clouds, a heavy-eyed mass swelling against
the surface. Her face is still as she gauges
the length of the fall, but her eyes
are the song of a captive bird filtered
through a window she never weatherized,
miserably bad at keeping out the cold.
Tracking Sparrow

Flustered fluttering through an open pane, feathers drifting over couches, chairs, and pine
turning in golden shafts of light.
Balls of black quivering in a tawny head.

The voices rise, the doldrums stir,
the morning shuts.
Dearest—

A willowing woman waits for time
flung out over a winnowing distance
between sea and sky,
between the mouth and the mind.
This is a marriage to memory.
This is closeness with the color sucked out:
a thin, tinny lengthening
pulling her body taut by a thread.
The voice from the corners
says to do it herself.
That autumn the front walk turned entirely into water, and a moat surrounded the house, widening so that I could not throw a stone across it.

It was just before the leaves began to fall, and the pool glowed yellow, rippled orange. I live so far inland that there is no need for boats, so in my front garden I remained, hanging laundry to dry and watching the whitest geese I have ever seen float across the swelling surface. At night, I stood bare, in full view of the trees, and waded into the pool until my hair spread around me like a bronze current, darkening. Wind sprayed my eyelashes with water, and I did not blink it away, did not turn my cheek from its touch. When the bottom fell out of the sky, and the hour was streaked with cream, I climbed back onto the shore of grass, hardened by the cold.
Griffith Lake

shallow enough
for me to touch
the bottom
in one breath
a sky cut open
into many skies
by suns blazing
white over the water
The Mythen

I soak a pink washcloth in water and lay it on your skin. It pulses as the miles seep out of your body, the trails that cradle you, rock you back and forth across these hills where shadow is a most welcome thing, a means of seeing the rocky outlines of the connected peaks holding each other, pinkness tinged silver and darkened purple, all wet edges, bleeding together. When faces are cut by the day’s break, the two stand separate again.
Consolation

his clothes hanging empty
rustling on metal hooks
snatched from the air
as it streamed toward delta

crossed power lines
twitching in the street
snakes curling over
leaf-strewn pavement

pleats and their shimmering
folding shine in breath
a dandelion hangs its head
the asphalt cackles

hair shed from a scalp
reveals the brassy skin
of a bell underneath
magpie, magpie, magpie
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“Various Storms and Saints” is a title of a Florence + the Machine song, released in 2015.

“Zenith” is indebted to Book IX of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, notably lines 429 and 463-4.

“What Madden Brought Up the Lane” draws its title from the action in “The Garden of the Forking Paths” by Jorge Luis Borges.