

What Blooms in the Dark

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Abstract

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This manuscript was born underground. Following an obsession with roots and soil, these poems appeared one by one—as if pushing up from single seeds, surrounded in dampness. This collection of poetry is one that dives into the personal shadow’s archive of past selves. It teems with spirits, both human and natural. It descends into the dark necessarily, as a precursive measure of arching back up for the light; it honors the violence and the beauty within both. Its purpose is to trace a journey of release, return, and rebirth; to witness the divine’s hand in each cycle of growth.

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WHAT BLOOMS IN THE DARK

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I.
SAME SOIL

THE BEGINNING, AGAIN

I don't remember exactly how I came
to the surface again, or why I descended
into that sticky dark in the first place.
It wrapped me in a strange comfort.
The cold saturation. Body ballooning backwards
into the black below from which initial tendrils
spun themselves awake.

A rose will spend its life climbing
into its strong stem, will perch ripe
atop its slender neck; we too shoot up,
until our petals free themselves, circling back
into the thirsty throat of the ground. Perfectly
natural, the thing alive winnowing through
another death of itself.

A STASH OF DAYS

The nosedive into oblivion
sweeps through me
without a warning—
 abruptly bursting color bombs, noise spilling out
 from floral sweats and flint mouth.

I lose myself in a stash of days
drug under, into the churn
of a hellbent wave; my shape
 crumples in on itself, a geode of limbs
 skidding into ringlets of obsidian.

 My hands contort in flailing prayer—
 calligraphy of undrowned sins.

Nosediving again,
my organs surge in riptide. Swimming,
swimming, baptized. I find my eyes in a mirror:
 two fluttering moths
 doused in kerosene.

The matchbox in my pupil blinks, and I strike
the holy mania, waiting to be braided
spasm first into my spine so that I may remember
 this craze of crawling
 through the maze back to my center.

 I was born with one of those: a center,
 however serpentine the way back in.

Just when the white sea sneers
wild enough to tear me limb from limb,
just when the sky is eaten clear of light,
 I remember to relax.
 In one flexuous flash

 the swell breaks and I am spit onto the split grin
 of the unsuspecting shore.

THE LINEAGE OF ANNE SEXTON

A woman steeped in language
is the throat through which the entire world
speaks. Cursed to live in translation,

she wires her life around
this weird gift, an electrical conduit
unable to unfeel.

The ancient elm split open in the storm
sends its ache through her middle.
The rain unends its patter, splashing inside her name.

The black cat's gaze magics through her iris.
The sparrow's song trills from her fingertips.
She morphs in image depending on the mirror,

a revitalized artery into the next girl
spinning itself cleverly.
The same flame licks knowingly

behind her single eye. Sometimes, I think
she possesses me, pouring her life force through the ink
into the verses stacking on my page.

Once, she visited my sleep, and I quivered
at the striking sight of her standing in my bedroom.
I woke with the sentence coursing through me:

*A witch
does not fear
her own home.*

Was it mine, or hers? Has she staged her resurrections?
Another heart a-throb, so many pulses.
Another skull a-clang, so many voices.

She doesn't always have to die. In one life
she asphyxiates, only to awaken in another throat,
another woman soaked in murmuring.

FOR PASSING DOWN TO DAUGHTERS

When the cedar chest lived in the living room
I would crack its polished skull open to the light
and ask Mom why it smelled so funny
like vanilla on fire? or a candy beach?
She told me that cedar protects the delicacies
like fabrics and old papers from being eaten by moths
or dampened with mold, fungus, oils, fumes.

A master preserver, that mom.

While a decade bustled by, the shrine
of objects inside that chest lay still.

Unsure how to bury it, Dad moved
the heavy thing upstairs to her once library,
kept the curtains drawn and door closed.

Two decades later I pay it a visit, pry its dusty jaw open.
Contents of the riffling:

- a miniature pair of booties and tiny floral t-shirts (mine)
- a nest of beaded sweaters (hers)
- a spread of bone cold bracelets and mismatched earrings (whose?)
- a lock of ghost-white hair (someone's...)
- stick-figure crayon drawings picturing Mom and Roxy our dog under lofty trees
- lunch notes she wrote for me
- an ancient bible the size of two cinder blocks and tearing apart at the cheeks
- a mess of photographs in which all eyes are bright

I inspect each item in the window light.

The last fabric I find, wrapped in tissue paper shrouds
at the very bottom of the wooden breast, is her
limp, lace wedding dress.

VACANCY

The voice leaks through the rickety wire
and its slur makes my eyes go vacant.
It tells me it went to the hospital
to see me and my new baby.
I'm not in Wichita, Momma, I say,
and I sure as hell don't have a baby.
But the voice oozes on, a senseless sap.
Mother, the voice; Mother, the undead.
Mother merely flesh, her being lost
to the needle, the spoon, the pipe.
I ask myself again, who exactly
I am mourning. God, I think—
it's been nine years since I've seen her face,
but I can still conjure the eyes.
Dense as ice, though flecked with sunflower;
eyes that grab you like a gnarled hand.
They are dead now, I'm sure. Devoid
of human glint. She is just an empty
snail shell, slime slinking through a skeleton;
just an echo of voice, that carries
its home on its back.
Can you craft a casket for a voice?
Can you send it off with fire?
Or when it goes, does it just—poof?
Evaporate, dissolve? Right back
into the ether? I guess I'll know
when it leaks out completely.
For now, I know *Amen*
means the same thing as
so be it.

CRUSHED

The same snail's long eye peering up at me from the slim gullet of the bottle
watched her stuffing the vile of cloudy crystals and stained pipe
into the pockets of forgotten coats, crouching in the stale closet.

I am still searching for a pair of steady eyes in the mirror.

My stash of secret stones rattle deep in her old jean pockets
that haunt me with their perfect fit.

This is the armor I wear against your affliction, oh Mother. Oh, abandon me again
in the alley of Lucky's grocery, in the unlocked car behind the harborside bar,
in the casino hotel room.

Each time I will go looking for you, who always warned me to be careful where I step.

I walk lightly through each day, composing a ballet of eggshells. Side-step. Tip-toe. I skirt
the edges of addiction.

Even still I have the dream of snails seeping through the floorboards
squishing up through my toes, their long eyes like bony fingers inching up my calves.

I lie stiff as a coffin, covered in slime, until morning washes them away.

Oh Mother, I am careful. Clear-eyed, I peer up at the coke nail of a crescent moon shining.
A shameless sliver, the dangling beacon.
Then I hear it.

Hard crunch. Shell crumpling. Spineless body
crushed beneath my feet.

GLORY, GLORY

It was the ax, I'll bet,
that split you into splinters
small enough to swallow.
Your torn father, shattering the wood
to your locked bedroom, blinded
by the bottle's blare after the second war
which in your home would never end.

*His eyes were big, his pants were wet
They stood him in the door—*

Just a teenage paperboy, collecting nickels
for your mother, your flock of sisters.
Liver and lettuce sandwiches for lunch.
A tangle of limbs, long and gangly, you were
a scrawny excuse for a man-of-the-house
and when his eyes went black
he could kill you for it.

*He went up six, and out thirty-six
Then splat he hit the floor.*

After your first love—the one
you gathered all the pulp for, gluing
your remains into a recognizable grin—left,
the red river ribboned out into the bathtub,
became the warm lake around your body
bobbing in its wish to be released
from the duty of grief.

*His boots were filled with blood and guts,
His risers on the trees—*

The dog would sense your dying
and howl throughout the house,
pulling your soul up by the bootstraps.
The doctor would thread your wrists closed
to the open air but you would shatter the glass doors
at the hospital, and follow your father into the bleak horizon
enlisting to become some kind of man.

With black eyes,
you would earn
your silver wings.

*And he ain't gonna jump no more.
Glory, glory what a hell of a way to die—*

On my eighteenth birthday,
I am still not the son you tried to make of me
but I am white knuckling the open door
of the airplane, dangling out over the patchwork
quilt of earth below. I suppose I am becoming
some kind of man while falling
through this unbreathable abyss.

*Glory, glory what a hell of a way to die
And he ain't gonna jump no more.*

I close my eyes, and it's my sternum your father's ax flies through,
and it's my pale artery flowering open for your broken heart,
and it's my reserve of rusted nickels tossed into your bathtub,
and it's my neck your bootstraps wind around,
and it's my teeth that eat the glass,
and I fall, and fall, and fall, spreading my delicate arms
latticed with scars over this distance—

airborne! This violence ends in me,
a daughter—metallic shards
of silver wings, glittering.

*the italicized lines of this poem are borrowed from a song my father wrote while in paratrooping school

II.

GARDEN UNDERGROUND

HELLO, FEELINGS

You've been away so long!

Look at you! comin' in clad
with all your razzle dazzle
butterfly lipped balloon eyes
makin' my jaw drop and brows bow
blood simmer viscous
like a sweet syrup slicking
through a thick vein
which you have raised
to a crazed pulse
with one suck of a finger.

Organic material.

Ozone drunk.

I slunk into you
behind the back
of my shrine to aloneness.

There is no such thing
as a modest riding
into the wild, no;
this is an always wobble
ever moving teeter totter
sea saw pendulum dance
of swoon-and-moan trance.

This is the kiss that rhymes.

Hello windchime.

Hello violet.
Rile me icicle spine
flitting fire belly

ocean wide;

un-wind me, I'm unraveling.
I'm spread like a summer picnic.

Middle finger to the bashful.

All howl for you.

Wolf peach. Sticky palm.
Between the bird purrs.
Between the flint whirs.

Between the new moon
and full bloom. Here is my hand.
Here is my curious.

We can fuck until dawn.

Say—hello, feelings
as the sea mirrors itself
in the morning light.

