

What Follows

H.R. Webster



Inside of that world
someone painting
animal-sounds

Inside the dark
huge sounds

—Jean Valentine

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What Follows

Every house I've ever lived in was filled with snakes.
The black snake in the attic, wrist-thick as a man.
The copperhead beneath the couch cushion. Garters'
quick green caulking between the kitchen tiles.
The single timber rattler, invisible except for the tender
husks it left for me, crinoline rustle like a party
dress pulled down over the shoulders then breasts
in a rush. Wherever I went they followed, dragging
their delicate purses of venom, their noise of forage
in the china after dark.

The snakes I live with now leave
quieter marks. Long, dark hairs caught between
the paint and the bathroom wall. The animal
musk of water from the tap. The nightmare impression
of a single sharp red nail drawing a part in my hair.
The fear that no matter how many years have passed
any child I bear will be yours. No, will be you.
A little boy, blond and fat, who will industriously beat
at the tall grasses with a stick, will wade into Lake Michigan,
not to swim but to punch the waves with your tiny fists.

Farm & Field

I could talk about the Virginia Creeper turning on the split rail forever.
Cosmos petaling themselves monstrous through the too-long fall.
I'm still wearing the ring that turned my finger green.
Someone has stapled a single panel of clouds over the stirrucked bed in one room
of the clinic. Cherry blossoms in another.
I'm still pulling suckers off the nightshades. Pruning back blossom
end rot even though I'm expecting a frost.
Someone has told my body to telescope towards the kind of pain
we have agreed to call *a pinch*.
I am not sorry for what got me here.
I felt like I had 10,000 tits.
I felt like I had 10,000 tits and they were all being licked at once.
I was the lodestone sewn into the bird.
I was the secondhand trembling in place.
The calendar pages ripping off, the barn-roof tarp, the flock.
It is better, maybe, to talk about horses. Horses ripping up grass.
Let me tell you what I love.
The way they will eat from your hand even when locked in a brimming pasture.
Even when locked in a pasture sugared in rain.

Autocomplete

I can't stop watching teenage boys eat shit at the skatepark.
It gives me real pleasure.

I imagine pulling the stitched pennies of scabs
from their shoulders and knees. A man

barks at me like a dog from the window of his car.
A man shouts *I want to fuck you in the—*

I lost the last word to the parking
lot's rattling sea. I think it was *ass*.

It could have been *mouth*.
The computer can't stop suggesting *yours—*

truly. There are only so many words.
I can't stop reading

articles about the woman who pushed her dead
toddler on a swing for a full night and day.

My mother wouldn't have.
Wouldn't have pushed me I mean.

So few of us are original in our disorder.
The computer can't stop suggesting I begin

To Whom It May Concern. Suggests I might be hurting
my eyes, staring at a screen so long.

It might have been *pussy*, but that seems unlikely.
I imagine pulling the boys' torn

white t-shirts over their heads. They aren't hurt, not really.
Not badly. They don't smell good, that's ok. I run them

hot water. I test it with my wrist—fingers too practiced
to let me know when things are too much.

The computer can't stop suggesting I sell someone
my eggs. *Girls like you can make big money.*

It knows my height because I bought those jeans,
the chimney fire of my marriage,

my student loan debt, breast size.
It must know I am not well, inside, that I have

spent hours reading about the woman
who drove the wrong way down the Taconic Parkway

with a car full of kids. The abscess
of her mouth, the gut's thrum of clear liquor.

People get pissed when they talk about Diane.
I lick every word clean. Still the computer

wants my eggs, the ugly teeming of my
innards. A man sends me a message online:

I want to cum on your
face/tits/ass. Strangers know something

the computer doesn't, should have guessed.
There are only so many kinds of girl I am

permitted to be. It is hard not to imagine
a child slinky down my steep wooden stairs.

The way each thump of the body downward
is inevitable, but still makes my face break

just slightly, the smoke sucked
back into the red hole of my mouth.

I will be at the bottom. I will be watching.
Watching is what I know how to do.

Failure

On his way out he tells me his childhood dog hung herself
on the cord holding open the blinds when left alone a few hours.

It clearly took her some time to die.

Blood on the sofa back. I have thrown away all my books

with phrases like *the willowy willow branches,*
hot August heat. I have made fun of the way language

is always finding its own end. My neighbor's Chihuahua, Lucky Boy,
spinning in circles this morning when I bend to touch his face.

He survived 30 days alone in coyote country before someone found him
who wanted him. I have made fun of these failures but here I am saying

this sadness is sad. I am always buying those little bottles of milk
that indicate loneliness. He will come over again tomorrow to jack off

pressed against me. He will leave and I will lie down
in the easy blue of television and beer. The wallow and blank

like the thick bank of tulips between East and West
bound highways. I like home improvement shows, couples

smashing the bedroom wall, ripping down velvet valances, pressing their palms
to the cool cheek of a new marble countertop. My dog would be certain to eat

my face if I died and didn't feed him dinner. My milk has already begun to clot.

