

This is Not a Poem about the Body

I wanted to watch my head float out the window and rest
its cheek next to a small bird.

I wanted the bird to see its eye, feel its eyelash legs.

A boy brought me a leafy branch full of spiders and ran.

I wanted to bring it inside and nail it to the ceiling over my bed
(I wanted the thump inside the bird).

Sometimes I called it peppermint, or rosewater.

Sometimes I couldn't feel it, but I could see it

across the lawn, planning its escape over the fence.

Round as a tree hollow,

I wanted nothing, nothing,
no thing inside.

The Lost Libraries of the Balkans: Reinheriting, Restoring and Reintegrating the Spines

Abstract

In which I inherit my grandmother's ukulele thirty years after her last performance.

Introduction

My boyfriend, the Noctilucent Mr. O, presents me with an old vinyl record featuring an enthusiastic man on the cover offering to teach anyone how to Play the Uke in Two Weeks! My thesis is due in two weeks.

There is a bar in the Mission with a trick: once an evening, the bartender shouts "Close the curtains!" She then pours vodka into a metal channel running along the lip of the bar and dips her lighter into it, setting it ablaze. This is where we go to see a performance of *Dark Side of the Uke*. The thirteen band members each plug a tiny electrical instrument into the gnash of cords piled on the stage. They strap the ukes around their torsos, a musician in a glittered jumpsuit plucks her uke once, gives a decisive nod to the others. They start in on *Speak to Me*, while the technicolor *Wizard of Oz* glows silently behind them.

That night, I dream of my grandmother as an Ozarker girl bringing her ukulele to school. Waking with the ability to play her song, whispering its watery lyrics and strumming its algae notes over coffee; the song is called *Dirty Emerald*. I relate this over the phone to my mother, and her voice lowers to the register of burnt honey when she says: "I'm concerned about you."

Methods

In which the archivist is in league with my mother.

My *History of the Book* class has sent me to an archive of 15th century Italian manuscripts, some written on linen or hemp, some on vellum still marked with the calf's hair follicles and biting fly scars. The scratchy white polyester gloves I don enclose each fingertip in a little cloth box, making it difficult to turn the pages. The archivist, Ottavia, who wears her expertise like thick white sunglasses, gives me a lesson in page turning. We chat on my way in each day, where I leave my bag and water bottle in a cubby, settling for thirst and a #2 pencil. I spend far too much time shivering in the stacks, greedily taking out more volumes than I can process in a day, neglecting my other classes. Peering into the words, the letters and symbols, inked by monks with devastated fingers: on many pages, I see the pale hazelnuts of dried blood. I don't have time to learn Latin, but my eyes learn it for me, the way a hand learns a lover's face. I mention this to Ottavia. She tilts her head back and nods slowly: "This has happened many times before." She writes a name and phone number on the back of her card and drops it into my book bag.

Literature Review

In which I evade my thesis by torching an Altoids tin.

A section is due on Friday, and Monday I am up all night tearing apart discarded library books, transforming them into other things. I rip off their spines, saw through their covers, puncture their pages with an awl, and run shoelaces and thin electrical wire through the holes. I slice the covers off all the forest green books and make a box for Noctilucent, dropping in love letters the size of price tags. Making a second box, I grasp an empty Altoids tin with a pair of cooking tongs and hold it over a medium flame on my stove: the paint begins

to peel and then slough off in sheets until the tin is a dull gray with black smudges. I write love letters back to myself and pile them in the tin: *Izgoren, Zamard, Motorsiklet*.

The next time Noctilucent cooks dinner for me (salmon, asparagus—he detests it—and a cordless drill), I hand him the green box. He walks to the kitchen to fetch a match, then lights it and moves to touch one corner of the box. “No!” I say and push his hand away. “Okay, I’ll burn it later, then.”

Discussion

In which I account for every word lost in the warehouse fire of Alexandria, the systematic sacking of the Kosovo War, and the moment the scribes stopped copying Sappho.

-4 days: I write aphorisms on index cards and pin them over my work area, an entire wall in my kitchen that is painted a hazy gray called Inadvisable Excursion. Words should be weighed, not counted, *Petit à petit, l’oiseau fait son nid*; Speak the truth, but leave immediately after.

-2 days: It’s my grandmother’s birthday. I buy the most embellished slice of cake I can find, so tall it’s listing north. Rose by bitter blue rose, I slowly devour it as I write. Lighting a candle, I blow it out, inhale the singed spirit rising from the wick, and make a wish. I don’t know how to play the ukulele, but my dream hands begin strumming the C, F and G chords in the decisive key of C.

