

The Road to Slapton Ley

And Other Poems

Written On a Walk Across San Juan Island*17 August 2018*

The sun beats down on a hill of bleached grass
yellowed and curving like a hip bone,
the sea filling its pelvic gap. Below,
a road cuts through, running along the parabola
of the shoreline like an intestine, a vein,
the fresh black asphalt rippling in the heat
like a wave. A stem snaps. Birds call
from the forest that runs down the other side
of the island. Dust swirls up from the path,
hungry for shoes to kiss, but I sit just off the side
of the trail, cross-legged in the grass, waiting
for my father to finish calling back to the birds,
for some great wonder to reveal itself to me.

for my father
and his father
and all the birdwatchers

The Birdwatchers

There is only one group of people
I can think of
to whom, for instance,
going out into a cold, barren field
at five o'clock in the morning
—or perhaps earlier—
and standing there
for the next
several
hours
has any appeal whatsoever,

and that is the birdwatchers,
with their heads tilted back,
their sight soaring into the sky,
shooting out of the barrels of their binoculars
like bullets
that never hit,
and so never stop;

with their thin notebooks,
where all they need to remember
is recorded;
their thick guide books
where all they need to know
is stored;
and their thicker coats,
where all the heat they need to stay warm,
radiating from their hearts,
which are mindless of the cold,
is trapped;

their sharp, keen eyes
and their keen, sharp ears,
missing nothing of the moment
that stretches around them,
only of the world beyond the field,
beyond reality;

and their studied calm and soft patience,
keeping them in that field
until they decide that perhaps
they should try going
into the woods
to see what they can find there,
hidden from plain sight,

hanging between the world
and the sky,
like them.

There is no group of people
I can think of
who are quite like the birdwatchers,
because the birdwatchers know
exactly what they are looking for;
and, even when they do not,
can always find it
all the same.

The Dog

His fur glows a dark orange,
rich and deep as an ember in the June sun, fiery
as my father's beard not so long ago.

His tail curves like a question
over his back, like my father's hair curls
down over his shoulders.

He sniffs through the green
blades of the back garden, the tips of his ears
like two candle flames, hovering.

Like my father in the marshland
grass, his ears pricked to every movement,
the sun all around him, falling

across his back like a wave.
Like it falls across the dog now, his fur
lit up in a golden inferno.

But when I run my fingers through it
I come away clutching clumps of thin,
white hair, old age shedding off his back

like sunlight. Like ash. Like the white
hairs poking their way into my father's face, salting
the blaze of his beard, the great flame

of his hair sputtering, the color
growing thin as sunlight through a window pane,
falling across the vermillion wood
of the floor, and sucked up by the shadows.

The Moth

Tawny burst of flutter
and fall across the gateway
of my closing window, soft

spattering of yellow-brown fluid
across the sill, blood-dots of rain
and stain, the insect leaping

and tumbling with unsure wings
onto the carpet. The dark hollow
of my cupped hands around it,

unnecessary, I realized, for it sat,
simple and still, on the curve
of my palm, plump hill

that crests up to the joint
of the thumb, solid land.
It vibrated there, and I tingled

with the buzz, the fuzz
of legs and face feeling
at me, the smooth shield

of his wings, closed so that
it could have been any other
small creature, unable to embrace

the air, the pulse of the wind rushing
over the surface of this window-lip,
the flutter of a volume of Woolf

atop a tall stack of books, winged
creatures resting, but rattled in
the breath-heave of air,

the oncoming clouds. And I did not
want to shatter the peace of the moment,
this rarity, mother on my palm, not

trying to escape, just thrumming with me,
wanted to stay there like that. But instinct
took over, and I ushered it onto the slick

stone of outside, watched it stumble
and then, all of a sudden, fall,

his sparkle over the edge, the fire

-cracker of him lit in a long
arc towards the ground, the flame
of wing and flurry, only airborne

in descent, like Icarus, little pale brown
angel falling, explosion of body and limb,
gone in an instant. I hung

out the window for a moment,
stunned. The burnt peach hue
of a strip of sky, hanging beneath

the thick blue of clouds, the lit pit
of twilight, the wind gasping.
And then, I swung the hinge shut

and it began to rain again
as I wrote this, the spattering
roar of it, blurring the glass, distorting

everything, soaking the grass,
soaking, in my mind, those wings
too wet to lift it home.

