

Safira
before the beginning

Infinity stands in 8 familiar positions
facing the sun and one prayer:
please find all my oranges.

I last saw them asleep on a sailboat
peeling their skins in the sun.
When I turned to leave they said,
Watch for monsters. You're safe
in our laps, in the sun. I couldn't stay.

I followed the milkweed to shore
to the Islands. I didn't want winter
to find me. *The milkweed,*
they whispered, *are dead spider souls*
making their way to the sun.

A procession. Lila. Monks

in midday
 arcadic nodal
postures. Transgressions
 Placemats
Sins: just missing
the marks. How did we get (anything &)
to this point We rode here.

Past that field past the field
of right and wrong doing to this
field. The one with the de-
robed monks. The field
with (two young sisters)
Lila and Jennifer

a blonde and curly summer winding down
It's almost there she said and softly stayed
a word that spilled and sounded as it should
We pushed a wooden wheel through fields of hay
and halos silos balancing
a mood and unused toboggan in my arms
I like your shoes she said.

But the day did not stop. The sun had
just paused reminding us to re-assess our accumulation

rise triumphantly from below (thighs squeezing
the juice) on the devil's back,
bloody red horns grasped. A conquistador!
Michael's dirty feathers stuck between
your teeth. (He's in a heap!) To wrest with one
is to wrest with the whole familiar
congregation. You know the posse rides
like that, together like that. Protecting and sinking
each other.

Who else did Daddy kill
on the hills in Fu Bai How many
women did he rape along the path
to My Lai Sick with Malaria.

Malaria. Malaria. Aiming his gun
at the sun. "I really stepped on my dick
this time Sarge," G said. Daddy carried him back
They left his legs behind. "I fear we'll never find
my oranges now," G gargled the rain.

"I'm sorry," I told Jenny when I left that day.
"I have to find the man who stole my thread. *You*
have to stay with Daddy."
"I don't think it was a man," Jenny said. "I think
Mom took it with her."
She runs to Grandma and asks to trace the scar.
Grandma lifts her blouse, allows Jen to poke the place
where her breast once rested above the navel.
"Don't forget the songs your Mother played
on the high keys of the piano."

The moon fell behind the mountains
and G hugged a stick of butter. "It feels
like being hugged by Jesus," he said.
"If I make it back to Jackson County,
I'm becoming a crossing guard. Melt the butter
around me before I die, Sarge."

Lila finds her father in the park teeing off inside a sandbox.
She drags him back. "This is home," she says.
He follows her to the kitchen and waits as she stains the bread
yellow with mustard. "You're old,"
she says. "Disguised by the sun."
Daddy falls, embraces her legs, embraces her knees.

"She ruined my crayons!" Jenny cries.

Daddy spits out wet bread.
“I hope that cunt dies of cancer,” he says.
But Mom doesn’t die. She continues
to melt the primary colors. The chocolate
bunnies. The paper airplanes. Miniature brass
instruments. Felt
clippings. We didn’t know felt melted.

Keep it moving, the crossing guard says.
He motions with the windmill
in his hand (a whistle in his mouth so we do not pause
to wave at the passengers in the cars.) Keep it moving.

Daddy pulls a toolbox from the garage and heaves it towards the Jeep in the driveway crushing
ants into unrecognizable ink.
At the tire’s edge he selects a wrench, changes his mind, removes a hammer
lifts his arms (the maker of a first great tool!)
He tries his courage
against the rubber beast.

Lila pulls Jenny in a wagon through the field
until they come to an orange tree at the edge of the highway.
Dad has promised a dime for every orange truck
they count while Mom is away. They keep a tally
on a piece of cardboard, stuck to the wagon with gum.

8, says Jen, but she writes it on its side.
Infinity, says Lila. That’s at least a million dollars.
This could go on forever if Mom never comes back.