0 day: I stand up in a stuffy beige classroom in the basement of Poindexter Hall, feeling swoony and porous from lack of sleep, to deliver a thirty-page chapter of my thesis on the extraordinary texts missing from humanity as a result of library looting and pillaging during wartime. As I announce the title, I cough out a sob. Dr. O, chair of the Intellectual Freedom Committee, brings her hand to her chin. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but I like it,” she says.

Ad Ulteriores Investigationes

[Branch that remembers another forest]

Migration says to map: *There is no fitting inside you*. I have arcs of my own, looping out beyond borders.

These ruby pins that pierce the flat green of Seattle, Berlin, Valparaíso, say nothing of what it means to move. I could laugh at their bright pluck, the way they dig

into one thumbled square, presuming they've claimed the coordinates. Really, places claim us, law us, work us, marry us, then heave us

up like a crust of earth we mistook for bedrock.

Migration says to map: *I've seen what you're made of*. This is a nation and also a piece of paper. Documents we signed at the embassy, when our ink levitated for a moment above *I hereby declare*

this map is thinner than we imagined. Its lapis fathoms can be folded, bringing jet streams together, piling oceans on top of mountains. Then unfolded, its soft hinges making new origami of coat racks, train tickets, the last lap of milk.

Some species begin with a question: *Shall we meet at Mono Lake?* The water clouded that time of year with algae, the geese gone, its shore thick with feathers poking from the mud.

Why migrate at all? For some animals: a desire to float on freshwater, feast on fat insects, escape the parched winter sky. But the strident passage

of the alewife twists more cryptic, the way she slips into oxygen we'll never breathe, before looping back on a path nameless as a deer trail, to the lake where she broke free.

The blackpoll warbler, too, listens across continents, finding her way back to the balsam fir where last year she assembled leaves, twigs, grass and spit.

We can't know that precision: our boots,
our bookshelves, wade through the slop of job
markets and rainfall averages.

Once, our arrowed haplogroups rowed across oceans,
spat in the dust of rectangles first inked with voice
and blood, now by our dotted breath unfurled on the table:

A Technology for Forgetting

Remedy 1/

For the immediate relief of intolerable knowing, may I suggest this beige rectangle,
which, given electricity, can suck the scalding swamp of summer in one end, extrude
glacial anesthesia out the other. We don't even feel the voltaic scalpels as they slide in
to excise the heat, pulling it out with wishbones. And there scuttles the demon that sat
with great haunches on our fragile: lungs (: *morally weak, liable to break*). Ten square meters
of fractal: airways our bodies carry so we can receive, release (: *as with rivers, as with lightning*)

Remedy 2/

Beginning now, let us manufacture each garment,
every piece of crockery from sugar. Our children, bolt
cutters in hand, will open our storage units decades
from now to find boxes filled with sweet dust. In the present, solid teacups
and saucers await us in the shingled cottage up the hill, on a table dressed by ancestors,
our grandmothers' rosebuds, windmills and cherubs painted onto thick, rough paste.
They slowly dissolve as we finger, chat and drink. When we finish our lapsang souchong,
it gives up its smoke and we find ourselves holding twinkly sludge. Wine goblets sparkle
their veils: pitched into the fire or crushed beneath a heel, we still lament the residue.

Remedy 3/

The ocean holds our oldest memories, and it won't let us forget. Look – it's returning
our trash to us: round bundles of drifting seagrass have rent their bellies to collect
the sandwich bags and takeout forks—once sad, now monstrous—that we gave up.
The hoary spheres bob toward the shore, overflowing with poor nutrients, their spindly
green hands laying plastic bones on the shore to not rot. Let us allow the *Posidonia Oceania*
a rest. No one asked the seagrass to bear witness. It has no eyes to see the snowy plovers

pulling
droplets
of crude oil
through their floss.
Nor the emerald mouth
of the river wanting
its salt, silenced by sand

/

We've all cauterized a wildfire, plastered a spider bite with library paste. Once you've duct-taped
a knife laceration, superglued a knocked-out tooth, or bound a sprained ankle with hardback
books, you've earned some kind of advanced badge (we need to check the manual).

There are ways of stitching a wound with the hair of your beloved, though the skills
are rarely taught these days. A slow heart, a dead outlet, can sometimes be revived
by inserting blades of grass. Do you still have the sun? Earbuds to take its charge?

Drop them
into your tea, your
wine and ear-to-glass
listen to the almost-music
you heard over the fence as
a child and have bopped
toward your whole life.