The Komat'su

sits in its rusting glory
in the rocky, shrub-spattered field
behind the townhouses. Sheep yell

in the distance, and the sun is high
over Capanwalla, the light-kissed
slope awash in green. A bird chats
in the bush and the Komat'su sits there,

its one arm hanging over, claw lost
in the weeds. A starburst of pink-purple
blooms behind the back of its treads,

the wheels locked within them, time's gears
stopped on this scrap of machinery left to sit
like a monument, or a mausoleum, or
a piece of litter amidst all this growing,

these full-leafed ferns and wispy straw
and flower- bunches corn-yellow and open
to the sun. Poor Komat'su, man-made

and devoid of soul, stranded on the edge
of the wild, this line of bushes and trees
full of thorn-scratch and the hum
of everything, who left you here

to dry into time? Was it the workers
who built these sandy houses, sweat
streaming down their arms as they

assembled stone and wood and glass
into these temporary lodgings for tourists,
tucked away on the edge of this town?
Do they plan to return to you, and

build more, or did they simply leave you
once the job was done, to be nibbled
at by the coming decades? Now you guard

the undeveloped, last sentry between
civilization and wilderness, drenched
in the rain, burning with heat
throughout the tumultuous Irish day,

and as out of place

in this cracked limestone
landscape as I feel.

Self-Portrait as Egg Shell

Your emptiness,
your cartilaginous fragments
of a life before life. Papyrus-thin, you crumble
at the touch. You were made
to come apart.

Yellowed by the dirty
air, purple spots pepper you,
a chicken-pox pattern, a dull speckling.
Your insides crusted with sand.
Your curve. Your collapse.

Left on the edge
of this marsh like litter, scattered
beside a vast greenness. So small,
it is a wonder you ever held
anything. Nothing is born

without a breaking. Life
hid in you, once, stewed, boiled,
grew, broke through, cracking you, leaving you
vacant. And now you lie here, dead
calcium, purpose complete.

The Marsh

stretches out like a green blanket, tucking away the tide that dribbles from the edge of it in streams of shimmering sea-drool. Square houses with white porch-balconies line the tussled reeds like toes poking out from beneath the lip of this earth-quilt, this patchwork of browns and yellows and mottled pale blueness coalescing into a messy green, this collection of threads woven together by the soft, silty dirt, grass and marsh-fern and spartina, torn here and there by a slice of water gaping in the fabric like a patch of air. A firm bank of clouds sits above the horizon, misting the distant trees. Bird-screech shakes the branches of bushes and mixes with the far-off cries of children playing as gulls swerve through the wind with their black heads, smaller terns whipping through the brush on U-shaped wings. The long white wings of a heron fold into themselves as it drifts down into this sunny swamp, disappearing, not too far from the exclamation of wood where ospreys make their nests on there. The wind bends the spartina to one side like a dancer's ribcage leaning into a curve that the air fills. The sun shoots into the eye. Gull-screams lament out to the west, where the white light is steadily sinking, bright as it may be now. Though this quilt below me looks whole, I know that every thread is quivering every blade of grass echoing with those avian shouts.

And if I were a better son to my parents,
I would recognize why.

I Wake Up Early to Write, and My Father Wakes Up Early to Go

birding. I watch him out the corner
of my eye as he pulls on his jacket, clean grey

light falling through the floor
-to-ceiling windows and lapping at his shoulders,

inviting him out the back door
and into the whisper of day. Virginia Beach sits

like the footboard of a bed on which
the steely sheet of the ocean rustles, vibrates in some

great impossible sleep. It took us
nearly sixteen hours to drive here yesterday,

and neither of us should rightfully
be up this early; but after denying the twitterings

of about a dozen alarms, I rose
from white, shadow-crustled sheets and passed

down the hall into the living area
of this hotel suite, sat at a grey table I have made

my kingdom. And now he has emerged,
and he is hoisting his Nikon camera over his shoulder now,

the strap of his binoculars curling and
falling over the back of his neck in an old, familiar comfort,

his white, broad-brimmed hat, crinkled
and covered with grey stains like the beds we both

abandoned to be here, and as he moves
for the door I wonder if I should go with him,

if I should offer, hurry into clothes
and follow him out into this morning we are both losing

time with, try to see it through his eyes.
But we each have our own rituals to perform. So I stay

seated. Reassure him that I will lock
the door behind him, yes, including the deadbolt. Then

I watch him set off, towards the beach,

his Birkenstocks kissing the pavement, hat like a flag atop

his sandy hair, the apple in his hand
disappearing as he bites into it, cracking the morning, crunching

into it, as he disappears around the side
of the hotel. Then I turn back to my books, to the creased white

folds of this page. I put my ear
against the glass, listen for the hum of the world.

