

The Death Spiral

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Black
Lawrence
Press

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For Elise

I.

Emergency Procedures

Family History

*In memory of my great-grandmother,
survivor of the Armenian Genocide*

No god is more inscrutable than ours.
Think of how our century began: red fistfuls
of pomegranate blossoms knuckling the windows
in the early dawn, a warning missed and a call to rise.
And at the doors—the early monsters
of modernity, trained to be meticulous, expedient,
propitiated neither by suffering or the skirl of exile.
Think of your grandmother with her rabbit-beat heart
who knew something about hope's atrophied muscles
and the secrets of rubies. She scooped pomegranate seeds
into her pockets to sustain her. During the march,
god roosted in her inner ear and whispered back
such strange flashes of memory: the first clean *A*
she played on her spiked fiddle, the last goat she skinned,
the wet cord that tied her to her son, the gleam of her sister's scissors
that snipped it off, the gleam of the bayonet that killed him.
She watched her daughter's ribs peek through the skin,
and in time, realized that god is anonymous
and intimate as a nurse who can deliver pain
or take it away in the same breath.
What do we say? Our family history?
A death sentence, and yet—
you breathe. You tell me the rest.

Newtok, Alaska

Home of the Yup'ik, the earth's first climate refugees

There's not much time left,

the elders tell us.

The river slurps at the edges
of our village, and we bury our hungers in work.

We raise homes on stilts to ballast
ourselves atop the ancient permafrost,
but it melts faster than we can build.

Sinking, we sing our children to sleep

in careening bedrooms, string up and dry
strips of pike while the land pitches below our feet,
mush our dog teams across a crackling Jacob's ladder
of ice. The borders of our world are shrinking:

our kids go jigging for burbot and herring

from their front doors; we've seen them toeing
the drop off point like seal pups testing their power
and playing caribou eye in corners

where tundra's thin as teeth

ground down to gums
and sourdock sprouts from slush.

There's not much time left,

and outsiders tell us to start over in Anchorage,

city of disappearances, before we are swallowed up
by sea. We prepare to move to higher ground:

we apply for funds, pray the government will help.

Exile is expensive and the elders are slipping away.

They say their dreams are invaded by ice-
music, sounds of cracking and whomping so loud,

they wake with chipped teeth

and the taste of sea brine in their mouths.

Mammoth Resurrected

Before my birth, father was more than fossil;
pickled in tundra, he still had his undercoat
of grizzle, teeth, and a knee broken
and folded in
tighter than a jack knife.

When they found him as perfect
as the day the sinkhole swallowed him,
they dreamed me up.

Am I extinct?

No. Called back,

claimed the minds that made me,
coaxing DNA from Father's bones
and toying with Mother's genome
to invent a new sequence for me.

Poached from another eon
and implanted in her womb,
swaying in time with her elephant strides,
I grew from Mother's coos and breakneck science.
My tusk-nubs scuffed her insides,
outscaling her womb too soon
and stretching her belly cruelly.

And when I arrived late
I knew that Mother,
who scraped her trunk against my hump
and raked her tongue through my wool,
was mapping my flesh
like ancestral land.
She tested the length of me,
making touch memory.

Entrusted with my soft spots
and whimpers, baby dents
and outdated ridges, she, with elephant-tact,
had no choice but to love me,
more grandaunt than offspring,
captor and taboo.
I kept below the soft flaps of her breasts
and, in the first hungers of infancy,
I drank in the millennial air—
choked on the seepage of benzene, mercury
and the musk of men,
before my mouth found her teat.

Prognosis: Releasable

As told by a raptor rehabilitator

What is belief to a bird but the compass
of the stars and skies? If the forests wilt,
as they will, and the stars and skies
are left, the raptors will
last longest. I believe this, just as I believe
the owl in its aviary will recover someday
beneath an indifferent moon.

We are not so different:
both blinded in one eye, our pinions tied,
we are ghosts to the day, prisoners perching
in our cells by night. We know in our bones
the calculus of the wait, the rubato of the hunt,
but our recovery is slow. Still, I know
someday you will go stooping again,
and a creature will freeze in your eyeshine.
It will taste the razors of your talons,
and from its fretting and final sputter,
you'll hollow out its heart,
squeeze it in the parentheses of your beak.
Your reflexes will be a revelation to us.

Kill with ease and be released:
this is the test of your freedom.

And there will be other tests: someday
your breeding range might be hijacked,
slashed down or burned away.
Someone might lease it to Liberty Trust,
break ground below the slippery elm,
mistake your birthright for just a nook,
phony up a house or office and call it a day.

