

A Field Guide to Aftermath

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A Wilderness Grown While We Were Sleeping

In your dream you were a gull
in a world flooded by gray ocean.
You flew all night but there was no one,
nowhere to land. Nothing but gray
and gray waves. In my dream, I was falling
in a lightless cavern. My own voice
echoing: *nothing can scare you, nothing,
more than me, nothing, because I know,
scare you, what scares you, nothing, the most.*

When we awoke our bed was surrounded
by a glistening white-pine forest. The sun
bright daylight, but silver as moonlight.
Under our bare feet pinestraw lofted thick.
We sank to our knees. *How do we ever get back?*

We Named the Dove Alice

When I was four, I didn't want
to turn five. When she was six
my sister Sarah cut off her hair

because she thought
it would grow back pink.
When I was eight

we drove to Yellowstone
and I saw two bears, twelve elk,
three bison and a moose,

all from a distance,
and too many prairie dogs to count.
We drafted maps

of imaginary continents,
built fairy houses
from beech-bark and shells.

When I was nine a giraffe at the zoo
took a fig newton from my hand.
We went to the mountains each summer.

Sometimes we were lonely.
The bird we found, a fat gray dove
with an injured wing, would die in the night.

We learned about planets, how Charon
is almost the size of Pluto,
how they orbit each other mutually.

When I was in high school,
as I drove along Route 4 with my father,
he told me he'd thought

of killing himself
the night before.
I was sixteen.

Just before Christmas,
Sarah and I drove to the ocean
and the rust-red Volvo

ran out of gas in the snow.

That summer, we squeezed lemon
into our hair until it matted

in sticky clumps. We wanted
to lighten it blonde. Unsuccessful,
we dyed it a brassy yellow

with thick chemical paste.
When Spring came again
we drove to school together

with the windows open,
shivering in the reluctant warmth.
Listening to the same songs

again and again. These days
I'd like to believe
things will turn out alright.

There's No Mention of Hummingbirds in *On the Origin of Species*

Darwin missed a subspecies
on an island just south of Santiago
because the scheduled day his captain FitzRoy

decided the finally fair weather
was reason enough
for an extra dram of whiskey for the men

who lounged precariously
on the whaleboats and gangway. Darwin didn't drink much,
he was almost continually seasick

and even then
prone to migraines. Instead he set
his dainty brass-edged field desk in the light

of the upper deck and read several chapters of
The Principles of Geology. Then stretched back
and watched the water

while the crew napped in the sun
like mountainous cats. Partially in view
behind Darwin's stack of sewn notebooks

the unvisited island:
home to rainbowed tortoises, carapaces
refracting filtered sunlight, and strange hummingbirds

whose ancestor dreamed of Pegasus
and stole, from their sleeping father's guard,
an iridescent clump of seahorse eggs

to hatch. Weeks later, the nestlings emerged,
beaks not yet long, and unfurled
translucent alien tails.

Now these tiny chimeras whirl through
the mangroves and cutleaf daisy.
On the scorching days of August

they skim low, glint green
over the water, curled fishtails
glancing the surface.

They yearn quietly for their return to the sea

while the tortoises bear their heavy shells,
gathering slow lichens through the centuries.

The Opposite of Gravity

1. Accumulation

A woman who lives near Tallahassee
has filled her house with dolls: lining up
along the hallway,

leaning on the stairs. Her bedroom
is packed with hundreds
of tiny beds. Her kitchen, tiny plates.

The doctor called in hypothesizes
wildly: she must have been lonely
as a girl, must have lost a child.

The closet overflows with parasols
and somewhere, one black lace fan.
Sometimes the woman, whose name

is Ellen, steps on a pale hand
or booted foot
and crumples to the floor in apology.

2. Stacks and stacks of Catalogs

When we took my aunt from her home
it was filled with everything new,
most of it still in the mailing envelopes.

Bloated manila, bubble wrap,
her address serenely typed by a fulfillment center.
Her anticipation, her acquisition,

the bought promise of change
that won't be change but more of the same.
The door of her bedroom would not close.

It was the summer
I graduated from high school,
we were still living in our parents' home.

My sister watched *A Streetcar Named Desire*
four or five times a week.
One Saturday in August

she explained she just liked the way

they talk in old movies,
like every sentence is a manifesto.

She drew scenes over and over.
We find ourselves squandering love,
I saw her write across an intricate paper.

The dishes piled up into a cathedral of porcelain.
Outside it rained in the way it had all summer.
Our cat stalked shadows of drops across the rug.

3. This summer I return home

My brother has been reading the Greek philosophers.
Stretched out in the shade of the back yard,
pretzels and the *Republic* laid out like a picnic.

Or maybe an offering. But it was Heraclitus
this morning: everything is fire and flux.
I was weeding the herb garden,

smell of mint on my hands.
I feel it sometimes:
what pulls us away from this world.

A slight thing, the damselfly
alight on the verbena. Or the threads
dangling sunsoaked

from the kitchen window curtain.
I open the refrigerator, look out
the window to the three men with the lift

re-stringing wires down the street.
Lily purrs against my shins.
It has been so windy,

I should have mentioned that sooner.
The pages of my brother's book
wouldn't lie still.

Grief teaches us nothing
except that grief teaches us nothing.
We will always find something to fill the house.

Lamarckian Evolution

When we were young
 we were horses.
Sheen, sinew,
 sunlight on sloping flanks,
the scent of wild bedstraw
 in our mouths.

But so it goes:
 an ache ran shadowing
through our bones.
 Then sharp scales
sprouting, splintering
 our skin.

Our small bodies
 unmoored
from themselves.

Our hooves cracked
 and split, grew longer
and coiled themselves
 into talons.

An embering
 sparked in our lungs.
Finally, we unfolded
 wrinkled wings,
snapping them taut
 into the wind.

I drift in this blooming armor.
 But it's a shell
I want for my own,
 for the eggs I will warm.
Let them hide themselves
 in a secret reptilian dark
so fortified

 they will be indestructible,
even to themselves.

II.

A Field Guide to Self Destruction

It's easy
 once you realize
how flimsy
 it is, the body.

From there,
 it's simply a matter
of undoing
 its fastenings.

You can do it quietly,
 you know.
 As quietly
 as stripping
paper curls off a birch.

Look at the pearled peach
 revealed:
 the same sweet-flesh color
of my violet-veined wrists.

And if you strip
 the full circle
of the trunk,
from that downy ring up
 the tree will wither,
yes it takes time,
 and die.

It can happen
 like that.
It can happen
 many ways.

*

 The landscape here
is as indifferent
 to joy
 as to suffering.

The frog
 half devoured
by the snake
 whose jaw unhinges

for the slow
crush and juicing
of digestion.
And the frog
keeps kicking its legs
because life
craves more life,
and more life
and more.

*

Something was torn.
Something came apart.

A Field Guide to Temperate Deciduous Succession

His suicide: a wildfire.
My life charred
to the scorch-blackened ground.

Skeletal trees, a thin
snow-dusting of ash.

Red hawks circle
in the smoke-emptied
sky, starved and diving
for unhidden field mice.

Autumn passes,
but there are no leaves to fall.
Winter creaks
through brittle wood.

With thaw, rain softens
the hexagon-cracked earth,
a carpet of viridian buds.

Overnight
the green blooming,
ravenous life:

first goldenrod, famished
for the sun drenching
through the thorned remains,

then juniper, dogwood,
blueberries, bloodwine stains.
Small creatures scurry
and refatten.

White tailed deer return
to chew softly
the glossed leaves of poison ivy.

Woods, unbody me.

Soon birches,
their photosynthetic
bark first taut
and then unpeeling,
shedding lichens to eat the light.

Poplar, Maple. White pines
 dripping crystalline sap.
Soon the oaks will follow,

soon the shade-thrown
 understory will ease
 its sun-bent clamor.

Leaves become litterfall,
then dark dirt
where mushrooms gather,
 encircling.

 In a strewn owl pellet:
the minutely toothed jawbone
of a meadow vole.

 Void becomes ash, becomes soil.

Accumulate.

The sweet worms
 in their deepening ground.

Poem after October 21st

In the nights that followed
there was always someone awake.