Scaphism

Yesterday two men told me my skin smells like good milk and grass.
Hay put away wet will burst into flames.

I slept with them both. After, one added—*and butter too*.
His hands shook before the evening's first beer—a flank under flies.

Horses put away wet will tie-up, colic on cold water.
One in the morning. One in the night. I showered in between.

The ancient Persians would feed liars milk and honey,
smear their face hands and feet, and lay them between two boats,

one smaller than the other. The places on my body they press their faces to:
anything scooped out. Set on a stagnant lake, it took days to die.

Days for the boats to fill with shit and wasps.
The milky skin to be stung away.

I am both ashamed and not ashamed.
I like to tell the truth. I like to make men love me

with my body. But I am always afraid. Afraid
and leaden with power. Here, the barn

is wet and burning. The horses sick and they can't spit it out.

Ritual

He says he thinks I want to see his cock.

He says *I promise it won't hurt you.*

Outside, a car crash claps. It's 4 o'clock,
the cat has peed behind the fridge, and through
the pane the streets unleash the day's long heat,
the ants draw dark cartography around
a squirrel, her red insides. The curtains beat
against the reeling fan. All over town
young boys walk home with clarinets, the bus
sighs and brakes; it kneels like a girl. The bricks
loose as children's teeth. The chickadees fuss
over bread mixed with earth. He lifts his dick
like a candle, a bird. It does not light
the growing dark, does not lift its wings in flight.

Tender

In zombie movies there's always a couple who fuck
one last time, drink some wine & just give up.

This is the only reason I can think of to fall in love again.
On first dates men often ask *how would you rather die*,

I kid you not, *drowning or fire*. They want to know my body even as it's destroyed
by my imagination. It's the end of the world & we can't stop saying the word *tender*.

It's the only language left for flesh, for helplessness, the desire to be kind, etc.
It's the secret name of every shirtless photo sent me

from the gym bathroom, clattering with light. The sloppy calligraphy
of the ten-point buck half-velveted & hoisted for the camera

on their dating profiles. Strop of tongue. I want to be touched like the belly wants meat
or pills, some new combination of words. On first dates I always make sure to say

I have a lazy left eye. After, they rub their thumbs against my thigh—
a scratch-off ticket. They want to know my body as it loosens its leash. Baby teeth

unhooked in their holsters. Slack bight of muscle in the face, pendant chain
still tangled in my hair when I turn on the bathroom light. In movies

there's always one gutsy little zombie dragging herself forward
by the elbows, as if I would do anything undead but lie in bed

watching reality dating shows and gnawing off my own hand.
In this episode the man is eating great platters of cold cuts,

in this one the women are crying in the badlands, their hair-dos ruined
& revealing scalp. They have the hacksaw voices of sorority sisters

& flames taking a house to the studs. There's a virgin there's a widow a zombie
in paste jewelry shoving rose petals in her jaw. They keep rasping

tender tender tender but it's been dubbed
into a series of questions and answers about what they fear most.

Close-Up Magic

After Jose Ahonen's Youtube Video "Taikuutta koirille – Magic for Dogs"

The magician's hand
is a mouth swallowing
into his wrist. Flaw in the palm's
horizon. Disappearances rust
industriously inside us.
Busy flecks of pain.
Dogs shown close-up magic
kiss the palm's empty salt lick.
Again and again. The way girls
on reality TV whisper *thank you*
into the ear of the man tasked
with their dismissal. The crinkle
of their bare spines in backless
dresses, the thin lines earrings
have stretched into their lobes.

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You know what it is to be composed
of absence. To spell out
your existence only with the lamp
which won't turn off despite
the flicking of the switch,
the rocking chair, the oily
handprint on the glass. To name
yourself by the carton
of double-yolked eggs, the typo
in the text, the echo of the motion
sensor light between snow and snow
heavy sky, underneath the heavy
pelt of pines.

Snapdragon

At night the ghost lays my body out
on the sticky counterpane.

Like solitaire, like carnations.
My skin the safety glass

graffitied with a pin. My hair
the rope hung over

the river from a dead limb.
My face lifts a wing to preen, to bite

its feathers smooth. Outside the window
the gap-toothed night is all lattice,

all cantilever, all boxwoods musking
up the dark. The wind

is the perpetual motion of a fist
opening inside me—a game

revealing a blue packet
of sweetener, an empty palm.

My hands are leaves, limp
with drought, a little girl's

thin plaits. The strings I use
to lift them by the wrists

have been cut, retied
by someone else. The ghost

covers my mouth with its hand:
all dial soap, all silhouettes, all calluses

from plucking chords. Now
that my mouth is covered it occurs

to me that I should scream.
Because I love the ghost,

because I have been raised
to do what I am told,

I open my mouth.
The ghost waits,

a rusted bolt,
for tonight's syrup-dose

of sound. But I scream silent
as snapdragons, dried

on their stalk, skulls
ruffled at the sockets

and mouth like the hem
of that sweet summer dress,

with its thin shoulder straps, three
cloth-covered buttons at the chest.