*What happens if we’re right about Mom’s permanent flight, and she never comes home again?
Then we’re left with two possibilities: 1) We don’t wait, and we get on with our lives, losing
nothing more than the original loss (0). Or, 2) We wait, and we’re left waiting under this tree
forever, and we rot away into the dirt, waiting, and we become orange tree fertilizer, waiting,
then oranges, waiting, then maggots and who knows what else. It keeps going. Outcome:
negative infinity.*

½ a chance of us not waiting and mom never comes back	$\frac{1}{2} \times 0 = 0$
½ a chance of us waiting forever and mom never comes back	$\frac{1}{2} \times -\infty = -\infty$

A negative infinity? Jenny tilts her head.
I don’t like it either, Lila says.

Don’t leave my lap.
We watch the sky

peeling the skins off our oranges
We set sail on paper boats.

Are we going to the ocean? Jenny asks.
Yes, Lila says. Everything goes to the ocean.
We're going to probably maybe pass Mom on the way?
Don't talk about Mom anymore, okay?
Jenny considers this. Sometimes I can't help it. My head says I hate God.
Don't worry, Lila tells her. God doesn't get offended. I can't sail anymore. I have to do my homework now.
Why do you have to do *that*?
To stay in 99th percentile.
What's that?
I don't know, but I know that Dad likes it when I'm there.
Jenny pulls a finger puppet over her index finger. Why aren't you in the 100th percentile?
It's impossible, Lila tells her, for anyone to be there.
Jenny scrunches her face and tilts her head *But it's better*, the finger puppet says.

The monks tell us this:
It's hard to play with a zero denominator.
Mathematicians don't like to do it. "The answer comes so close to zero... and never reaches it!"

one is infinitely receptive
to nothing

a hollow bamboo | | an absence

(a hollow bunny breaks
at its limits too.)

The crossing guard
shuffles. Polypropylene limbs.
(He thought he was born
in Bethlehem. He was
born in Biloxi.) We scattered his ashes
in Tulsa. A regenerative compromise.
The segments *might* have grown back into
windmills and stop signs if he'd only let us chop
him up, but
ashes-- no chance.

Jennifer,
your hair is so soft
The high keys
are so countable.

from paradise

We held on
and the rock broke free

cliff bits and scrabble letters
following us down

Anna let loose two small screams
like pregnant mice
aborting their offspring

I landed first
and collected the things
arriving
 scattered
at my feet—

Shells, candy wrappers,
pennies, threads, emblems
torn from sleeves

We built a universe of these
 unnecessary things
On our fireplace mantle

Someday we will burn it
unmoved
 condemned treasures

*

Our fall has jostled the stars
loose from the sky
They fall to our front lawn

We never thought we'd have a lawn

 a brick and stone four-bedroom home
in the middle of New Jersey. Anna mows the lawn in a bikini
to keep the neighbors talking

“Don't mow over the supernovas, darling!”
they call from their bedroom windows

Anna bends to lift another sparkling star
from the dandelion weeds
She places the stars in a glass jar filled
with fireflies and feathers

“Put the jar on the mantle!” she delights, “Tonight we’ll witness
a battle of light.”

At nine o’clock we drag cushions to the floor
and watch fireflies breed with stars to produce

something

new

entirely.

Our lawnmower is retired for another season

The supernovas have children with wings

I have Anna in a towel on the floor
painting her toes with last year’s pink
“What’s it called?” I asked fascinated by the names of toe polishes

“It’s Blushing Bride,” she tells me, “The next coat will be Cherry Blossom.
I’m suffocating in this house. Did you bring me here to die?”

*

These things are also true:

Man is a fragment
—an island—
a vegetal species
a hierophany

What does any of it matter? I wonder Even poetry
silver utensils, apple cider, sighs,
fantastic voyages on cardboard skateboards
(when we were too poor to drive)

Looking around
I suddenly can’t avoid the crudeness of this:
placement of matter
this mistakenly solid identity

a man and his wife the everlasting strife
the formulas and recipes

I smash the jar
the lightening bugs are *free*
but the stars are weak from captivity
and fall, again, to the hardwood floor
in the shape of no constellation

Anna collects them in her hair. “Why did you do it?” she cries.