We took shifts
against the raiding cold

that burst the front door open.
When no one was looking

the maples out front
began to slide their roots

through the earth.
As I walked my small dog

in circles the diameter
of the only streetlamp's glow

I'd see them shift
in the corner of my eyes.

Unable to tell if their limbs
were craning toward the house

to place soft leaves
against the roof

or if they were just
going to lean and lean

and lean until they crashed
and splintered across the yard,

uprooting a maw
of knotted darkness

at their base.

Winter Light

I don't understand
 how you could prefer blackness
 even to ache.

But maybe what beckoned
 wasn't blackness,
 and that's what I can't see.

Maybe it was a bright
 unending blankness,
 clear as winter light.
Maybe it said your name aloud.

Splitting Wood

It's not so much sheer strength
as finding the faultline
of the wood.
Strike again
and again on the split.

To split myself so cleanly:
heartrush, salting body,
knot of mind,
rice paper, mint leaves,
soft folded sweaters.

I lie down on the sidewalk
with my cheek
to the steaming pavement.

Deep in dry soil
my many selves tangle:
thirsting roots choking
a pipe rushing water,
nosing for the cracks.

III.

Grief

Each month
 on the anniversary
of his death

I awoke, my body
 cracked

full of air,
 my ribs
 open splayshards.

Nothing
 inside
but dry wind
 and ache.

On the ninth month
 I woke slowly
to an emptiness
 that squirmed
 inside of me.

After hours
 of carrying
the spasming lack

I gave birth:
a pale creature
 who follows me,

unformed hands
grasping.

The months I have not written

Knowing it would undo me.
Like a heavy turned key.
Like a knife slit down
the belly of prey:
the steam, tangle
and burst of organs.

Like a snowshoe hare
that changes
stark white in November
though the winter snow
comes later
and later each year.

The Encyclopedia of Superstitions

Ants are messengers,
you must not step on them.
Don't say goodbye on bridges.

Cats will suck the breath from an infant.
Carry an acorn in your pocket
and you will never grow old.

Sooner or later, though, the barricades
of logic collapse at the insistent knocking
of the hand of luck.

Why not enter a world of elaborately
patterned architecture?
Even if no one can know

what the intricate tiles are made of.
Even if in the end the city will crumble,
and outside its walls,

a vindictive universe waits to be denied
its essential rituals.

A Field Guide to Cloud Formation

I didn't realize close observation
was its own form of augury

until I learned
about clouds.

*Cirrus: five miles up,
built of crystalline ice,*

*in winter they thicken
with the approach of snow.*

*Cumulus: fluffed
and scattered across the sky.*

*Cumulonimbus: thunderheads.
Anvil shaped, they carry lightning,*

*searing rain, the beat of hail,
high winds.*

*

I see my father in dreams.
Once, we sat on the floor

of my high school bedroom.
I asked him not to do it.

I thought he had agreed.
Then, I turned back to him,

his profile a closed door
with the light

of a room beyond
shining around the edges.

And then I knew
it was too late, he would,

again.
He already had.

*

In another dream
I wielded all the studies

and statistics I've been
harvesting since his death.

I meticulously
explained the effects

of suicide on family
and community.

When he looked down
at his hands,

defeated, I was sure
I had convinced him.

We were going to take my dog
to the park.

I put my father in the car,
went to get the dog.

When I returned
his body was pulsing

a gurgling flood
of rich blood.

My chest was drenched
as I reached toward him.

There was nothing
I could say or do.

*

Last night I stepped
onto a porch

where my aged mother
sat next to my father.

I saw his face
as it could have been:

lithium swelled, eyes
like a hurting animal.

I kissed him on his forehead,
as I kissed him when he lay

in his blue coffin.
His skin cool as smooth stone,

and I inhaled
the smell of formaldehyde.

*

*Stratus: the fog low over mountains,
wisping, indistinct.*

*Nimbostratus: low clouds,
rain and snow falls.*

*Altostratus: the high featureless
gray sheet of sky.*

The Kunstkamera, St. Petersburg

*In the gummy chemicals of 18th century preservation:
the double liquid gaze of a two-headed lamb.*

Two dogs in the hills above the Volga
circle the farmer in a heavy coat, hooded,
because the lambs come before full sunlight.