Feel the sea in myself stir,
and wait for something to wake.

Notebooks

Notebooks run in my family. My father's
lived in his back pocket, faded
black and crinkled, worn about the edges.

Every day he fed it graphite, scribbling the names
of the birds he'd seen cartwheeling
across the sky, nestled lightly atop

the crown of trees, buried in bushes, flocking
to our feeders, or hopping on the ground
like us mortals. He would categorize and classify,

able to identify a call through the woods, a shock
of plumage, the curve of a beak or flick
of a tail, cataloguing winged creatures

like he learned to from *his* father, who still wanders
the wilderness, jotting and noting, still scribbling down
counts even though he can't hear birdsong

quite as well as he used to. I grew up watching them,
those notebook-men, scratching away into the abyss,
capturing a fragment and flutter of the world

around them in those pages, which stained
and yellowed over time with them. They hide
in the bird hide, listing away as if it will save them,

as if it will bring order, as if in the tumble
of data, of species and genus names, they can find
their own, trying to identify themselves

with the world, and I am just like them, I sit
in the midst of nature and stare into the air,
write down everything I see.

Written in Coole Park

Wrapped in the sharp green of my surroundings
I have almost forgotten the trail
and lost sight of it, though not quite.

I sit beneath the plated armor of this pine,
its three arms twisting up above me
and listen to the throaty moan

of owls, distant in the forest, past
split logs and the tangle
of vivid leaves, behind the cover

of some shadowed place. And the sun falls
through the slate sheet of the clouds,
bleeding through whatever holes it can.

Everything clear, hidden. I close my eyes,
hear much I cannot see—discussions
of birds, which my parents have the tongue

to translate; murmur of stones; mumbles
of the French woman and her son
on the path, picking berries, crackling

through the brush to fill their baskets
with wildness. So many languages
I cannot speak, but still recognize,

the accent of the forest familiar
in my ears, its vernacular unlearned
but lodged in my memory. Someone

spoke to me as a child, and
I didn't listen to the words. But still
I hear the subtle pitch of that voice,

its ambling stream from the mouth
of this planet. And I do what I can
to whisper back.

Cornfield

The cornfield is like an excavated corpse.

Its barrenness alerts me to the season.

The sky seems to speak to it, the twilight's blood dripping into its horizon.

Every time I pass by, I am hungry.

My pen bites the page, and the ground shudders.

That, or I shudder, and everything else shudders with me.

Crows croak through the cornfield, talons clutching dark earth.

I approach and the whole field screams, rises into the air.

The cornfield keeps escaping me.

It does not want to be written into this poem.

It does not want its emptiness immortalized.

I try to see into the blackness between the remaining stalk-stubs.

I want what is not there, to hold its not being there in my palm, like soil.

I want to harvest this nothingness like an archaeologist.

To pull the dust to my lips and swallow it like corn.

I want the crows to be ravens, to speak their language, for them to live inside me.

The cornfield is not giving me answers.

And I dare not enter it, when I don't even know the questions.

My Name

My ethics and philosophy professor
is talking about the difference between belief
and knowledge, how to *think* you know

your car is still parked on the street
where you left it this morning is not to *know*
your car is parked on the street

where you left it this morning, and now
he decides to use me as a further example,
proposing that I *believe* my name to be

Owen but what if all this time my parents
have been playing an elaborate joke
on me, what if I turn twenty-five, slide

the knife into the cake, and they're
there with their camera phone, recording
my reaction as I discover, buried

in the cake, my real birth certificate, with
the name "Christopher" on it. It's a thought
experiment, my professor doesn't mean

this scenario seriously, doesn't know
the storm he sets off in me at the mention
of your name, Dad, or maybe he does,

and I only *think* it's a coincidence,
he could know, but I don't know, I
don't know, and what if it's

true, and in five years when (surely)
I am comfortable with myself at last,
when I know fully who I am, as all

people do by the time they're twenty-five,
what if I slice into celebration, my blade
sinking through its soft flesh only to

connect with the rustling of paper,
what if my name is not my name,
and I discover, after all this time,

that I am not me, that there is
no me, that I am really

just you?

13 August

Today would have been your grandmother's birthday,
my dad tells me and Adam, as bacon and tomato
sauce sizzle on the pan, and it takes me a moment
to realize he is talking about his mum, *she would*
have been 70 today, he says, casually, as if talking
about the weather, the rain the forecasters predicted
that never came down, the grey sky we've been left with.