MERCURY IN CANCER

I come
skittering sideways—
afraid

of
my own

soft meat.

Heart like a
peach—

velveteen
sun-ripe
and
bruise-able.

Bite into me
with your whole
mouth.

Allow the drip
to roll silky
down your chin.

Open, expose me—I

can take the parting
of strong fingers.

These rivets
in the pit
ache
to be
touched.

LONELY BREAKFAST

After too much red wine on a Sunday evening
we slide from goofy lips to reckless tongues and you tell me
"I don't even really like poetry"

which makes me wanna snowball up my words and throw them
at your devastating face, then grip you by the jaw and command you to *listen—*
Do you think these gentle eyes are a casual product?
Do you think my soft comes naturally?

The way you erratic-butterfly suck a quick breath behind your bared teeth
makes me wanna spit in your mouth. Dirty vulnerable. You are so bad
at hiding your fear and its sting, so I come back
jabbing my stiff pen straight into you—
hard shell, you're not hiding
those gooey insides
any better than
I am hiding
my love

that's as ready
as a swollen tomato. I dare
you to handle me like you ravage
your garden—scattered and delirious.

I eat your sting for breakfast.

FOUND: HIDDEN NAME

I go where the body pulls me, today.
I listen and follow

the measured hush of my worn boots scuffing
warmed dirt, which little exhales punctuate

the tourmaline gaze of a garter snake
penetrating the stark pause between our frozen frames

its river-like swivel into the effortless wisp
of the tall grass shimmying, shimmying

white berries conjuring my curious thumb
firm flesh exposing itself between the squeeze

molasses shuffle toward the memory of leaves
a once-canopy transformed to a skeletal gateway.

The lone bluff calls my hidden name:

Palms press hard into the chilled earth,
ankles crossed and dangling over its edge.

I imagine my body sinking downward, collapsing
into the twisting swarm of branches below.

I write my hidden name into the sand,
to be found by a lone passerby, or

the flying eye of a sparrow—so that the body
and I can get up and go.

NOTE LEFT IN THE FULL-LENGTH MIRROR

my love's been
 a lone leaf
floating down
 into the soil;

 crawling back up
 the bark in the dark
watched by moths
 and widows.

growing slack when the sun cracks
the horizon in half—
when the finches start stirring,
my love finds its way
whirring in again
lured by the whimsical
mind of the windchime.
does yours slip deep like mine
slips into your breath when you drift
into sleep? does yours
watch me unwind?
does yours watch me
drink in your sultry serum?

my love
 throws petals
on the surface
 of the water;

 my love
 keeps its toes in
even when
 they're blue.

THE RAIN COMES EASY

It is high tide, and you are building a sand dam
manifesting your own tiny island to casually smoke upon.

Two charcoaled clouds float across the fuchsia sky.
Are they also ripe with rain?

You are sipping wine over the fire
I have spent the sunset kindling.

The air is viscous with lingering salt
and we are quiet and you pull me close.

Is this how you say it?

The plump-chested robins are zooming
through the emerald lawn.

You beckon my eyes from a book because *you know*
I will *love* this dramatic dance of delirious worm-craze.

Is *this* how you say it?

When we fumble down the bluffs to dangle our shins
over the gooseneck-barnacled end of this private world,

I am overcome with the urge
to puncture my quiet, and spill:

I have been dredging the silt to make myself
a safe harbor for you to drift into.

Instead, I stare into the kelp's sway
and say nothing.

Our days are filled with the sounds
of somersaulting shells under our sheets

the lapping slaps of the tide against the boat, its bell banging,
sweet creek of the mast rocking, rocking.

It is low tide as the indigo light streams
over our bodies, draped in a tangle.

Is this... is this how...

Those charcoaled clouds return,
dampening the dawn.

I mouth the words I need to hear
into your chest.

Then the rain comes, easy,
and the room fills with your favorite sound.

COYOTE SONG

We sleep lightly near the unfamiliar hum of each other's

bodies, when somewhere from within the surrounding woods

a coyote pierces its song through the crickets—

a layering wail, yip-yowl of moonlit ecstasy. You whisper
that it sounds like a cackle of witches and I let

my jaw part in awe as we listen, imagining the lace
of organs spilling from a small mammal, glistening beneath

whatever slice of light is left in the inky sky, thinking—
my insides, too, are giving me away. If only I could

stuff them back inside this newly humming body.

I am empty, starved for a filling. The night creature in me, enticed—
circling, and circling. But I am not the coyote.

I am the opened thing, trying to hide my glistening
insides seeping out—a milky mess unfastened by your night song,
strewn before the swelling moon. Have your fill of me then.

I want to hear you howl and howl and *hoooowl*.

I relinquish these glassy eyes to you in the night.

III.
DELIBERATE DESCENT

LITTLE GRAVES

To wrap your arms around your many selves
and slowly become the next—
 there is so much work to do.