The farmer finds the balanceless creature toddling to the ewe,
who nudges it as it begins to nurse, long tail wagging.
He doesn't tell anyone, not his wife. He nests them

in the woodshed. Two trembling noses nuzzling for warmth.
Sucking each other's ears, four eyes closing. Their mother stands by
bleating soft murmurs, chewing knots of hay the farmer leaves for her.

But the boy who helps with the lambing must have seen.
Because when they die on the fourth day as it begins to rain
and the farmer lays them down again, still just warm,

on the pile of brush cleared to burn
a man comes in uniform with a decree from Peter I
and a wagon clattering crates.

The envoy stands stiff against the mist, cranks the small body
into a box with a scrape of unhinged featherlight bones.
As the ewe stands by on the slope with whiteless eyes and no sound

the farmboy bends to a snow crocus so winter-famished for light
he can see it unfurling. Its anthered chalice fills and fills with rain,
and the flower swallows, and fills again.

IV.

Learning the Names

Of all the laws
that bind us to the past
the names of things are
stubbornest

Robert Hass, *Field Guide*

1. New Hampshire

To learn the names
is to build a home.
The salamander walks
across my hand: redbacked
salamander. Found under the log
that was an oak: *Quercus alba*.
Where a small bird,
downy woodpecker, a female,
her beak too small for drilling,
once peeled bark for insects:
beetle larvae and pill bugs.

2. *Chelydra serpentina*: snapping turtle

I last saw my father
on Route 9 between home
and the North of Vermont.

A snapping turtle
was crossing the road.

My father took a long stick
and teased the turtle forward
out of traffic,

its reptilian beak
clicking
as it lunged for the stick.

3. *Acer rubrum*, *Acer saccharum*

To know red maples
from sugar maples
is to know watered sap
from sweetness.

When the trees begin to run
in late February
we carry overfull buckets
to the saphouse,
splashes spilling coldly
into our boots.

4. Tapping the trees

To tap the trees
I press the hand drill
to the gray grooves of winter bark,

and turn the crank
to sink the bit into the trunk.
The sap flowing fast
I press my mouth hard
to the wound
and suck.

5. Early Experiments in Dissection: Tent Catapillars

We must have heard my father
complaining about their
warp and weft in the apple trees
and dogwoods.
My sister and I gathered them,
in satchels made
by holding up the hems of our shirts.
We carried our wriggling harvest
to the back porch
where we arranged flat stones
into a table.
It's the only time
I have ever killed something
just out of curiosity.
Between two rocks

a squelch of juices, the navy blue
tubes deflated and then, bundle of ganglia:
the tiny, mustard-colored seed of brain.

6. *Myotis lucifugus*: little brown bat

Driving home
from the hospital
where he worked,
 my father hit a bat.

The next morning
I crouched on the driveway
and watched

 as he pulled
on a pair of examining gloves.

He peeled
 its papered wings
off the hood of the Volvo

and laid the small-flung body
 on a slip of cardboard.

I was six or so, I bent close,
not knowing yet
 to be afraid of dead things.

He carefully hinged
 the wing at its elbow
and held the membrane
to the light:

“see, the skeleton,
 there are fingers,” he said.

I stretched my palm wide,
 the same reach as the spindled bones.

7. Eden

To learn the names
is to make this place
our own.

8. Porcupine, Hemlock, Chestnut

You find porcupines in Hemlocks.
At the base of the trunk you'll see a scattering mess
of stripped pine cones.

But the hemlocks, like many trees, are dying.
Like the American Chestnuts that grew once in the yard.
My mother pressed the barbed leaves in the heavy cadmium

phonebook to frame them. But even behind the glass
they browned and blighted, staining the white linen mats,
crumbling into green-tinged dust.

9. Little Brown Bats

To learn the names
is to be able to name what has
scared you.

When I woke up
to the small wind of wingflaps
on my face
we realized the heat vents
in the attic
were sized for bats.