And I never met my father's mother. My mother
only did once, the Christmas after she and Dad
started dating, and by springtime she was gone,
swallowed up by the English soil, the flowers
just blooming. I can only think of her as roundness
and red hair in a photo buried somewhere
in the house, two-dimensional smile and ancient

history, blue cardigan and hand-stitched pillow
in our rocking chair, golden deer and the invisible
hand that made them. *How old was she when she died?*
I ask. 42, he answers, after thinking about it, and I am
scared to do the math so I just ask, *How old were you?*
20, he tells me, *3 months away from my final exams.*
And I am 20. And I am my father all over again.

And suddenly, he seems magical to me, to be standing
here, to have survived. 5 days ago, he turned 49, and
5 days after his birth, she turned 21, and 4 months
after her death, he turned 21, and 28 years later
he is 7 years older than she ever got to be, and 1 year
away from 50. I have been preparing for my parents' deaths
since the first grade, and I am still not ready for them to go.

How does he bear it? *How*, I start to ask him,
then lose my nerve, *How did she die?* and he knows
It was a blood clot, but he can't remember where, knows
It wasn't the heart, can't think of the proper name, runs
to his phone, to *pulmonary embolism*, the term ringing
hollow in the kitchen, and I search for the red meat of it,
the death hiding in the syllables, the blood swelling up

behind the letters and stops in an early destruction. But
all I find is blank space, an absence. There aren't enough
pictures of her, no memory to hang onto. *She didn't like*
having her picture taken, Dad tells me. *What was she like?*
I ask. *I don't really know*, he says. *I never really knew her*
as an adult. And I wonder if I will ever really know him

before I lose him, before we both disappear.

Villanelle I Can Never Let My Grandad See

My Grandad overdosed on sleeping pills,
not enough to die, just to cry out.
A drug alone is not the thing that kills,

though it may bring you temporary thrills
that free the mind, the body of doubt.
When my Grandad overdosed on sleeping pills

it wasn't glamorous, with chemical frills,
that's not what taking them was about.
A drug alone is not the thing that kills,

not the thing that surrounds the heart and stills
it, just the traveler taking a new route
like my Grandad did when he took those sleeping pills,

through the roads of the bloodstream, through internal hills
that remind you only what you are without.
A drug alone is not the thing that kills.

I think about the gut, the way it spills
out of the mouth, the body's desperate shout.
My Grandad overdosed on sleeping pills
but a drug alone is not the thing that kills.

Diagnosis

Sometimes I wonder if having one would help,
like a car of my own, or a new iPhone—more
storage space for all the [REDACTED] I already know,
and the need to be updated every other month.

As if I can squash my [REDACTED] flat into a book
with its wings oozing beneath it, and put a name
to it, as if this will keep it from flapping within me.
As if by naming [REDACTED], you can kill it.

As if this [REDACTED] can be shackled into symbols,
contained by the graphemic bars of letters. As if that
would set me free. A word is just a box
for us to hide the unsayable in, disguise it so that

I no longer just act [REDACTED] sometimes, I have [REDACTED],
adjective becoming noun. I no longer [REDACTED], I am a [REDACTED],
verb becoming noun, label, sentence. I sentence myself into
sentences, acting, as I always have done, as if words will save me.

I think about my Grandad, how they didn't have words
for his [REDACTED] when he crumbled into a hospital,
leaving my dad, as a kid, unable to name this sudden
absence. How calling it [REDACTED], forty years later,

doesn't help, when he's yelling at his father in the front
of the car, or cradling him as he weeps in the back room
of our house. I think about my Nana, how if she'd lived
in a different time, she would've been marked [REDACTED],

but back when my mother and her siblings were growing up,
all they could call it was *a bad day*. *Mom's having a bad
day*, they would whisper, and they are still haunted by it,
by what has left them tongueless, the [REDACTED] of it.

At least I've never thrown a knife at you, Mom tells me,
and I know she sees her mom in me, sees her sister. I know
this is my inheritance, this aching chasm of wordlessness,
this [REDACTED].

So I resist. I diagnose myself poet, diagnose myself noun,
noun myself into a diagnosis, diagnose myself word.
I diagnose myself mirror, diagnose myself metaphor,
because what is a metaphor if not a kinder kind

of diagnosis, and always just as insufficient,

presenting symptoms as if they explain the
sickness, when the truth is no matter how hard I try
I will never be able to write out the [REDACTED] of me.