But agile bird, as long as you sleep
here, as long as you breathe,
your every wet inhalation is a defiance
and every bone you crush in your beak
is a victory. Don't break.

Here, in this holding place,
I will feel out cold meat
from the funk of a bucket;
I will feed it to you by hand,
whispering to you as softly as rabbit's dewlap
of your powers: ghost-swift strike,
eyes cut from onyx and blade,
your hunger for a clean kill.

Culling at the Audubon Sanctuary

Cleaning out the mouse tank,
I find a small bulge beneath wood shavings:
a dead pup, the runt, expelled from the litter.
I fear mice; I always have,
and this dead one—a little crimp
of flesh, blistered and hairless—
scampers his ghost feet up my back
and molders inside the curl of my ear.

Of course, it's natural: death, I mean,
and its quarantine; even the mother
knew that when she nudged him away.
Even he, who sipped for a day or two
from his mother's milk and power,
felt in his first moments an invisible border
she could will him over with just a touch.

Mashed together, the rest drowse
between the warm musk
of their mother and the samba beat
of seven dainty mouse hearts.
All are buoyed on a precarious lifeboat
of bodies. I toss the runt's
into the hawks' cage. The rest
will be raised to breed or be raptorkill,
but the dead one—still with me now—
twitches inside my ear,
whispering between the small bones
that even gods must wear their meat.

Poult Shares Her First Lesson

Mother was born deaf.
To her, I was a hapless forager,
peckish and scrimpy—
craggy around the eyes
even as a newborn. But she took to me
and knocked my beak away with her snood
if I picked at my quills,
spilling blood as mothers will.
She tried to satisfy my babyhood thirsts,
and I'd cast about for seeds,
whispering, *Love me, love me,*
burying my voice deep into soil
where worms drawled their O's
and fine-tuned their cravings into matter.
We'd rub our heads against her spurs
while she plucked at slugs,
mashing the fattest bits up
for her babes.

The night she killed us,
she could not hear our cries
or see us in the dark.
When we went scuttling up to her breast,
she sensed the press of predators—
pack rats, maybe. They're our size,
our gestalt, and she was protecting us.
Mother's beak never misses.
At sun up, stunned, she found us
butchered but uneaten.
A dog? A wolf?
A monster, she thought. A massacre.

Brothers and sisters, blind-
sided by violence, save yourselves
from heartbreak. Repeat this,
beat it into your soul if you must:
*Nature is neither cruel nor moral,
but she's irrepressible
as a kink in the nervous system.*

Emergency Procedures: A Lullaby

You will be your own worst terrorist,
she says, placing a curse at your cradle.
Fairy godmother, friend of Jack, she lives
to draw a crowd, induce double vision,
bazooka your little heart out
with a volley of doubts.

When the door swings open
and Terror comes skunking in,
clap for your life to let her know
you're there or start singing
that verse about the grey wolf
in the woods that eats up babes,
flanks first (you remember:
the one Mother sang those nights
she glowered you to sleep).
Terror always liked you best,
still loves to plug into the power
line of your panic and settle in,
turning every thought into a trip wire
or an open wound
you can't help but scratch.

And you're dead
wrong if you think you don't like it—
the snakebite in your spine,
the small snips
 in your soul,
 the idea of mercy like a wet blanket.

Sheep Shearing Demonstration

Since she gets lonely in an instant
and squirms if you let her, be firm
when you force her away from the flock.

There she goes—
hooves clattering away,
she's ramming her head through iron gates;

she's nicked her eye and now—
stunned, swaying—she's yours again.
Wipe away the curve of blood under her eye.

You didn't mean to frighten her,
but you'll have to try again: clasp her head
tight now between your legs.

Stay calm when you upend her,
forcing her legs skywise. The wool will be dense
in your fingers, purled with leaves,

moist with dew. Her heart's knocking
hard against her rib cage, knitting
its rhythms into yours, and you'll need

to steel yourself, then steer the shears
through a wilderness of wool. Those wrinkles—
pull them flat so they don't catch

in the blades and remember to cover
her teats. Be sure to shave off the skirt
rife with leaves and dags; this you won't keep,

but the rest will be fleece and lanolin,
greasy, but spinnable. You'll inherit
its trace of manure, its whiff of hay

and clover. Then when you clear the cheek-
bone, keep a hand under her jaw.
Steady now. Cut the flank

close until you can see the pink
below the skin. The fleece will fall off
in waves. Her memory's sharp;

she'll remember this. But through it all,
be a pupil of her eyes. You'll see terror,
maybe trust. *This is how I will open to you.*