

In Lisa Dordal's stunning second collection *Water Lessons*, she pivots from the political to the personal, from despair to unapologetic delight, revealing that one cannot exist without the other. In the title poem "Water Lessons" she writes, "In Leningrad, I was told not to drink / the water. It could cause illness; / in rare cases, death" ending the poem, "I drank the water": both a confession and reclamation of self, as if to create an inventory of what might cause harm, and then walk us directly into the damage. In this way, Dordal tends to the messy and uncertain realms of the heart, capturing what it is to long for what we know will hurt us, and how we are nourished by that longing: "Remember *mother* // contains not just the sea / but the darkness of the sea. // And there is no such thing / as a half-life for grief." I read *Water Lessons* the way I would look through an old family photo album; the ache of nostalgia and regret in one hand, joy and forgiveness in the other. Lisa Dordal is a poet of exquisite craft and grace, unafraid to face what haunts her, knowing that this is where the treasure lies. This book is the treasure.

—Kendra DeColo, author of *I Am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World*

# water lessons

*Poems*

Lisa Dordal



*For my mother, who always wanted to write,  
for my father, whom I love more than words can say,  
and for Laurie (again)*

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I

# Welcome

Flipping the remote, I keep landing  
on the hotel's Welcome Channel.

*Hello*, a woman says. White woman,  
pretty smile. *May I have a minute of your time?*

*Be as alert as you are at home*, she says.  
Pretty woman, concerned for my safety.

She keeps walking towards me—there,  
behind everything else. Like fear behind the eyes.

I keep flipping, taking in the news of the week.  
People are protesting in the streets:

This Pussy Fights Back. No Ban, No Wall.  
*Never invite strangers into your room.*

Pretty smile, pretty woman. As pretty  
as my mother was when she was alive.

Pretty as she was in my dream. *Be alert*,  
the woman says. *As alert as you are at home.*

I never knew, on Tuesdays, what she'd look like—  
my mother, who drove to the Del Mar College

of Hair Design to get dolled up cheap  
by a stranger. Sometimes large, loopy curls.

Other times, tight and small—tucked in  
like something sleeping. *Use the viewport,*

the woman says, *if someone knocks on your door.*  
Hepburn-chestnut one week to a sassy blonde

the next. In the dream, she is reading  
from my book. She looks happy.

*Keep the doors and windows locked,*  
the woman says. In five pages,

my mother will be dead. First, the bottles  
hidden in bookcases throughout

the house. Then, the heart wing. *Locked,*  
the woman says, *at all times.* My mother

glances up. She is reading in the voice she used  
for *Souder* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

She reads as if the woman she is  
will not die; as if the woman who dies

will not be her. As if she is not even *there*.  
Like when she learned about my attempts—

aspirin, then the knife, my hand like Abraham's  
over Isaac. *Nice story,* my mother said.

We had learned to slip out of ourselves.  
To squeeze our consciousness through a hole

the size of a dime. We were small inside  
our bodies. My body is sin, she told me once.

*Be alert, the woman says. As alert  
as you are at home. Nice story, she said.*

## Water Lessons

My mother loved the beach at 57th Street  
where she'd stand at the water's edge,  
her head bent to a magazine.  
I never saw her swim.

\*

Sometimes I still hear her  
walking the halls of our house—  
the sound of ice clinking  
against the inside of her glass.  
The sound of her breathing  
on the other side of the door.

\*

Alcohol is absorbed into the body  
through the bloodstream.  
Alcohol affects every part of the body.  
Liver, stomach, eyes, brain.

Heart.

\*

Inside the Titanic,  
there is a glass of water  
still sitting on a bureau—  
the strange physics  
that allowed drowning,  
not breaking.

\*

Sometimes I still hear her  
climbing the stairs of our house.  
The sound of ice against glass.

\*

As a child, I feared falling  
into the soft, leaky ice  
that barely covered the fields  
where we skated.

\*

In Leningrad, I was told not to drink  
the water. It could cause illness;  
in rare cases, death.

\*

Salmon can smell the distant waters  
of their birth, towards which they swim  
when they are ready to spawn.

\*

In Leningrad, I drank the water.

## Backstory

When owls hunt at night  
they see our version of day

shadowed by clouds. Concurrence  
of dark and light, like the gods

I memorized as a child—  
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

How I learned the Creed  
by heart, as if love must be

drilled into us. *Father Almighty,*  
*Maker of all things seen*

*and unseen.* I could recite  
any number of statistics—

*God of God, Light of Light—*  
one in three women

assaulted. Growing up,  
I could press my ear

to any wall in our house,  
and hear the murmuring

of male voices, like a swarm  
of bees. *Begotten, not made,*

*being of one substance*  
*with the Father.*

## *Ars Poetica*

My mother is saying something I still can't hear.

And I want to believe there is a door.

Sometimes I dream I am being led through darkness.

And I wouldn't call her death "natural."

So many rooms were closed off before we knew they were there.

And I was the one no one believed.

And my father still insists her liver was fine.

*It was her heart, he says, just her heart.*

# Underpinnings

The house presses  
into the girl  
and the girl becomes  
the house and the house  
becomes the girl.

The girl accepts the force  
of her father's  
voice; his words  
against her skin.

The house presses  
into her. And the girl becomes  
small and quiet  
like a statue pulled from an old grave—  
wide staring eyes, a mouth  
that could be chanting  
or screaming.

# Grief

There will be days when the word mother  
will burst out of you

like the black smoke of a squid, a fire  
deep inside water. Anyone can become

animal or a flicker of light.  
Remember infinity

means unfinished,  
and time doesn't move

at the same speed for everyone.  
Remember *mother*

contains not just the sea  
but the darkness of the sea.

And there is no such thing  
as a half-life for grief.

Even oceans contain waterfalls  
and your mother is inside

everything that you write—  
sometimes as melody,

sometimes as mountain  
or bone. Every time

you hear the word, you become  
something else.

## Of One Substance

Even the field  
where the girl runs

is filled with the sound  
of bees, low hum

darkening the sky.  
This murmuring

that enters her, thinks itself  
divine. To survive

she becomes like the body  
of any small thing—

a worm in black dirt,  
a wing pressing

into mud.

## Interview

*Tell me about yourself.*

My mother is dead.  
I write poems about her.  
Sometimes it feels like she is alive.  
It's a game we play.  
I play. She watches.  
Always, she is watching.

*What was she like?*

She was beautiful.

*What else?*

She was my mother.

*And?*

She sang to us.  
She took us shoe shopping at Gately's on 53rd.  
She drove a blue Karmann Ghia.  
She had her hair done every Tuesday.  
She helped people. Out there,  
in the world, she helped people.

*And?*

At night, she disappeared.  
She was in the house,  
she was not in the house.  
She looked past everything that was in front of her.

*What was she looking for?*

I don't know.

*Did it scare you, this looking?*

It scared me. It didn't scare me.

*Which answer is true?*

Yes, it scared me.