I would like to forget myself
while gazing over the glistening yard
 blanketed in new snow

watching closely for the invisible
language that floats up from somewhere
 so deep, it almost doesn't

need to surface. We are mere collaborators.
Then, the miraculous rose—
 a golden cup in the dead of winter

bobs the bulb of its body
seemingly without the breeze
 and I remember uncurling

like a comma in emptiness,
the bitter cracks of splitting open
 from a closed seed;

the difficult intuition of circling down,
plunging deeper into the blind rain's well—
 farther, farther still from the light

while the smallest part went on straining for it.
I was trying to forget the dozen shapes that dove
 into the depth of no pit, no promise of wet earth

to crash into, parched for the substance
that injects the blood with its spark.
 Death found me every time.

I retrieve the tender pistil at the center of the flower,
the fragrant layers guarding it from harm.
 Oh, there is the old wound

beating, pulsing. There is the hole. There is the light.
We are meant to return to the womb, to writhe
 and rebirth in the cold soil

where the endless cycle
coaxes inevitable life
from each little grave.

KITCHEN DANCE

How I end up swaying like a lone poppy
 always topless and often in the kitchen
 I cannot explain to you but when the song
 of my shame which might be estranged
ecstasy starts blaring
 my spirit splits and my soul strips
 for no one in the nightlight.
 Dizzy from dimension hopping
I change dresses like a skin
 flaunting all my petals or shedding all my scales
 I can't remember.
 If I were a fictional character
I'd dissolve into my next life
 right through the skylight window
 into the blue-violet vibrating.
 Behind the blotchy reds of eyelids
I see the poppy, dangling from a floating hand.
 How my midnight cocktail
 spilled all over the vinyl floor
 we will never know.

I QUIT

pretending
that I don't wake up fully clothed
on the couch every full moon
after dancing the evening to shreds
mascara smeared and eating disorder
full swing but not cheated on
that I don't drive through the rain
because I can't brave the cold
and wet that I don't stand
like an icy statue before the beauty
when it just won't send its peace
pushing through me
that some part of this heart
is not still the little
girl who was left yet pushing
thirty while learning to live
alone today I quit pretending
that the plants don't wilt
that the garden keeps its health
that I don't melt at the thought
of I love you that I don't need
an I love you and I quit pretending
there will be a note on the desk
or a rose at the doorstep that says so
no I quit worshipping each eclipse
for the hidden revelation I quit
prayer and morning meditation
I quit river cleanses and hot baths
and incense instead lighting a match
under the memory of my legs
curling toward you and the sucking
in your hesitance yes the sucking in
all the hard tension and the honest
desperation of your fingers in my ribs
and the olive fabric between my tits
and your kiss how bad I want
to be there again but this time
with all my honey spilling honey
with no rose to witness the soaking
you in my blushing open
yes today I quit pretending
the knives in the kitchen don't look
delicious that my flesh doesn't crawl
at the dream of leaving my body

that I can quit smoking for real
this time that somehow it will
be different when I wake up
I will be a different woman
un-drenched in longing I will be
satiated in quiet stretching and one
cup of coffee a day I quit
pretending that I am not hellbent
on finding her in the crook
of my sternum because she is here
and while it seems she disappears
each full moon dancing
alone in the living room and naked
alone in the sheets she flickers
in the swallowed rage so full
so ripe and ready to burst
if only I could quit
pretending that I don't love
I do, I love
I love to dance alone.

THE BLOOMING

To the rusted blade
lobbed into the grey ache
of the sound—forgiveness.

To the splay of former selves
spattered across the bone-walls
of inner ribs.

For not having found the prayer
to free the imprint of ghosts
from the purgatory of forearm skin.

For the folded pile of fraught spells
scrawled to manifest a brighter being
inside this flesh casing, rough seams.

To all the tail ends of evenings
lost in a half-empty bottle drifting
into the abyss of memory.

To the flash of ashtrays accidentally overflowing.
To the grit and spit and sweat slipping
between two bodies that chose each other to forget.

For every fight of gouging out
my father's fists from the soft depths
in the grudge of my sternum.

For not having learned
to stop trying to beat
the beatings out.

To unravel from the surging fury.
Because abandonment kept leaving.
Because just believing in the light

would not beckon it over the lip
of the horizon—all that is left
is the night's thin throat, waiting

to be wide-eyed waded into;
is a punch bowl of ice water
that thirsts to hold your face;

is a pair of soot-strewn lungs
designed to remind you
that sometimes it is enough

just to release
the perpetuated shape
of self-destruction—so get to it.

Cast that damp shadow off like a wet shawl
and launch your movement
across the warm meadow.

You didn't spill all that salt for nothing.
But swear—right here—you'll let
your blood remain blue.

Swear you'll cup the cheek of your loneliest hue,
that you'll eat all your fallen petals—
nascent bulbs bursting from a mouthful of soil.

Bloom the boomerang of kindness;
bloom the furious aliveness;
bloom mercy. Bloom soft.

Oblivion is forgiven.

