

Poem for a Runaway Mother

Runaway Mother

I track you in my sleep, a rearview face
Your back a long road sleek with rain.

From town to town it seems you turn
Once a tree, a stop sign, the main exit,

Your hair the last banner to take the curve
And a barrage of dust to stun me.

Underground days, at night I pick up the trail
Wonder what you will change into next:

A lark, a border, a highway motel,
The reckless fawn I just ran over with my heart.

Migrant

You left in November, not like the leaves
But like the birds:
You flew

From the nest built by instinct

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A trail of feathers to follow
Like storm clouds, floating.
My arms

The nervous grass, stiff
And unrelenting, charted clear shifts
In pattern, bent towards the wind,
Withstood

The atmosphere. Recent death, blizzard
Warnings, the season's chill: scent
Of absence. While below

The equator water continues to breed,
Trees refuse to age. You make a new home
With all the native birds I had come to
Rely on.

Unlike the Dead

Unlike the dead, your flesh gets thicker.
This year I could spin it like wool
On my lap, your hands embroidered
Into mittens, your remembered back
Tatted into a fine tablecloth.

I could lay you out like a tree trunk
Count the years you've been away
Nail the hard wood to a stand
And watch your distance grow
Steadily as moss.

You plump up in the winter, hibernate
In closets and picture frames, make
A nest in the hollow of the pillows
You once fluffed. Even trees are jealous
Of your survival techniques.

I could carve a tiny family
Out of the timeline of our parting.
I could wrap you up like a large blanket.
I could use your legs for firewood.

By Thanksgiving, I could stuff you,
Feast on this grief, and still have leftovers.

Grave Robbers

Underground we went
The basement littered with your papers.
Your things.

We opened an old wooden chest.
Your body was scarred
And staining the corners.
The smell of mould
Astonished us.

Air thick with dead flowers
I crouched in the shadows, included myself
In the company of ghosts.

It was my brother's hands that excavated.
His lap stocked with red dresses
And cheap costume jewelry,
The dust like lice, crawling
Over his skin.

*Dig in, he encouraged.
No harm can be done
to a skeleton.*

Mistaken Identity

The last time
I went home to see your husband,

My father,
He greeted me at the white door

And staggered.
A tired man's guilt

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Shocked by
A woman's figure and long

Dark hair.
I remembered his voice once

On a cold
Afternoon, telling me *better*

To have been
Left at the altar than after ten

Years, better
To have her run from the church

Than me.
Pauses like wilted flowers

Hanging over
The children that wouldn't be.

The last time
I went home to see your husband

The yellow
Wallpaper shone a bright hope

And over
The scuffed threshold I stood

Both of us
Sobbing for the blushing bride.

Hints My Father Gave Me to Your Whereabouts

The backyard would be the first place to go:
Pick up the scattered seeds of radishes
The broken ribs of autumn's rhododendrons
Skim the shell of the pool until it dries.

With these in your pockets check the cellar
The starved bottles of better anniversaries

The withered boxes of apologetic love letters
Store the finds in a sunny place.

If nothing materializes, raid the laundry
Air out the stained sheets of your childhood
The grey hairs of last year's lint bags.
The washing machine rumbles like her tongue.

I wouldn't bother to travel. Trust me
She lives not in our bedroom, but is not
Far from home. Do not be tricked.
A needle in a haystack is not her style.

Preserve anything resembling a body.

Denial

When asked about his mother
My brother claims her death:

Sometimes to avoid questions
Sometimes because he believes it

Sometimes as a pick-up line
For women who love tragedy.

He wraps you up in white satin
And hundreds of yellow daffodils

Spell your name. He insists
We do the best to honour

Our fading memories: even if
They print in black-and-white

Even if our minds flash on
And off like movement sensors.

Still after the lonely women leave
His bed, there are nights he calls

For advice about funerals:

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Who should read a eulogy

And whether or not God ought
To be mentioned in pleasant company.