10. Deer Tick, Lyme Disease

The brown and blood-hungry being,
flat and then expanding,
leaving traces of itself in my blood.
It must have nested in my scalp
because I never saw the round and rippling
rash on my body. Spirochete, bacteria infection.
I went on for weeks, dizzied,
until my face began to freeze itself
and I realized I could no longer move my mouth.

11. October

There is a trail
through the old sheep farm

I walked with my mother
in the days after my father died.

It was the week in fall when the leaves
were at full burning.

The next week when we walked again
the trees had dumped them.

That's often how it happens:
color one day, a night of rain

or wind and the ground is layered
and we kick the trees' offerings as we walk.

12. *Betula lenta*: sweet birch, black birch

I am leaves, I am the dirt.
I stand where I've stood before,
years ago. I want to stand here
until roots reach down from me, until leaves
open from the buds in my hair:
all this sunlight to devour.

13. Winter passes, then Spring, a year goes by

This peace we build
is lasting. Believe me.
This peace is all we have.

I walk with my mother
through the stand
of young beeches, their leaves

like the membrane wings
of the little brown bats
but yellow bleached by sun.

Every day I think of things
I want to talk to him about.

14. Home

To be from a place. To leave it,
to return.

What a lucky thing, what a lucky
shattered thing.

V.

The Hall of Comparative Evolution, Paris

Down the center of the gallery
there's an ossified stampede:
weighty arrangements
of buffalo, whales,
animals of open spaces.

But I love the tiny skeletons most:
frogs, voles and bats,
the filigrees of ribs.

The biologist
hunched like a watchmaker:
reassembling their
precisely sprung structures,
a magnifying glass,
finely pointed tools.

I sit on a bench
and look up towards windows
through skeletons,
hardened lacework:
dentelle. Lace.
Like teeth, like bone.

These words I am given:
os, a whispering
in my mouth.
English *bone* is so strong
in its sound:
own, belonging,
as if they were ours.
Os is the hiss back to sand,
crumbling.
There is no ending.

The Natural History Museum

Because it is spring
and life goes on in this city,
and there are bones
of giant ground sloths
and glyptodonts who grew armor
out of their skin,
and there is a meteorite,
an actual meteorite,
4.5 billion years old,
and you can touch it,
and we both touch it
we press our fingers to it,
and outside,
on the edge of the park,
we touch our fingers
to each others lips.

Vampire Bats Have Evolved to Share

If a bat goes hungry,
unable to find a goat that night,
it mews echolocating squeaks
through the hollow
of their colony's tree.
Hearing this
with exquisite ears
one of the others,
full-fed and slow, comes close
like a mother bird and chokes blood
into the eager, empty mouth.
as they wrap their tiny,
diaphanous wings
around one another.

Love Poem

You hold me
when my body is wracked
 with ghost-given sobs.

When I wade out
 through the saltmarsh
of my mind, I find you there.

Think of the coelacanths.
Thought gone
 for sixty million years.

Only for one to be trawled
 off South Africa in 1938.
Thick cosmoid scales, flecked

and dented with scars,
it's wide mineral eyes, unblinking
 from another time.

What they couldn't yet see:
 a notochord pulsing its spine
with bitter oil, heart chambers

strung in a line.
They live on the wellings
 of the deep currents

and dwell in underwater caves.
 They lurk and lunge
for benthic fish.

Twenty years ago
a related species was found
 off Indonesia

at a fishmarket, a biologist
 photographed the specimen
just before a shopper carried it home

in her braided basket
only to find it difficult to scale,
 the flesh waxen and acrid.

The world is stranger than we know.

And the heart is a fossil of itself.

We go on in this living world
and evolution continues
 its slow hum.

And we dance when we are alone,
 and ache comes and goes,
and we take notice, or we don't.

VI.

A Field Guide to Invasive Species

Driving away
from your childhood home,
cathedrals in your chest.

All along the margin of the highway
purple loosestrife spreads
unchecked.

The car windows rolled down
and in front of you is a farm trailer:
three brown and white alpacas.

Their strange dexterous noses
curling to explore the slatted vents
and the wind of 50 mph.

There are weeks where death
pulses below the skin of the earth
so quietly you almost don't hear.

