

# Department of Elegy

poems

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*For Klaus*

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## BOOK OF DISCLOSURES

She wanted to taste the fire inside the corn,  
cried over photographs of other people's cakes.

Once she punched a cake. Those memories  
surface often, like a flood of bus stop pigeons.

She hoped to meet an owl before she died,  
did nothing at all to further this agenda item

other than looking up. Curious about clocks,  
she asked a lot of questions regarding their guts.

Was there an ocean inside them, for example.  
How did the first craftsman know where to lodge

the quiet snore of gears? She asked for holy  
water to be distilled down into an adhesive seal

that might ride the forehead all week long  
the same way she tumbled her bike into hollows

and ravines regardless of weather. Little reek  
of the river which was mostly things left behind.

Once she bit a tree. It was softer than expected.  
The blossoms remained unchanged or fell like hail.

## THE SLIMNESS OF OUR CHANCES

The delicate status of our couches.  
The easily offended elbows of favorite sweaters.

A sudden note that reminds you of fifteen years ago.  
Hovering in the first snow outside Hawkeye's.

Lost like a bus in fog. Lost but still dance-ready.  
Trying to memorize distinct coordinates.

Giving up in approximately seven minutes.  
The unyielding nature of thinking, the hot of glass.

Battle between feeling and reason and feeling.  
They call it the upper hand, but it's always down low.

Was there even a DJ, or was the music internal?  
Nightmare of an empty hive in a women's restroom.

Nightmare of conversations in a women's restroom.  
Don't ask me about my dress or hip bones.

Sometimes it's downright impossible to be authentic.  
Every new sentence begins with *Can I talk?*

I was a hair model not a hand or helmet model.  
Even my bed was from the Rent-A-Center basement.

Panic about junior high locker combinations.  
*Will we ever go back* into a disconnected payphone.

## SUDAFED AND GIN

Listen, I'm falling apart but it was worth it  
like eating lunch too fast because you're walking,  
or lurching on the deck of a novelty paddle-wheeler  
you wanted to exit the moment they pushed off.  
These days I'm mostly dry shampoo and concealer  
but at least both are effective. Nobody's asking  
for my identification but here it is, and the cashier  
wears a hoodie with a red polar bear dabbing,  
and I've run over both of my feet with the cart yet  
in separate collisions. I'm mealy but at least  
that's still a meal, it could be worse, grad school  
when we'd get wrecked on Sudafed and gin.  
Sorry, but I do wish I had more photos from back  
then, and not just the PVC jumpsuit or halter  
built of metal loops. You won't believe this but  
I never thought about the future much. Lost  
four or so years down the hole of a blood-mouth  
mistaken for a lake. I was dreaming of a man who  
ran relatively clean, like a lawnmower engine.

## HEAVEN AND ITS ORANGE FLOWERS

*Are you my ghost*, I asked the water bucket, the Angelus,  
a beard of moss grown over a statue's shoulder,

the concept of true friendship, a Rand McNally atlas so  
trip-worn it could double as sheets for a doll bed.

The answer was *no*, so I shoved my fist into a hill.  
Dropped my tiny beaded purse into the mall's atrium

fountain. Went back to the wing buffet, but it vanished  
along with a major thoroughfare and creek

where I once fished illegally for legendary night bass.  
I read a novel where butterflies grew plate-sized

and people congregated on rooftops to best view  
burning woods from a distance. In the scrap cabin of

my ghost, the curtains roiled with fire, not as cleansing  
or like a dancer with a pole-ribbon, but a holy

fire. *Should I take some*, I asked my ghost, who  
at this point was purely hypothetical, *Should I go next*,

and then regretted the thought, like when I dropped  
a blood-hue marker onto my gingham pants.

It's something impossible to retract. A neighbor  
lamented how heaven is so greedy, but she picked all

the orange flowers from our bush. If my ghost  
was a piece of debris, I would broom it away but not

forever. I thought my ghost was tangled in a kite.  
Braided like a twine-knot baby beside the river's bed.

## BITCH WIRE

I was becoming the person with many slips of paper  
in her purse. Sobriety adjacent, sandal-wearing,  
country fling garden instead of beastly wild pocket.  
Maybe in the dream I wore a wire, recorded  
my own heart-flex. So many of us want this episode  
to end, but it's beyond live, and the coyotes just  
pups in an abandoned snowplow tire, dots of polish  
on plastic frost. We all compared our levels  
of preservation, the goal to resist change like a hill  
pounded yearly by weeds. Some mechanism  
got me from one point to another, adolescent bus  
entering but not exiting the damp underpass  
tagged *Stairway to Heaven* back when relevant.  
Like many, I poured my best years into  
a Springform pan, but they were stupid years.

## BOOK OF MILD REGRETS

Here I am, fretting over whether it's okay  
to take a second Zyrtec, when fifteen years ago

I downed a pill nicknamed *El Capitan* while  
a woman I just met shaved my head with a knife.

It was clear I would never become a Fly Girl  
because the decade was off, but my greatest hits

still snapped on like a trustworthy lantern.  
Today I apply several coatings of organic spray

proven to further cleanse small batch basil  
I vetted at Whole Foods, when almost yesterday

my amateur chainmail had me swallowing  
half a marsh in one night, my friend disappeared

past the gorge, a man with sufficient facial  
metal to be characterized as a homemade weapon.

Something spiked that was spiked, noise  
eating itself beneath flat rocks. And why is it now

I can't settle on a single laundry detergent  
but keep replacing what I have with what seems

milder, like the time I cried for sixteen hours  
over a photograph of a Chincoteague pony, lodged

between the fence and the hillside, fetlocks  
hammered by street mud. When I take my clothes

off and iron them better, when I recycle fifty  
sheets of paper for one italic comma, maybe I pay

some forgotten bar tab. Like the time I fell  
straight through a mirror imported from Galway.

## A BACKPACK FULL OF KNIVES

Even the songbirds that usually lurked our yard  
were vacationing in France or posting montages

of crumbles baked from scratch with fresh-fallen  
stone fruit. Imagine: a decade ago I'm declared

"a nascent Chekhov" and "a thunderstorm without  
the cliché of lightning." Then today, marooned

in a coterie of damp dishrags, unsure which way  
to hold a restaurant menu. My former roommate

sends a birthday note all the way from Mykonos:  
all emojis. Double entendre, perhaps unintentional.

Also in my inbox: screenshot from notorious Cori.  
My apron is wet and this time I don't want it to be.

Email from Brian of the Tennessee encounter, rest  
stop where he asked me to guard his caged quail.

I was the Lake Superior of our workshop: forgotten  
and cold, always on top. When I passed out photos

to accompany my story, you could smell developer  
on my fingers. Not the cocaine or patchouli or Cori

who my classmates believed was a pet mouse, not  
a backpack full of knives. My high school English

teacher is now vacationing for six weeks in Slovenia,  
despite a salary the size of a mini bag of pistachios,

and she boasts about a simple scallion and rye toast  
lunch. I'm still figuring out how to sharpen a blade.

## BEAR-PROOF

It was like every reed in the marsh was on fire  
with beetles, the ground temporary, clouds a concept

invented by a designer who had been awake all  
night drinking schnapps from the cap of the schnapps

bottle. I was afraid to look up my symptoms  
next to a bear-proof trash bin, feared I belonged in there.

How long until everyone else got the message  
while I was reading the inscription on a bench, another

corporate sponsor disguised as a fallen neighbor.  
People thought I was weird still using a radar detector

but they saved two dollars a month downloading  
contents of their fingernails into a shared spreadsheet.

The horizon remained true to form but was not  
straight. Nothing was. I turned each mosquito over to

inspect for a minuscule battery compartment.  
The sun declined a push notification to glide down.

## HEAVEN AND ITS TEENAGE RIOT

One woman smelled like honey, the other like Funyuns.  
I hadn't started carrying a purse yet, kept a check safe

in my sports bra. When house lights turned off I was not  
centered. But nobody waits for a shadow to catch up.

One woman took measurements, the other extracted  
feathers from a gallon bag. What exactly was I learning

aside from how to lean? My unremarkable thighs  
clanged together like volumes of a fresh encyclopedia.

I wondered how many people had touched the clipboard.  
Back then people still actively licked their fingers.

I walked everywhere, considered a coat demeaning.  
My street had more boards than windows, a stray rooster.

Thinking about the moon brought collective nausea.  
It was 1990 and we spent zero time pondering the future.

People always asked if I had a fever. I tested poorly.  
When the flood lights powered on it felt like spit falling.

Basically it was a life with very little context beyond  
yes or no. They assigned me a leotard thinner than a mask.

The only taboo was braids so loose they resembled grain.  
A phone was a thing with square buttons, a wall mount.

The "hangout" a bald fire pit by warehouse tracks.  
Getting high meant becoming happy, and I aspired to it.

## TEST OF FORTITUDE

Wherever you've gone I hope you're still hot  
and reading novels the way some attack puddings,

the city slightly more aloof but still desperate  
because of all the phone light. Maybe an adolescent

like yesteryear-you is gazing at the ice trash  
in Lake Erie thinking it's a ladder lying about depth.

I wonder if shoes have become progressively  
quieter or if that's just me, situated on the outer edge

of the opposite of a half-pipe, witnessing coupons  
expire or spreadsheets corrupt, pining for the plastic

grapes that decorated each table in the old pasta  
joint. We pinched them because they bounced back.

I recall tests of fortitude that involved a shaker  
of red pepper flakes, Whitney cranked scream-level.

Whatever new occupation you have, besides  
the coffin you always aspired to, and wrote heavily

about back when still alert enough to catch  
a tennis ball lobbed over a bus by an alcoholic nun

you befriended at the Osco, I hope you're cool  
enough to replace your corduroys seasonally, conceal

an empty container of Old Style in the petunias  
while conducting official business at 24 Hr Cashland.

Or maybe you've fallen of the screen, flushed  
and traded for someone who looked better on paper.