THE THIN HOURS

For weeks, I've wandered through the thin
hours sloughing themselves in unabashed
last gasps of rust and ember.

There is no precise moment, and I know this.

Time doesn't snap its fingers; transformation
flows and blends and blurs.

I thought I'd write a poem for the riverbed:
water whispering its unforced figure
over ovular and jagged stones alike.

I contorted instead.
Unsmooth in shape,

I hauled my body to the lake's edge,
like I always do, to witness

the willow wag its finger

the maples brag their wilt before the yawning sky

the rainbow cackle, back against the hour's final light.

Nothing here allows me to ignore the miraculous bleed.
Blush peony swigs a shadow
quick as olive pit snags the peachy flesh
of dove wing fog.
Urchin shell swirls the perimeter
of the sky mirrored in the lake's lapis pupil.

Each hue is a space possessed
and I will never be done writing this poem.
I will never be done fumbling through the vastness,
whose low hum
pushes everything forward.

PLUNGE

Tucked into the crook
of the river's elbow
I strip bare
before the morning moon
tilted in the brightening sky
and the soft mouth
of the river
brings me
to my knees now
so that I may renew
my vow to love
like the rose returns—

bold and unfurling.

Dear river,
if this is how
I say the prayer
so be it
if this is how
I cast the spell
so be it
if this is how
I begin again
here is the offering
my flesh crashing
through your surface
my limbs as roots
spindling deeper down
where the boulders
drown the sunlight
in their shadow.
River, I descend
deliberately.
I plunge
willingly.
I know how
to reach up
for the rays that lay
in mirrors upon
your rippling face.
River, I know how
to emerge
into the night
soaked and breathless

under the stars
appearing
one by one
to fill me
again
with their
prickling
light.

For the Seeds, From Which the Whole Garden Grows

A Statement on Poetics

Emily J. Mundy

I Believe...

that poetry is a force that heals, transforms, and connects.

that the path of poetry is a choice one makes, with purpose and love.

that poetry, like love, is a generative energy; it reforms and recreates both matter and spirit.

that poetry strengthens and refines the skill of attention.

that poetry challenges us to be present in our experiences, which allows us to witness the phases of our own becoming.

that poetry prompts us to honor connections; that though often a solitary act, it is emboldened in community and gains new life when shared with others.

that poetry entices curiosity.

that writing poetry summons our honesty and attests to the power of vulnerability.

that poetry is a way through which we are able to tell the stories we need to and re-write the ones we've been conditioned to tell ourselves.

that each poem is a gesture of moving through fear.

that some poems are artifacts from lives once lived, letters from selves we once were;

that some are gifts given to us in precise moments, to ensure they are preserved.

that there are poems we write for ourselves and poems we write for others—both are necessary.

that some poems appear as mysteries we are not meant to solve.

that writing poetry, like casting a spell, is a form of prayer and manifestation.

that poetry can orient and guide us, permeating every aspect of our lives.

that being a poet means revering the language in all things, continually listening for it.

that the source of poetry and the Divine reside in the same well.

that poetry is a lifelong practice, a way of being, that must be returned to again and again.

An Open Channel

Poetry is everywhere. Meaning: the swirl of poetic information teems, surrounds us always, and makes itself available to us through our senses: in the strange sight of bouquets bursting from a cemetery's garbage bin, in the drift of a loved one's perfume surprising the nose, in the copper taste of a bitten lip, in the bird song before dawn, in the dampness of soil beneath new grass. It jumps into our awareness in moments of ecstasy, awe, and joy; it accumulates in our memories; it lingers in our heartbreaks, grief, and loneliness. It is the poet's purpose to open to this information, to allow it to flow freely through their use of language.

The poet as an open channel for poetic information is simultaneously a deep listener, a conduit, and a translator of language that is not limited, initially, to words. Eroticizing the senses, sharpening one's awareness, amplifying attention on the seemingly mundane, and practicing intuitive porousness are avenues of opening, as is simply staying present in the unfolding of day-to-day experiences, opening the notebook whenever the impulse to write arises.

The poet must know, as the writer and diviner Selah Saterstrom puts it, "what conditions must be present in order to best position one's multiple selves in the guts of the flux" (Saterstrom, vii). For me, it begins with a clear space, a quiet mind, and a willingness to find—to invite—the poem. I've held a quiet knowledge of this channel, inside, ever since I started writing. But it was Selah's work (*Ideal Suggestions: Essays in Divinatory Poetics*) and teachings in divination that revealed an entirely new plane of language for me to explore this ancient idea: that poetry is an avenue through which divine information spills. This idea buried itself deep within me; from it, the channels multiplied.

The Seeds Want to Grow

In the spring of 2020, I started a garden. I had three wooden beds (among the flourishing ones of my neighbors we shared the yard with), two books about gardening in the Pacific Northwest, and nearly no idea what I was doing. I knew I wanted to grow tomatoes like my mother did when I was younger (though I heard they were notoriously tricky to grow well) and tall sunflowers, because they're my favorite. I began by germinating seeds along the bright windowsill and turning the soil over. For the first week, I was surprisingly anxious, peering into the tiny cups where no sight of green had made its way to the surface. I was convinced of my black thumb, until the morning that the first, miniscule sunflower leaf popped into the sunlight. I remember thinking: the seeds *want* to grow! Sure, my hands help facilitate their work—but it is their work, and I am a happy witness.

After a few weeks, I was settled in the new ritual of greeting the day: wake early (when the ground is still cool), make coffee, and shuffle bleary-eyed into the yard to water the garden. During that season, cucumber vines scaled the side of the house, kales and lettuces exploded, a row of beets got scorched and died, only one baby carrot grew its root, the sunflowers became tall but spindly, always leaning, and the tomatoes stretched their arms to a hearty eight feet. Everything plucked and ate felt like savoring a small miracle. It took me a while to realize that the garden was making its way into most of my poems—damp soil mingling with the warmed surface, spiraling roots, the first crack of growth from a closed seed.

This is how *What Blooms in the Dark* was born, emerging from my experiment in tending to growth until I became obsessed with it, consumed with thoughts of life cracking open in the dark depth of the ground, somehow knowing how to climb toward the light. Writing this body of poems, while observing how the work has taken shape, has cracked me open; the process has allowed me to explore the shadowy, dim parts of myself and my past that have been difficult to

contend with, ultimately waking me up to the power of personal agency alongside growth, to the cyclical nature of becoming.

The Stream and The Well

When I am able to position myself as an open channel, I imagine external sources of information available to me through a stream; my internal sources, I imagine as a well. The stream is constant, ever-flowing, serpentine and swift; it is “wherever [the poet] is, all of the time, in every grand place, in every suffering pit” (Saterstrom, vii). This stream promises momentum and energy but being in its rush for long periods of time can be overwhelming. This is when I return to the well, to submerge in its relief of stillness and echo. When, after a while, the well runs low, I reach back into the stream and let it pull me into its current. Whether I am dipping into the source of the stream or the well for poetic insight, I am looking to actualize the inward or capture the outward. Sometimes, I am attempting to connect them—even if they seem disparate—curious what potential illuminations could surface within their unlikely conversation. Language reveals itself when we give ourselves over to it:

“...life is continuous communication. Exuberance fills every space not closed against it.

Let us say I let it possess me. It overflows so that I give it to those around me”

(Saterstrom, 226).

Fear is a Door

My first writing mentor, Amber Flame, passed along a mantra told to her by her first writing mentor: *fear is a door that says ENTER HERE*. The red, neon letters—ENTER—blared above the dark, cracked door in my mind’s eye. I understood this statement as: go toward what

you fear most. I was, and often still am, afraid of what it will mean to write something. It can take me pages of attempts, of messy thoughts crumpled and scattered as eggshells, to get to the truth of a trauma, the stakes in an emotion, the resistance or shame or wound beneath a fear. But that statement imbedded itself into the guts of my poetics, pulsing as a philosophy I now live by. When I am afraid to write something (that is, to conjure my courage, to face something clearly), I take it as my signal. Onward. Through. Another door, another door, another door.

Dreams as Windows

All my life, I've been gifted at remembering my dreams. I've also, at various points, been prone to nightmares. There were periods when I was younger that I would solely dream of being abducted by aliens, or of my mother turning into a vampire (then turning into a vampire myself), or of the dead trying to lure me to their realm in hopes of tricking me into giving them my life force.

My maternal grandmother has been a sensitive dreamer all her life, too. She believes that dreams are messages from God, sent as warnings or premonitions. Perhaps there is some truth in this—mystery, at the very least. Dreams can be windows into the subconscious, a sight-passage into the rich undercurrent of kaleidoscopic occurrences, swirling and ricocheting in flashes of images that hold a meaning, a story.

As a teenager, I became entranced with the writings of Carl Jung, who believed that dreams are the psyche's way of communicating information to the individual. He said: "We have forgotten the age-old fact that God speaks chiefly through dreams and visions" (Jung, 133). If given the liberty to inflate the word "God" with the Muse, the Cosmos, the Collective/Individual Subconscious, then I agree. This concept was formative in my turning toward the content and

symbols of my dreams for hidden knowledge, and perhaps, the first way I was subconsciously exploring divination. As a poet, I both take my dreams seriously and consider them with a level of playfulness. Dreams are a manifestation of the stream, uninhibited by wakefulness. They pull the curtains back to reveal a sprawling inner landscape, once hidden from the conscious eye. They culminate as visitations, from our past selves and those in our memories, certainly, and perhaps from those beyond our scope of tangible knowing.

Obsessions

Our obsessions have an uncanny way of appearing from our deep-seated fears and within the content of our dreams. Spurred by sensations of discomfort, we itch to write out what we consciously or unconsciously obsess over, the things that haunt us, that need a way out of our bodies. The process of writing whatever stories and patterns recur in our lives may be the antidote to their dominance over our thoughts, emotions, and forward-moving actions.

Similarly, our obsessions can be delightfully directive, pulling us toward subject matter that swells with inspiration for our writing. It is not an accident to be drawn to something—an object, a place, an idea, a question, a phrase. It is, however, a clue; the needle of our intuition's compass, pointing us along our creative course.

Curiosity

It is intriguing and strange to me how *What Blooms in the Dark* has become itself. I am curious how it will continue to develop until it has reached its fullness. Inquiring into this work has been essential to my process of creating it; creating this work has been essential to my process of self-acceptance and actions of self-change. I've found that clarifying the language of

my questions about the work keeps me close to it. Experiencing the book as an entity of its own (with which I've collaborated) prompts my intentional inquisitiveness—a means by which I spend quality time with this growing body.

What habits uplift my writing? What daily rituals keep me in creative flow, close to the work? What voices/language (internal and external) do I feel called to surround myself with? How can I stay in contact with myself, especially when the impulse to abandon myself arises? How can I support myself to work steadily, to honor the slow process of growth as opposed to expecting it to happen suddenly or all at once? What yearns to change/shift/transform in this work? What does it mean to heed the mystery of writing while also remaining an active force in its creation?

These questions, and many others along the way, have been vital to my bond with this particular body of poems. They have formed the connective tissue between my work as a writer and my work as a person, now inseparable.

The Sacred Relationship

When I am in a place of alignment with my writing practice, I am giving something to it daily. Usually, this shows up as spending even a small amount of time with my notebook, writing observationally or in a journalistic style, or utilizing recent passages to form the initial lines of what I hope will find flesh as a new poem. If the spark to write is quiet on any given day, then reading, researching, or involving myself in a creative activity becomes the way through which I attend to the daily practice.

Though I keep a few notebooks for various purposes and employ my beloved typewriter as the vehicle for luring a special speed and style of writing out of myself, my main notebook is

always the one I feel a sacred relationship with. The pages of my notebook are a safe place for me to come to however I am—wild, incoherent, flailing; calm, eloquent, steady, all the same. I come to it to work out my fears, shame, hurt; I come to it elated and joyful, to express my gratitude, awe, love. My notebook remains a constant companion that I carry with me to clarify my purpose, to mark my growth. It is a lifeline, a tether, a support. Every poem and subsequent larger body of work begins here, in the forever-home that the pages of my notebook hold for me.

Heeding the Cycles of Nature

While daily attentions help the writing build, little by little, orienting my practice around the lunar cycle and the seasons has become an elemental crux in my creativity. On the new moons (which I consider the beginning of a cycle, a time for refreshing), I employ the practice of reflection, wherein I re-read everything that was written over the previous month. On the full moons (which I consider the midpoint of a cycle, a time for releasing), I employ the practice of externalizing, wherein I send my work out in a concrete way, by submitting for publication, participating in a reading, or applying for an opportunity that could bolster my writing identity.

Observing the seasons has allowed me to tune in to each one's distinct energy, supporting my momentum in the writing process while holding a deeper aspect of creation in my mind as I move through each one. Though what my practice is asking for each year changes, developing longer-term intentions in relation to the seasons helps me focus the work energetically. After a period of rest and gestation (winter), I give my energy over to what nascent writing wants to emerge, to grow, to be nurtured (spring). Then, I allow that new writing to burst forth in whatever shapes and messes it wants to (summer), after which I take time to reflect on, gather, and organize what's been created (autumn).

For me, the creative process is as much about attending to pace as it is about honoring what wants to have a life of its own; it delicately oscillates between diligent practice and conscious surrender. The moon and the seasons continue to guide my understanding of this, through each cycle of return and renewal.

Community

As I imagine most writers do, I spend most of my writing time alone—usually at home curled over my desk, sometimes with my notebook near a water’s edge or under a tree, rarely in a café. In general, I prefer solitude when writing; I consider it crucial to my creativity, and a necessary counterbalance to the more extroverted means of employment I’ve had for the last decade. But it gets lonely, isolating, disorienting.

The writing group I work with has remained a tiny, but key community for me. With three other poets, I’m consistently challenged to bring new work for critique, even in its roughest shape (we frequently grant each other “permission to suck”), to edit, to set goals, to be accountable to those goals, to celebrate progress as well as rejection, to give insightful feedback, to dig for honesty and clarity in my work, and to keep pursuing, with feverish determination, this weird path that is the writing life.

Sharing work within this group has been so enriching to our craft that I was inspired to create a reading and writing circle series, in hopes of expanding this sense of community in Seattle and the greater PNW area. The Poetry Séance debuted, with exciting turn out, in December of 2021 and continues seasonally—it is curated with the intention of gathering writers of many genres to share their work in person and re-enliven the once thriving scene of poetry shows. May it continue to grow!

