



PROJECT MUSE®

Light, Flashback, Flight

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Because I was young that morning
 In gray light untouched on the rug
 And our gifts were so few, propped
 Along the furniture, for a second
 My heart fell, then saw how large
 They'd made the spaces between them

To take the place of less. Because
 The curtained sun rose brightly
 On our discarded paper and the things
 Themselves, these forty years,
 Have grown too small to see, the emptiness
 Measured out remains the gift,

Fills the whole room now, that whole year
 Out across the snowy lawn. Because
 A drop of shame burned quietly
 In the province of love. Because
 We had little that year and were given much.

Paul Zarzyski

Light

for Fred Lighter

He cherished the chunk of burled apple
 bucked from the trunk
 of his grandfather's oldest tree – cured,
 stored, packed, and moved it with Audubon art,
 alongside Victorian rococo, from home

to new home, through his feisty thirties,
 through mid-life crises into his tender fifties
 until the wedding of a close friend
 brought us to his hearth
 one cool Seattle afternoon. We watched him
 lay the log onto the grate
 cradled with cedar
 kindling the color of straw, lay it
 gently as a priest placing the swaddled infant
 into the manger of the crèche. Lord,
 how that apple burl beamed
 its radiance behind the bride and groom,
 and long after their kiss, still glowed
 brighter yet behind him
 sitting close to the firelight's shadow play,
 the ceiling alive with crows
 dancing to the pantomime
 of his limber fingers wheeling their excited flight
 as he spoke to us of his first love
 for rich earth.

His grandfather taught him,
 while planting saplings together
 on their knees, to know the loam as sacred
 living flesh – to cup it loosely in both hands
 embracing it close enough to see
 within its darkness, the starlight,
 close enough to hear the high
 pitch a single sparkling granule sings
 shifting into its new, unique niche
 in the universe – until once, so charmed
 while savoring the sweet
 sweet breath, he barely caught himself reaching the pink
 tip of his tongue, like an angleworm,
 toward the dirt, his grandfather coaxing him on
 with a chuckle. As we laughed, each spark
 became a burgundy seed. We relived

with him the bushels of intimate fruit
 he knew in his youth, and we too felt
 the brisk autumns of first-frost harvests
 so real, we flinched at the thought of windfall
 thump and bruise.

After the last champagne toast,
 we left him alone with his embers
 living long past midnight
 when we dreamt him
 sifting through cupped hands
 to each sapling in his backyard orchard
 the warm ash at dawn, fairy tale
 glitter dust, as magical
 as photosynthesis itself – this sunlit sprinkle,
 this gift of grandfather
 friendship passed on
 through the family of the rose.

Flashback

Please fill my ear with softer sound,
 I wish, lifting a thrift store conch shell
 and cringing, one week after the crash,
 still to the jagged-edged
 noise of chain
 collision – pain in the rotator cuff
 of what I will call, till the day I die,
my throwing arm. August gone,
 dusk no longer able

to tuck the sultriness of sun
 and hold its sweaty warmth up
 under Montana's hefty September moon, I am drawn
 from the sea I could not hear
 to a wooden Pabst Blue Ribbon box
 stored in a cobwebbed corner of the garage
 so sentimentally empty
 without our *family* car. I stand in its space.
 I am amazed by the body,
 man-made or otherwise, surviving
 on its original four-banger heart
 umpteen years, a quarter million miles,
 all warranties, rebates, guarantees,
 long ago expired.

The crumpled Rawlings football
 flops from the beer box with no more bounce
 than hockey skates and fielder's mitt
 onto the concrete slab. I spit
 in my palm, wet the needle, work it
 clockwise into the stiff valve and witness
 leather – unlike glass or metal –
 taking back its shape. My grip fits
 the laces with a craving
 for simplicity fulfilled. I throw the pump-fake,
 then perfect spiral. Across the pasture
 a pair of colts watch the pigskin
 launching almost vertical,
 just a bit more trajectory each time
 until I can not quite race under it
 to make the fingertip snag, a boy's
 playful hands atrophied
 to hooves. I think better of the Hail Mary pass
 toward my tailback receivers
 trotting rocky ground
 into the sunset.

I must have thought *cortege* –
 blinded as my head snapped back
 to track the next toss, whiplash
 shooting again through the trapezius,
 and two geese surprising my eye
 where the ball once flew – I must have sensed
 at that sad moment the dying
 Princess in a Paris tunnel with her mate
 already dead, the dark blue
 Mercedes demolished
 one week to the hour after we walked
 away from similar aftermath, body and soul
 out of the blurred midst of the twisted.

The ball

disappears into the crown of a Lombardy
 poplar bobbling it just
 long enough for me to slide
 my splayed hand
 between leather and earth, knuckles
 skinned. Because summer barely hangs on yet
 in branches fleshed thick and breaking
 the fall, today this is what life takes
 and death gives back – the split-
 second intimacy inside a car spinning
 out of control, hit and hit again and still
 spinning as I learn
 what thin significant space
 a single leaf, love
 passing before our eyes, fills.

Flight

I felt a little miffed that first morning
 the great horned owl did not return
 with her fledgling to their nest in my hollow
 balm of Gilead tree, to their tabernacle
 facing east – gentle buss of sunrise
 softening even further the tufted chick
 when I tiptoed out to say *good-day*
 before my first cup of joe,
 one scowling old bird, I thought,
 of this earth to another. The dawn greeting
 had become a ritual that boosted us,
 I deemed, beyond the gloom of Tribune news,
 into our more civilized, personable world. And so,
 upset by their rude rejection of my good will,
 I marched up the coulee to search
 the abandoned lambing shed for the nocturnal
 birds I felt I deserved to call
my friends. How could they desert me
 without so much as one wing beat
 of warning?

 Their velvety gray pellets
 piled below each rafter perch
 and a knife-blade feather preened loose
 was all I found on the dirt
 floor where I stood stunned
 in the dankness of an empty nest. The grimace
 of a shrew's ivory crossbones and toothed skull,
 hatched from the chasm
 of an old dry pellet, made me back away,
 frame my face in a paneless window,
 and brood.

 Peering into the steep
 glacial hillside shingled with limestone and shale,

alive with lichen and bright violet verbena,
 I climbed, not stepping on one petal,
 to the rim where I raised
 my single wing feather
 and waited.

For the first time, I witnessed earth
 as painful host, not much hope
 for some grand galactic raptor
 stooping to pick the globe clean. Out of nowhere
 I caught myself wishing for such
 heroic stroke, softly brushed
 my fingertips across the blossoming
 tufts of downy verbena at my side,
 and understood the mother owl
 as mother earth, yearning,
 within orbit and soar,
 to rid themselves of me for good.

Pramila Venkateswaran

Diminuendo

I had imagined the drama of my parents' separation:
 suitcases stuffed with mother's saris, my dresses,
 tattered Tamil magazines, silverware, and photos
 lined up at the door; mother had sent the maid
 to fetch the taxi. Soon we were on a train, speeding
 to grandma's. At every episode, I changed the ending.