

tether is a book of distances and intimacies, of letters never sent and dream talks and delayed communiques. It is a study of distance between us, between an astronaut and a poet, between lovers, between ourselves and each other, ourselves and ourselves. “We are the beached boat / with a hole in its hull,” admits the poet. Each of us, even as “baby in a womb is a cloud.” And yet there is so much love. And yet, everything that happens to us, happens for a purpose. And when one turns worthy, a giant squid washes ashore. It is this knowing, this insight into our distances (of years, of geography, of a space of a single day) here that I find compelling: “& how far / must you back away / from yourself / to see / yourself / as the Astronaut / sees/ Earth.” Beautiful work.”

—ILYA KAMINSKY

“Just over a full column of definitions for “tether” in the OED, among which are those that suggest diametrically opposite forms of fastening. It’s fascinating to read through them, but not nearly so compelling as it is to read the poems in Lisa Fay Coutley’s *tether*. We are tied, ensnared, and attached—in an especially intimate sense of that word—to everything that matters, which Coutley knows and makes us see and, in the richest sense of this word, *feel*. This is a superb book of poems.”

—ROBERT WRIGLEY

“Is it desire, wonder, duty, or memory that keeps us most firmly tethered to the world, where “truth is every bird starving,” and we live in constant awareness of all the forces that threaten to break the bonds between us and our loved ones? A mother’s death, a son’s drug addiction, the disastrous world news filtered daily through the internet: how do we reconcile the painful events that define our existence with our hope for a more secure future? Through sinewy, sometimes hallucinogenic syntax that threatens to (but never does) spin out of control, *tether*’s poems examine a contemporary and very human paradox, in which we long to absent ourselves from our grief, while also needing to document our losses so as to ensure we won’t forget. *tether* reminds us that we are formed as much from pain as from delight and that, in her ability to look back upon her past, upon today’s terrible and compelling news, the contemporary poet is like an astronaut, able to regard the world “from a great height,” a witness to what most of us cannot bear to see.”

—PAISLEY REKDAL



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tether

poems

Lisa Fay Coutley

Black Lawrence Press
New York

For the loves of my life:
Cody, Channer, & Cooper

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How

& how far

must you back away

from yourself

to see

yourself

as the Astronaut

sees

Earth

from the moon

& how

far

is too far



It suddenly struck
me that tiny pea pretty
and blue was the Earth

—Neil Armstrong

TO THE ASTRONAUT: ON IMPACT

I understand. I do. I used to lie back
flat against asphalt & take our moon

through binoculars—hands steady
as the dead's. I understand a planet is

its history of impact, what gets ripped
away & what gets left. The moon struck

from here flickers one brilliant sigh, one
small mouth stunned in the night, saying

nothing of two bodies about to collide.
Remember the way your legs dangled

over volcanic rock, the sun pressing
so heavy against the water we were

forced to bow? There's no prayer now.
Just histories that can only be told

given distance & time. Can't you see,
from where you are, how a target arches

to meet the body cast into its moment
of shared light? I understand the evidence

is the catastrophe. To be defined. You
chortled. You snored. You chewed this sky.

WHAT HAVE YOU

Down here—forever projecting—
signs for signs for a sign for a woman

who kisses against the knife, but no one
sees her anymore. My son is the fist inside

the fist he's shaking at the rest of the world.
When he first heard his pocked heart homing

by rote, even its hollow couldn't show him
cage can also mean safe. Between us, clouds

are being torn apart by hands we can't see
or hold. Distance isn't the violent word we

mean if objects are always already absent.
What have you? What have you done

makes more sense. *What have you done for me
lately* doesn't make him laugh. What have I

done, he wants to know. Him. One of two
choices I made to hold change in the world.

II.

What have you *now*? I accuse the puppy
 & his boy responds—because desire
 Mom, because hunger—as if
he, too, could chew a couch cushion.
 I live here, with a head not made
 for hats, in blizzard country
where I accidentally slam the shovel
 against the asphalt & the dog
 barks & starts searching
for the other him & the other me. As if
 another us could be somewhere else
 where we sound better,
happier, full. My son says because desire,
 hunger, fifteen years already on Earth—
 this great gift he's certain we have
wasted & can never repair—words mean
 worse than nothing if we're thoughts
 unable to share pain
& wonder. What have you now to say,
 Mother, I ask myself, as I shove
 snow from an end to an edge
of dirt, bracing myself to throw, a language
 so old—what *have* you?—taunting
 me, the puppy arching, choking

on a chunk of anything, & I reach for a treat
from my pocket to dislodge it, thinking good
boy sounds so much like goodbye.

WINTER: TINEA

or ringworm which I refuse to allow
myself to Google Image hell

it took me ten years to allow myself
to consider how old you'd be now

mother shaking your denim bell
in a kitchen always avocado

smoke whole notes our thrumming
home lined by lilacs green apples

lake water behind forest before sounds
so idyllic it's ridiculous

that I have both arms under a soggy
box of records when the neighbor

squares her hands on my shoulders
squeezes remembers dad

(now dead) chasing you naked
through the field waving

a pistol at your lovely I must not
have woken that night *Special*

Little Lady that I was for always taking him
by the hand to the orange rocking chair

& spider swinging into that bright crushed
not quite velvet where you weren't

well but weren't being beaten anymore
so shhh quiet down now daddy

there's no reason to be so light
house in the living room or living

loom as I'd say then that's how
little I was dad that's how little

you were buttersoft hands
around everyone's throat

eyes choked into
every exploding color

less welts growing darker
than dueling empty wells

so when she says *you're a miracle*
Lisa Fay I think maybe but not

the same as a Nepalese baby found
under rubble dust caked

over his eyes all messiah in the fire
fighter's arms not like proof

of divinity but bones never broken
though molded by aftershock.