“I wanted them here, with us.”

“But I’m not here. You’re not here. What is that awful smell?”

(a moon rotting on our floor)

“You,” Anna points accursingly.

I shudder at the tip of her finger.

“Find solace on the golf course,” she says. “It’s all illusion anyway.”

She is right. We are not here.

Yet there are times I feel the density of my atoms
Other times, I’m just the space between

a synaptic afterthought
a procrastinated abracadabra
a rabbit never yanked from the hat
a hankie never pulled from the sleeve

I know someday Anna will leave me for someone understated. He will be a Romanian who sells luggage at the outlet mall. I’ve seen him before. Everything he does is sad and deliberate.

He moves so slowly.

He makes love slowly, Anna will say.

Their look will be the same: a potent intensity an immediate intimacy not lonely or desperate but grasping.

Anna has always looked that way. As if at any moment she’ll lose what she has—the grasp on a reality she doesn’t subscribe to.

On his break they’ll sit together on a park bench and read a book about Buddhism. Anna will stay on that bench all day until the metal slates brand her bottom. Then she’ll stop by my new apartment “just to say *hello*.” I’ll tell her not to come by anymore. I’ll divulge my plan to purchase a five-piece set of Louis Vuitton suitcases from someone other than her lover. I’ll tell her I don’t subscribe to moderation anymore.

“I’m alone,” I’ll say. “You’re alone. Everything else is absurd.”

*

Anna sits cross-legged on the floor and weeps. The stars have died in her hair. I pluck their limp corpses from her bangs with tweezers and lay them on a paper towel. Anna snuffles into an afghan. "I'll write a poem about it," she says. She wobbles to her feet, drags herself to the kitchen, and shuffles through a drawer. "Do you remember the pizza parlor?" she asks. She holds a pizza cutter in her hand.

"I remember the sign," I say.

"Yes!" Anna smiles. "It was a great, big sign shaped like an arrow. They'd hired that man to stand on the corner jumping with the sign."

"But the arrow pointed down when we saw him," I remind her. "That man had fallen asleep, on his feet, on the corner, jumping."

*

These things are also true:

- 1) Our shoes are covered in clods of dirt from the burial site we've dug. What will resurrect in our yard next year? Incorruptible light.
- 2) Crepuscular decomposition.
- 3) The precarious human condition.
- 4) Any theory that justifies suffering.
- 5) I am so far from the main stream, I'm not even in a tributary.
- 6) I feel horrible for valuing freedom. I should have remembered nature's sternest law before I released those stars: one cannot release into the wild a domesticated species without taking great care. A captured creature cannot be thrust so suddenly back into its freedom—not after she's been softened, enfeebled through submission—lessened, tamed, hobbled...hey if there is no Romanian, how will Anna survive when she leaves me?
- 7) Anna is about to leave.
- 8) Dark matter takes up just as little space as light.

I try to demonstrate this principle using my human body. I kiss Anna goodbye and lock myself inside our cedar armoire. For two days, I see no one. I remain in my cell. Condemned.

On the third day my problems peel away. Smaller and smaller my life became until I want nothing more than to look at the sky and see it dotted with the evening stars.

I shake the spiders and moth balls from my hands and I emerge.

“Anna!” I scream. I search the hall. I look underneath the stairs. “Anna!” I check bedrooms one through three. Bedroom four is also empty. “Anna!” I head to our backyard. Maybe she will be there—

an effigy of letters, stones, stars returned to live in her marble hair

“Anna?” I search the outlet mall

There was never a luggage store

“Anna? Anna?”

Anna

Anna

*

Where did that girl go?

the one with the mason father

the one with the wide, white hips

she looked like Marilyn Monroe.