I often feel carried and comforted by the many writers I admire that have carved their paths before me. Even at my loneliest in writing, I find solace in the lineage of writers whose words have changed and healed me—Sylvia Plath, whose precise images pierce through to the present; Anne Sexton, whose portents still feel predictive; Mary Oliver, whose reverence for the world remains palpable and nourishing. I continue to learn from these women, through their language and legacy, and feel a sense of kinship and uncanny connection with each of them. And I find sparks of encouragement witnessing the writers and artists I admire continuing along their trajectories—Jaqueline Suskin, Derrick Brown, Mindy Netiffee, Ada Limón, Amanda Palmer. I follow their work, and study their journeys closely. Witnessing them in community, I’m reminded that part of my purpose as a poet is to pull through my innate shyness, to harness my genuine love for and belief in poetry and contribute to this larger conversation, this communal belonging.

On Editing

After many attempts of opening the channel, after free-writing and reflecting and creating first drafts of new poems, after accepting feedback and allowing the pieces to rest for long enough to revisit them with a refreshed set of eyes, then—it is time to edit.

In her manifesto on poetry, Mindy Netiffee carefully asserts: “We should have some reservations about editing our poems to death. Our intention is to edit them to life” (Netiffee, 115). So there is a delicate distinction between what one of my writer friends and I call “slashing and burning” our drafts to barely recognizable smithereens, and allowing too much excess or murkiness to cloud our language. The point of editing is to surgically reveal the guts of the poem, to skillfully remove any barriers so that the meaning of the poem can shine.

Building off revisitation, the editing process can usher us closer to the transformational power of poetry. Because we have given ourselves over to vulnerability in our drafts, the practice of looking back at them with honesty and for clarification purposes invites our self-compassion. In tending to our work, we are tending to our processes of personal growth—and we cannot deny the skeletons in our proverbial poetic closets, nor the secrets that had us stash them there in the first place. In editing, we get to have another hand in telling our story, in transforming our experiences into art so that we can see them with gained lucidity.

Divinatory Tools

So it seems I have found a sense of belonging behind the divinatory lens, though my eyes are still adjusting—consciously, poetically. While writing is my primary divinatory tool, I love to pair it with reading the Tarot. Teeming with symbolism—archetypal, elemental, astrological, numerical, spiritual—the Tarot holds an innate energy, a language of its own. As a divinatory tool utilized alongside writing, this mystical deck invites me as the querent into a practice of listening, attuning, and understanding the world as essentially radiant with information. Untangling the heap of symbolism in a reading reminds me of the vitality shared within what I imagine as an invisible web—endless threads of “voices” that communicate in endlessly varying ways. Engaging in the ritual of conversation with the Tarot refines my openness and ability to allow a poem to flow through me; it reinforces the importance of tapping into this web to refresh my sense of connection to the language and metaphor within it.

Poetry as Prayer, Manifestation, and Spell

I am repeatedly bewildered about how to share the ways in which poetry has blossomed into a form of spirituality for me over many years. This sentiment feels somewhat private—one I will spend my life learning and sharing more about as I am ready to.

To me, creating poetry is a sacred act. It is a form of prayer (by definition, an earnest hope or wish), an expression of truth, an acknowledgment of beauty in the world, a call to action, an avenue of transformation, a noticing, a gift. Not every poem I write is intended as a spell or meant to manifest something, but through language, I am able to direct my personal will, realize my agency, collaborate with my own experiences and the energies around me, refine my reverence, and return to my inner power, my light, my belief in the force of love.

I plant the seeds of my own becoming.

What will I grow?

*

I invite the room to be present

In the bright force

From which growth

Perpetually blooms.

*

I have all of what I need

Inside of myself
To create what I wish to create.
So I lead with my heart
In this act
Of slowly reaching up.

The Endlessness, Interwovenness

Every time I think it would be easier—possible—to quit poetry, to smooth out the jagged path of pursuing the writing life, to pour all of my energy into keeping a garden, to just enjoy the moons and seasons without the need to capture any of it in language, to find a dog companion and relax with my cats and create a humble home in which we can live peacefully and simply... it comes back for me. It finds me. The language builds, almost vibrates, until I have no choice but to reach for the pen, to seek out the page. And I accept, again, that there is no unraveling from this mysterious force of poetry. It chose me, as I have chosen it.

In accepting my identity as a poet, I accept a life in which I will always, in some way, be creating poetry. This also means that I will always be working to be in touch with myself and what's around me, in tune with emotional undercurrents, deepening my attention and listening; that I will always be someone who is in awe, in reverence, in astonishment. Mine is a poetics of transformation through writing; a poetics of divinatory, cyclic collaboration. Whatever shines through it in any given phase, I am glad it is always morphing, always changing.

The constant: poetry permeates every aspect of my life. In it, I have found healing, illumination, and my own becoming. I have found a true home, and a sense of divine purpose. So I will not quit; I *cannot* quit. Poetry is everywhere, and in this life, it has captured my devotion.

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