

"Language Lessons"

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'Language Lessons'

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Body

I

His young body could run for
days, while she would wait,
wave her arm, delicate as
ribbon, *you 're moving too fast.*

At rest, his body
was her haven.
She snuck into the comers
of him, humming air against skin
to make sure
he was real.

II

Old age rubs its smell into his
thinning skin. His spine a curled
leaf, each alabaster bone bending:
someday, it will collapse, But she
knows the deepest caverns

of him, between bones, foreign organs pumping,
playing like instruments. She searched them in a
dream with a match, looking for the truth inside,
but found him hollow as *hello* lost in wind.

Silent Trails

Red ants roam the folds of thinning dirt-brown tree bark, each layer a scratched scab in sunlight. The ants look pale orange against wood. Silent movement upward, carrying crumbs, each separate speck circling black edges, decayed crevices, making trails up and down for hours, trails against the rough skin of old tree.

Fireworks

The sky was painted raw
last night. Streets filled: silhouettes,
families with fat babies
in each arm, couples pressed
to the lip: everyone
a stranger. All together
on one night for
a spectacle of sparklers.

Last night the warm, open sky
covered in color. Harsh blues
and fierce reds rubbed against
the sky. Sparks stretched in
thin lines, residue sliding
down the dark like rain against
a windowpane.

Those colors did not stay,
only melted down,
down to meet
the edge of land.
All that remains, smoke
against the outline
where hills and sky overlap.

Dirty Things

Shall I alone dismantle the wreckage? Each piece,
torn paper, old letters tarnished
with words I haven't heard
in years, words rubbed against garbage rust—
picking apart the whole, wading through
damaged goods.

Shall I empty out all the containers I can
gather in my arms? Empty bottles, with ripped
off labels, once filled with something sweet,
now emptying the last drops
onto my skin, the weight of hundreds
of crushed aluminum cans.
What can I keep, what will stay

after the dirty things have been hauled
like picked fruit, somewhere that is not
home?

More will create itself, fill my days with
debris. I cannot mourn that which never
ends, yet I do, I do because all this was
mine.

Early, I wonder, as the garbage truck beeps
around the corner to rob me
of my loose ends, my baggage, those words
that I haven't heard
in years, what am I capable of holding
and how do I know
what wants to be kept?

After Dreaming

My thoughts begin to pounce,
crisscrossing the cobwebs of
old memory, softened by years
of dreams. I want to tell you

everything I can
remember, like the low moan of jazz
echoing in my ears as I dance
over a lake, or the soft joy
leaping into my body
as I kiss a stranger.
Once I was moonlight
staining the streets, pressing
myself against porch steps.

Sometimes like a child
I whisper into your ear,
while you sleep. Maybe
my words will
last beyond anything
touchable. I hope
they take you
to places, only dreams
could reach.

Widow's Hairdo

twisted tight like wound thread,
coated in hairspray, held together

by a black ribbon, always.

sometimes a loose strand falls,
lonely petal, against her bare

snowy neck.

My Brother's Better Ear

Last summer the music
stopped, turned off
by the old man on Salt Street.
His tarnished hands
no longer turn the knobs
of his window perched radio.

My brother says on some days
he can hear the notes, playing
quiet as moths.

Letter in April

It seems so absurd—to choose desire
when integrity has been your back porch light
all your life. The irony seeps in like a stiff

stench, covering its cloud over your furniture,
your mementos, unopened guitar case pressing
against the wall. And yet, it was your

choice. It was your voice holding up the night,
filling silence like wine in a glass, except with
more drunk talk, words sloshing back and
forth—but really, what were you,

if not intoxicated by something? What
was I, deepening myself into words, when
the words were lampshades over our
heads, blinding us both

from faces that might have held
the integrity our voices will
never hold.

Conversation and Music

Remember early morning, you
against the phone, me in bed, pressing
secrets into our hands? How distance
gave awareness of our separate
bodies, the thin color of your voice,
so far, yet hanging in my ear—
that low, mellow tone
peeling away layers,
unfolding shy laughter. Remember
how quiet I became, you strumming
away, making silence into something soft
I could keep in my dreams all night—your song
like a folded blanket, your voice
cracking through the grace notes.