[Who Once Favored a Corset, but Has Now Taken Up Tuxedos]

Prologue

[The Grandmother holds six straight pins between her lips, like a cigarette]

Take a deep breath before I sew you in – imagine you’re Houdini, chained inside a box of water. I’m stitching loosely. Can you bring me my eyebrow pencil, honey? I’ll draw some stockings on you.

[The Girl exhales loudly, as if having passed a danger <always check the backseat> <stay low and crawl, test doors before opening>]

*Do you remember the girl who pretended
to be hypnotized at the state
fair? She never told. And then her family watched
the videotape every year at Christmas. I would
tell.*

Exposition

[The Wardrobe Mistress misinterprets The Dressmaker’s rules. The body is never, ever to be]

For the dress rehearsal, The Girl/Ingenu has been fitted into a strapless number, armoring stitched to the bodice, braced with plumage of many yellows. The stiff feathered shelf is insulated with rolled socks plucked from her gym shoes. Her family settles into noisy green pleather seats to watch. An Uncle, using her childhood nickname, notes with surprise that “she’s stacked.” The Grandmother sits next to him. The prior evening, she had loosed the seams of the yellow fluff, replaced the golden thread with white Velcro.

[Enter The Director, holding a stack of papers that emit the sweet chemicals of the spirit duplicator. You and you and you.]

The Main Character is played by a rangy adolescent boy who wears a black leather moto jacket and prefers no underwear: backstage, the other boys surround him with a tablecloth during costume changes. The girls usually slip bras, bloomers, corsets and dresses on and off beneath large, billowy tee-shirts: Camp Winnarainbow, Bikini Kill.

[The Dressmaker issues a corrective]

The dressed body requires:

Boning: Closet for the most exquisite
Bustle: Appendage for never forgetting
Corset: Double doors, often leading to the garden
Pannier: Hot air balloons, fires lit
Sleevecap: Needled fingertips hovering above the peau de soie
Stomacher: Secret passageway, we learn only later

[The Wardrobe Mistress responds]

Requirements beg to be torn:

This role demands breakaway seams: hidden fastening, including magnets, snaps, Velcro, or loosely sewn tear-away seams that enable rapid costume transitions for dramatic or comedic effect.

Breakaway costumes are quite durable and can withstand many performances (I restore them night after night). They can be clawed at by the villain or tugged off by The Ingenue herself to drop onto the dusty stage.

Rising action

[Enter The Ingenue and The Main Character, dressed in formal attire. They stand facing one another as the theatre roof peels back and a murmur of songbirds swoops over them, forming shapes known only in theoretical mathematics. Not]

really. The bright small birds form an arm that has clearly been used to practice kissing, a foot wearing a heavy boot size 7, a disembodied berry chantilly cake with one million layers, and a book lying open to a page showing a single glyph generally interpreted to mean “An appetite that grows with the eating.”

[Ohhhhh. The heavy purple velvet curtain drops]

[In the novel, fourteen years pass before the curtain lifts once more. The Girl stands in the middle of the stage, dressed in workwear, a chain snaking from pocket to belt loop. She projects from the diaphragm, singing: *O, dark adapted eyes, O tender drums and lapped hands, I bring you the sun, but not too much*]

[The curtain tries to fall, arrests halfway down. Stage techs gnash, grasp, tug on the ropes as if peeling a bell]

Intermission

Choreographer [be the butterfly, be the lion]

At their last dance rehearsal, the student players marked their places on the stage. The choreographer gathered them into a cross-legged circle and sat down with them. She asked each for their pain, and they recited it. The girl who would soon wear yellow feathers refused. “Drop your ego,” the choreographer chided, and began to tell them the story of how her mother burned down the house.

[You feel yourself going deeper and deeper with each word I say. In fact, with every breath you take you feel yourself relaxing even more now.]

That night, they brought sleeping bags and lay in a circle on the living room floor with their heads touching so their characters could meet *in the furrows (her almost-grown body gone soft and pliable, curled against an orange sphere, skin spiked with prairie, mouth and claws of glass, the hollow bones variant and expressive)* *I will not burn*

Climax

[The curtain lifts. Enter The Ingenue in her sunlit plumes, a crown of rhinestones atop her head. She begins the dance without The Main Character, her feet and arms moving automatically, through muscle memory, through skill learned at the aegis of an Esteemed Choreographer. The other girls in their finery form a human chain behind her. Where is]

Falling action

*The sound of Velcro announces my departure from the dress watch me
in bloomers escaping stage left, leaving the audience members bereft of my silk*

Epilogue: