

The Noise of Boys Yelling

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Small Bodies

need something
to believe in: the end zone

as a dwelling, their own
invincibility. Before games,

I remember the boy
whose collarbone

I shattered, the crushed husk
of his body

in the grass, and how sated
I felt afterward

standing over him. I'm familiar
with the consequences

of remorse. In this sport
it's the penitent

that suffer. So when
I see these boys, swollen

and angry, lurch
in unison

like righteous bullies
across the turf,

I feel nothing
but my own bloodthirstiness

against their bodies.
What does it mean

that later we meet
at midfield

and I smack every one
of their outstretched,

dilapidated hands?
It means we age

inflicting pain. It means
we expect to be forgiven.

I

Tree Swing

In the ocher light, I see it
dangling from the branch tip
of that abraded sycamore,

the silver creek
and crisp, imbricate leaves
beneath our feet.

I see my brother
suspended in the parched
summer stillness,

his left foot fixed
in the loop at the droop
end of the rope.

I walk alongside him
and ease my fingers softly
into his teetering heft,

as if to steady
the pitching stern of a dinghy
over dark water.

He smells of camphor,
and the grooved pastel soaps
in the guest bathroom

of our parents' home.
I know it is my job to push him—
this small boy

who sleeps nights
in the room next to mine,
his breath

through the wall
the moored rumble of boats,
their motors

turning over
in the darkness, widening
the distance between us.

I gather him up—
the whole grinning pendulum
of his seven years.

I gather his weight,
his girth, the great hull of it
in my arms, and let go.

When I see him diminish,
as my palms empty
in his wake, I understand

what it is to send
someone willing away,
all speck and jetsam,

and watch him return
what seems like years later,
both of us staring

again at each other
as if across a great sea.

Link it Up

The first hand I ever held
was my friend Brad's hulking,
callous meathook, sophomore year,

beneath the elephantine,
inflatable helmet
the team (like one big brain!)

huddled under before games.
How it bothered me—this mockery
of brotherhood, the oversized,

no-I-in-team symbolism, it's song
of selflessness transposed
for the stat-padders and prima donnas.

Fifteen. All I knew of intimacy
was the weight: his palm
in mine, the heaviest impediment

I had ever felt, cumbersome
as young lovers. The ones,
to this day, I see interlock

their fingers and walk
together down the avenues
and trellised aisles

of their lives. A mystery to me:
how they move that way
with four legs.

Library

In the alabaster lobby, rank
with body odor and old bums

a small woman behind me,
in the cupped emerald palm

of an armchair, begins to snore.
It is difficult to see her

off the street: belongings strewn
across the floor, patchwork

and odorous as hillocks
of compost, her skin

the singed, leather texture
of an old catcher's mitt.

I can't help but imagine
for her a home: bucolic;

walls; the small, simple
luxury of ceilings.

When the building closes, she lifts
from sleep, crazily, like a fish

pulled spinning from some depth
of unimaginable murk, gathers

her rabble of bags and slinks
chimney-mouthed into the street...

and I am ashamed, watching
her leave, of the pity I afforded her

in my imagining; its warmth,
its balm, undeniably, for me: a man

feeling for a woman alone in the night
and doing nothing.

Midlife

Before he sleeps,
my father puts his glasses,
an old roan-brown pair,
on the bureau, sighs
heavily to himself.
They glint in the moonlight,
and it makes sense to imagine
this shine he peels
each night from his eyes
as magical—the afterglow
of his young, innumerable
futures. Each one glimpsed
beyond the same glass
for fifty years, like all those stars
stuck up there, the dreams
of every sad person
condensed in them.

Yard Work

Summer mornings, before
birdsong and sunlight, before

the tender exhale my brother makes
turning over in bed, I hear

the side door unlock and rattle
the white stucco walls, its rusted hinges

keening us half awake. Then the scuff
of your canvas loafers on the cement path,

the muffled protest of twigs
and rhododendron petals

underfoot. All this
in the snoring maw

of a moment. How often
I have greeted each morning

utterly free, ignorant
of you in the haze and high grass

behind our house, the oval face
of your spade

uprooting mushrooms, wrenching
from the earth their needy indolent shapes

as us from sleep.

Memory of Wrens

Winged chestnuts:
noisy, bull's-eyed nubs
twitching in the wind.

We pointed dark barrels
in their direction, watched
our cruelty, coppered

and minuscule, enter
their bodies: a reckoning.
The severe faux pas

of our lives, even then,
existed someplace
in those soft explosions;

our formative parts, the eyes:
feathered, alive.

A Small Matter

I killed a baby
lizard, out back,
in the open
field where,
only seconds
ago, on a great rock,
it was sunning
like a stick of gum.
At home I made,
then broke,
a pinky promise
to my younger brother.
Easy. My finger
holding his perfect
inch of hope
like a creature.

Hills

Every summer across the street in the tall hills
heavy tufts of crab grass overrun the horse trails.

And further back, near the brown signpost and rusted fence
brittle spires of oak extend over empty jeep paths

spotted with snake holes. Beyond all of this, I know, is Old Man's Ridge
where I walk this morning with my dog in a flawless mist.

I've been told out here anything
in the way of wildlife was possible.

Which is why, perhaps, we should have crept
back through that breach in the barbed wire fence.

Instead, we forge on through wet fields
rife with insects, and dot-sized implausible spiders

that bite at our ankles. Up ahead in the underbrush
and expanding light my dog lifts a leg, leaves part of himself

with the landscape. Hours later, patting the heavy tambourine
of his flank in my front yard, I pull from him a tick, absolutely black,

the size of something you forget.

As Kids

we sat in the bleachers and watched
the older boys on the field below
deplete themselves, over
and over, to the bleat of whistles.

Among the spectators,
this pleased the parents
most of all
who cheered for themselves
in their sons and needed
symbols.

But to us, come
to bide our time after school,
in the gold light and cold,
it was spectacle. We saw

we couldn't feel.

Parking Garage

We followed the noise
of boys yelling
to the bottom-most level
where the light shone in patches
upon the ashen faces
of our friends
and classmates.
There were girls, too.
Beautiful. Subdued.
Brought by guys
to watch the fights.
Sometimes life
enters through the eyes.
Sometimes youth,
or something dumb in us,
confused, leads to places
where we see the faces of our friends
wrecked against the fists
of other kids, where we feel thrilled,
and complicit, and look away
then back again.

I Love You

Because by then the usual felt heavy and corn-fed
like cupcakes from a girlfriend with sticky,
unwavering intentions, I shriveled
when you said *those words*;
a gut reaction, really,
like coming home,
night after night,
to a made bed,
to white sauce on the stove
when (oh, God)
 I wanted red.

Maxxie the Cat

The coastal gray color
of an early Santa Monica

morning, we carried her home
where she huddled, friendless,

for hours under our bed.
When she emerged, at last,

into your arms, outstretched
as they were, all innocence

and pure nerve, we both learned
a small truth about love: how

unceremoniously it leaves
misfortunes, fine as hair,

everywhere.

Foreplay

*Tulips, I say. Roses.
Chrysanthemums.*

*The song I wrote,
for you. These poems.*

In hopeful courtship
how obsequious the tongue becomes;

how dotingly it licks
and lolls for love.

Even now, reading in bed
aloud to you

it keens the vowels, their lusty
dying sounds, then later

salivates before *hors d'oeuvre*,
sweet jester of a word, the lewd
allure.

It wants the mood

suggestive, set. The sun
decanting in the west. It wants

to worship you,
undressed,
your limbs

like scripture spread—

the enraptured godhead
apt for it,

all gloss and balm,
to genuflect.

Sunset

Slow plovers
swoop the coast.
The sun's a globe
of runny yolk.
In moments it will set,
smear its caul and gilded mess
over all the firmament:
drip, drip. Isn't this
romantic? *Yes*.
We go to bed. What is romance
anyway? The next day,
I woke before eight
and watched you sleep.
It was boring.

Two Haiku

1

Dusk! The steady
tug of shade—
my five o'clock shadow.

2

Poets: those who wake
each morning at the mercy
of every damn thing.

The Barefoot Hikers Wear Boots

The lightest is to be barefooted — Kashmir Proverb

We have come this far with our feet
wrapped in canvas, in the twiddle-
less black tomb of shoe. We have walked
over rock with our soles rubbered-
under and wondered at the lack in the view.

Aerobics: Early Morning

Pears in rows. Tan rinds
the texture of wrinkled
parchment lampshades.

Shapes eager
and synchronized.

Isn't it always
the mushy, corrugated ones
that are seldom plucked
first, if ever?

Day at the Beach

I have brought my floaties with me to the beach.
They are bright green and covered
with smiling blue and orange seahorses.

I have two: one for each one of my arms.
I pretend they're muscles, and put them on
and act strong. I chase seagulls

and scowl at surfers, and build sandcastles
that I step on after. At night

when everyone is gone
I walk beneath the pier. I dig
a hole for myself in the sand—

the worst part is the
anticipation.

Rebound

Because she's been here
before and by now knows
two shots

aren't enough
for what she's after,
she drains three more

from her spot
in the corner before
adjusting her skirt

and sliding closer
toward the man on her left.

On TV, the Lakers
are playing the Knicks

at the Garden
in a meaningless game. Someone

just *missed an easy one*.
People are booing.

None of this matters though
to the two figures alone
together in the dark corner

bouncing bricks back
and forth off one another.

Talent

I felt it first, one afternoon,
on the diamond at the park,
rounding third in the middle
of an auspicious trot.

Next on the blacktop,
I watched from half-court
as it flew from my hands
toward the rim
then in.

Later in a sprint
it seemed to slip, wittingly,
into a neighboring lane
and pull quickly away.

Afterward, alone,
defeated—the long
walk home.

Cleaving

He thought it would be darker,
that it would hurt more...

and everything suddenly
all at once would make sense.

Then he hovered over himself.
"Like a fine mist," he thought.

His head was a bruised hill,
his eyes two pits of obsidian.

Then he was without
and had forgotten.

The Bench

A man bent over on a bench,
his face in his hands,
sends down a thousand
thin rivers in the sun.
No one passing
notices or pauses
to console him
or sees the puddle
his tears have become.
Days go on.
The man is gone
but the puddle stays.
It pulses
on the pavement
out of place; silver
in the heat, buoying
the blue and yellow dangles
of the trees.
Eventually,
people sit above it
on the bench, they add
their sadness to it.
Soon it is a lake.
two women wade
its muddy banks.
Isn't it wonderful,
one says, her feet
two pale fish
in the shallows, the way
we share our sorrow now?
Oh yes, yes, yes!
But wait, she says.
something's beginning to happen.
It's growing.

The Idea of God at the Movies

After watching *The Matrix Reloaded* with Kevin at the Kaleidoscope, the denouement still fresh in our minds of the white, godlike architect—scion of a long-ascended line of Men's Wearhouse models and their grandfathers. The topic of televisions came up. Why were there so many? Then he had to piss, which is systemic, and a related form of aggrandizement, ergo I waited in the lobby near the arcade and watched the families and kids my age make a metal claw float above the heads of stuffed animals drowning in the carnage of flailed limbs, plush buttocks, and then, apropos of nothing, plucked forcefully as a single Riesling into the bliss, which is anomalous, lapis lazuli, and not a bad place to be, vis-à-vis love (says the architect) which is the alternative.

Today

Morning opens like a gorgeous fruit.

Neighbors amble from their homes;
the sun warms them.

Before you grow
and go away, lace
your plimsolls.

It is a fine moment
to feel bold.

There are ropes of beef jerky—
smoked, BBQ, and teriyaki—
arranged on the counter
in clear plastic bins.

There are those who go to the ocean
and stare out

at the flat glass plate of the sea, and the taut
translucent spools dipped at odd angles

and unwinding. There are animals
ahead and behind you, dying.

Tell Me Again

about your memory of him
how when you stepped off the train
he looked wounded standing there
his face in his hands

he looked at you and that's when you knew you said
it happened quickly but everything
fast seems immense to me

even now
it's the solemnity
in your voice that's startling
a faucet dripping

the problem is
that nothing lasts

see that Labrador
by his lonesome lying
like a furry slug in the sun?
I think that's why I started
surfing nothing worked

I was on a train and out the window there was the ocean
blue and endless I didn't have anything to believe in

I couldn't look at anyone I met
their eyes were so bright I just stared
past their shoulders and saw fields and fields
of yellow daffodils I thought
this was normal

then one morning I saw the figures
in the water moving fast as trains but graceful
uninhibited and I looked at the waves and behind them
was the world I didn't see
any flowers

I wish I could tell you
what it was like
the first time you know
when it's night
and there's a little light

from the moon
and the girl you're with
leans closer to you
for the cold and tugs
at your sleeve and says
Oh look at me
when I'm talking

Recurrence

The winter of '07, only once,
I drove all the way north on Highway 1
to Mendocino to bring you home.

Halfway there in a turn out off the coast
I stood in the wind, at the edge of a cliff,
and watched the sea between ships

diminish with distance. I remember,
how even near the end, we walked
at night along the beach to the harbor

to watch the boats come in,
and how seeing them, their elegance,
their great size returning, was a gift.

In the afternoon when I arrived
and couldn't reach you I drove
slowly, not thinking, to the harbor

but the boats were gone. Then
there was a sound (my phone)
and when I answered, a voice,

yours, but softer
than I remembered,
far away. *Shea*, it said,

*there's no need. I know
you're here. I'm sorry.*
Last night in my dream,

I walked again along that beach
to the harbor and saw you
at the water with your back to me.

It was foggy. The boats were gone.
Even then,
I waited and waited, but never saw one.

Story

She had felt, Sunday morning,
shutting his door quietly behind her

and walking out and breathing
in the brilliant winter—the colors

of the passing cars in the windows
and of the bare clouds

repeating themselves—
that she wasn't abashed,

or saddened, exactly,
by her leaving,

or the sense—slightly comic—
that she would never see him again.

The sex had been good—rougher,
more aerobic than she was used to—

and afterward, turning slowly
in the bathroom mirror, trembling

a little, bewildered
by her smell—musky,

oddly feral—she noticed
that a gust of air

from the open window behind her
had made the curtains ascend,

like a new, translucent skin,
above her in the mirror.

And, for a minute or two
(hot water steaming in the sink),

she stood that way: stock-still,
naked, raised curtains, her trembling,

and the animal smell—integumental—
coming up again as the wind stilled,
and the curtains fell.