Hating the Night

Because no one knows when it began, it
was always up there, hovering over
houses close enough to kiss.

Because darkness scratches itself into sky,
tearing away light, ripping seams slowly
to reveal a wound.

Because dreams echo darkness, digging
into the skin of my subconscious. And
daylight is pure like rain.

The End

I dreamt last night, a ghost tapping
pale fingers against
the window of our cold room.
My palm pressed
into your back, your weight
shifting away.

Early morning and I rise to see
white mountains. Car lights glow
dimly through fog. My slow
breaths leave spots on the chilled
windowpane. I remember

how your hands, soft as snow,
once reached to touch my cheek.
Now you sleep, dreaming your
freedom, thinking my hands have
held yours into a soreness

only separation can heal. I wait for
the mover's truck, pace the stains
of carpet, and drag fingers along
my empty bookshelf, touching bare
dust.

My Falling Dream

I pictured it perfectly, it stuck in my memory for days: the fireworks of limbs tumbling, crackling against old wooden stairs. My body bent in overlapping shapes. I felt whorled, a coiled piece of mass, imprinted.

Before, I was smoldered—
stuck into a stoic state, a bug against the whiteness of wall. Now,

I am palpable. Now, I am spilt bone.
Today I woke to find my body shed like lace, not quite dreaming

not quite alive.

Storm after Midnight

You were thunder last night;
invisible, untouchable, but your voice
clear, sudden through the window.
Sometimes you spoke so loud
I could feel the vibrations up and down
my spine. Then your grumbling began,
distance between us extending itself like lightening
in sky. I liked you

speaking in crashes and booms; my fear of loud
noises could not keep me cocooned in covers. I
wanted out—to feel the rain flooding my hair,
catching puddles in my hands, to risk being struck
once more if only to see you, your sound
becoming flesh in darkness.

What Can Be Said

about a flower blooming in a patch of garden,
rising like a ghost from earth, that has not
already been said?

Who would say its petals are not lovely,
but grotesque as fat worms pulling their bodies
out of black mud?

When he left her, his lover of seven years,
with a solitary flower placed on her pillow, she
sighed herself

into a scream, forcing the flower between her
fingers, until its redness stained her skin, and
there was nothing left to be said

The Hotel Room

Stranger, the worst part
are these starched white towels,
though this bed is big enough
to hold our soft limbs
ready for anything
our heavy heads
knowing nothing.

The red curtains are drawn just
enough to keep us hidden from
the outside, flickering eyes,
scrutinizing sunlight.

We look good in the dark, our
legs like overlapping vines,
your arms, wrapped blankets
over my torso.

I'm not scared.
We have come here
for each other, we have come
to be each other's secret.

Say something soon
or I will break your
silence with a kiss.

What I Talk About When I Talk About Love

Your skin is a pattern, a
spreadsheet of scars, marks,
patches sewn side by side. I
touch your back. Imperfect:
etched with blemishes,
indentations long and thin,
soft to the touch of my finger.
I trace lines for hours, awake
against your back. You never
flinch, only sigh and sleep,
and I know this much:
Something holy poured this
skin onto your bones.

Language Lessons

I

We wade through language,
library shelves stretching
centuries of Spanish, English,
German. Your favorites— the
harsh ones, those dialects not
easily digested: you love words
to be rough stones in your mouth.

II

You touch my elbow, curve your palm
to hug my rough skin and I
understand it as *Yes*.
Though I wonder if anything—a word,
touch, sigh, or shudder,
is enough to express those words
we haven't formed yet.

III

Do we live our words?
You relax into yours,
I worry my way into
mine, pushing harder
to get at meaning—always
wanting our words to stretch,
to fit us, to make this
language stronger than
any sounds we've heard before.

IV

When I speak to you, I feel
words gliding like lava

against my tongue,
spilling over onto the back of my slick teeth.
Do you feel our language like this?
Does it leave your mouth scorched
with sweetness, your tongue melting
for more?

A language is not learned until it
has been lived. If I live a thousand
years, will that be enough time to
hear all we haven't yet said?