The procession for your passing
Slips by in every breath.

He insists he has no mother:
Only the one we bury in conversation

Thousands of feet underground.

Prayer for the Return of a Runaway Mother

Mother, if you art not in heaven, give me
This evening a sign: a letter, a loose lock
Of greying hair, a special stone you may have held
In your palm. Tell me how to pronounce your
Hallowed name so you will answer. Have you
Traveled far in search of new cities? Where
Does your present kingdom reign?

For those who have no daily bread, even a crumb
Would bear forgiveness. Come and trespass.

Mirage

For decades your face a fountain
Denied. Dark plums of your eyes
Berries of your lips dried. Long
Crevices of your mouth and cheeks
Reservoirs of rain.

There has been such drought
In my country.

I have tapped at the trunks
Of mothers on subways
Ladies in grocery stores

Fast women on escalators skipping
Stairs on their way
For a few scarce drops to tame this thirst.

I've become bloated on the *idea* of water.

With burned eyes and stick-thin thighs
I store my wares safely.

In this desert
If time is made of sand
The day must be close at hand
To turn camel.

My many stomachs brought to your well
Too deprived to drink.

Forecast

Precipitation is
My memory. The weatherman promises
This spring the humid air we circulate
Threatens to break.

Disappearing Act

The house may be vacant
Your sleeves without a trace
Of silk scarves or high cards.
And you eluded our sight
Marvelously, like a star in daylight.
Yet still magician, we know your name.

White rabbit, white dove
Black cape, black hat.
All set symbols, all subjects speak
To your second coming.
The art of holding one's breath.

But somewhere

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Underneath the wooden planks
Of this house, the ground refuses
To be tricked, will sniff out
Your secret compartment

Drag you out by the hair
In front of a stunned audience
Whisper in your ear:
Abacadabra

Exposed

It is not the photographs we preserve
But the thin, delicate layers of film

The negative markers of our halted love
That we hold dear.

Silent Auction

The hall was stale. Price tags
Like toe tags, short
And to the point, hung
On fake silver hooks:

Red satin nightgown.
Beige leather suitcase.
Three gold bracelets, and
Hundreds of shoes.
She left them all.

The men wore black
And drank martinis. The women
Clutched each other's handbags
Wedding themselves to calculators.
This ought to be worth something.

*Don't touch, security reminded,
Not unless you're going to buy.*

No pen to claim the inheritance,
The girl on the poster jumped
Out into the hall, tore all the treasures
From their hooks, ending the bidding.

*I've paid, she screamed. I've paid
Dearly for these already.*

A Message to any Half-Brothers or Sisters I May Have

Sure, I've thought about you. Wondered.
Asked myself a dozen questions, about where
You might live, with whom, the type of climate,
Which countries are stamped on your passports.
Sure, I have.

But don't be surprised if the day comes
When the mail I receive goes
Unanswered, when I refuse to unlatch the door,
Or when I too turn from your well-meant longing
Without a single trace or clue.

Such a dominant gene, you understand,
Must run in our family.

Hide and Seek

I

As the child who has spent too long
In darkness panics, I ran from you.
Searched the smallest places
For shelter. Ones tight as stones
And just as common, where movement
would seem a trick of the eye.

Hard statue I stood
As you scored the land, befriended
Insect, plant, rain.
The sky became a magnifying glass

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And burned me.

II

We began counting. Five addresses,
Three cities, two continents,
You picked out easily
The tracks like badly forged documents.

When I wished to give up
Womanhood prevented me.

The rest you know.

III

Soon a dry darkness will be falling
Below your hand
Where I curled up once.

Your little girl waits patiently,
Almost stubbornly,
In the last place
She knows you will look.

Dedication

For you
Whose absence
Has made me messenger
Of grief

I beg
For your blessing
Over my door
My memory

Faint hand
I have
Felt frequently
In mine

Please sign
These notes
Previously
Unclaimed.