The loosestrife seeds are carried unnoticed
on the hulls of cargo ships
and planted to ornament gardens.

They were once tied in careful packets
by colonists who planned to cultivate it
and treat dysentery.

It's hard to know what will stay contained,
what will run rampant—
spread and spread, until

in marshes, its spiking
flower stalks
crowd cattails out completely.

The asian longhorned beetle
tunnels through the xylem heartwood
of maples.

The female bores a crater
through the bark: one single egg
to fester and bloom.

You can find the hatching sites

from the meticulous holes,
the scattered frass and oozing sap.

Half-formed
a feeling wanders through you:
like someone who comes into a room

looking for something,
but forgets, then keeps looking,
not knowing what for.

A Field Guide to Aftermath

No one can know
when a storm will bring an oak
 down through the roof.

No one can know
 the pipes will burst
 and the basement
 will flood

 into an underground marsh
where cattails and sweetflag spread

until one day
 you remember the phillips-head you need

only to find
 woodfrogs basking below
 the one exposed lightbulb,
 warming their amphibious blood.

And turtles burrow deep
 into the New England mud
because dirt
was the only floor down there,

packed hard over the graves of settlers
 who died young and in winter
when the ground

was too hard-frozen
 for a spade.

The snappers avoid these,
 their tunnels lacing

intricate water-filled mazes,
 and the mice

who have always lived in a nest
 under the stairs
are learning to swim.

They shake themselves
 like tiny dogs
when they haul out onto the shelf

where skunk cabbage takes root
in the softening wood
 next to three rickety
 electric fans.

*

You return to the house
 after months away
and it looks the same:

shutters open, porch stacked
 with wood, blue kitchen,
sprawl of skylit bedrooms,
 the low granite wall
 meandering the garden.

Wisteria weaving the white
 picket-fence,
blossoming monumentally.

But at the heart of it
you can hear
an elaborate
 ecosystem of loss

 humming.

down where the furnace
 sputters warmth
into the gray silt
 and clouding water.

Down where
if you slit open
a pitcher plant's
 red-veined throat

at the base
 you will find,

 in the black insect loam,
the emerald eye
 of a dragonfly,
all that remains, glittering.

Geography

1. One Year After

Laconia, New Hampshire

My sister and I
 wander the rows of booths
at the Laconia Antique Center.
 Sarah looks
 for lace napkins.

I look vaguely
 for a butter dish.

Strange
 how places persist.

 Leaning on a shopping cart
down the aisle of canned vegetables
 in the days after my father died

I was an alien: my skin
translucent, the pearly dermis
 of a far-off moon.

How can fluorescent lights
 and a whole glorious array of cereal exist

in a world (I was lying in bed, quiet morning)
where wounds of loss
open (the phone rang)
in the middle
 of our lives?

Adrift between these rows
 of old things
I balance a pitcher in my hand,
 feel its blue ceramic heft.

I will bring it home,
 fill it with milk.

2. The North Fork in Winter
Orient, New York

The warmest January in years.
I sit on the porch and
 watch the light on water.
Everything is broken.
Everything is whole.

The harbor seal
 we found dead
 on Orient Point,
 still and perfect.
The flounder sliced for cleaning on the dock,
 an open book
 spread along its gutted spine.
The light on water.

3. Sinkhole
Burlington, Vermont

I stand at the intersection
 of South Willard and Main

 where earlier this week
the street collapsed
 into a pit the length of a car.

 An old sewer system,
abandoned in the 1960s
left empty space gaping
 below the pavement.

The asphalt veneer
 just a taming of surface.
Heavy rain found the fissures
 and now, pedestrians in windbreakers
sidle up to the caution tape.

Violence enters the world:
 it seeps into the cracks,
floods in the hollows.

The tar chipped
 as delicately as spring ice
on the ruts of a frozen field

and beneath, crumbled cement mixes
with the tangle of roots and stones,
the small wriggling life
of invertebrates.

There are days
your absence
is a door I walk through.

In my bedroom, yellow jackets
are nesting
between the screen and window.

Only the thin pane
between me
and their hornet frenzy.

I press my cheek
to the glass
to feel the pulse and sing.