Self-Portrait as Eeyore

Your mouthful of thistle,
your unlying tongue,

your great grey ears dipping
into the river—

don't ever let anyone tell you
to cheer up, no,

keep singing your sorrow
to the trees.

Welcome it inside the house
they took from you,

broke down and rebuilt
on a new patch of land.

They keep taking your tail
and calling it a bell pull,

the lost parts of you repurposed,
recycled, made

into tools for their use, not
acknowledged as yours.

Just sigh,
resign yourself to it.

You are still beautiful
with nails holding you together.

Throw your own birthday party.
The best gift you will ever receive

is the one you make yourself
from nothing. Nothing

is not such a big thing.
Keep moving

the popped balloon in and out
of the jar,

marvel at the simple magic of it,

how even destroyed things remain,

how they still come in and out
of the dark circle

of the world, how they become
something new.

Wild Geese

after Mary Oliver: after Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz

with a line from Sarah Kay's "The Type"

You do not have to be okay.
You do not have to say yes
to every breeze that comes asking
for a bit of you. You are allowed to breathe
in one moment without gasping over the next.
You need not be torn
every night by whisperings in the deep
of your head. Sleep is not counterproductive.
The word "no" is not a death sentence, or an
unkindness, or an ending. You have no obligation
to possibility, only to the soft honesty of your body's
now. Work is not always the answer. *You are not the problem.*
Meanwhile, your imagination offers itself to you.
Time can never be wasted, only lost.
And isn't that sad, and isn't that okay,
I promise you, through every handful of glass
it feels like you are breaking yourself into,
you can always turn and find someone who loves you.

Walking Home

The night whispers delicious
 into the deep of my ear as geese dip
 their heads into the dark ink
 of the sky reflected in the pond water.
 My throat drips.

This park swells
 with its own greenness, the city air
 damp and fresh and
 I have never been good at living
 in the present, feel it

trickling away even
 as it flows about me, sucked up
 into the soft hungry soil
 and leaving my memory's grass slick
 with remembrance.

I keep living days
 as if in retrospect, as if I am already
 looking back on them
 with an aching, unearned nostalgia.
 I sweat longing,

feel it dampening
 each crevice and inner curve of this body
 as it climbs Beacon Hill,
 marching towards something I've managed
 to make a home.

I scatter a bag
 of pretzel crumbs for the squirrels, search
 for the right word
 for everything, try to stay present, to pay attention
 to everything.

I walk right down
 the middle of one-way streets, stare down cars
 and dare them
 to tear into me, just to feel a little freer.
 And the next morning,

as sunlight shafts across the brick
 and the flat of the gate
 in a way I have never seen before,
 I watch the marigold pot

as it sit atop a bed of bricks, waiting
for it to burst forth something beautiful.

The Next Morning

18 August 2018

This morning, I woke up on my back
and when I sat up everything was still in darkness
but the ocean.

It glowed at me out of the black
like a mouth, a shining grey space punctuated
by the dark bark of trees.

My breath caught in my throat
and for one of the first times in my life
I knew I wasn't dreaming.

Everything was still,
a kind of paralyzed serenity, awe freezing
each muscle of my body

like its cousin terror, lurking outside
the windows, wanting to be let in
by the blackness.

I remember falling asleep
with its grip around my throat
and I was so sure this time

I would be consumed, swallowed up
into the night. But now the sea shone
in spite of it.

It still hums within me,
the way the ocean resists invading shadows,
how it has its own kind of light,

even when the sun is gone,
and there is no blue sky reflected
in its mirror-rich waves.

And I pray that I may carry that sea in me,
in the night-like pit of my stomach,
to bring me peace, to guide me home.

The Road to Slapton Ley

I could drive it with both eyes closed,
but for now I sit in the backseat,

watch my father in the passenger,
and his father at the wheel, the backs

of their heads. The silence. The binoculars
about their necks, and the Devon countryside

unfurling outside the car window, fields
where my childhood seems to flit between

the wheat-stalks, unharvested. High hedges loom
on either side of the road, concealing

the past from me, a full view of our surroundings impossible
until we reach the hill, and begin winding down it,

until the sea, clouded in mist, emerges
through the trees, the bay expanding beneath us,

until we reach the bottom, and everything
is visible.

And I have been here before,

so many times.

And it always feels
like a dream,
my memory's landscape, ingrained

in me. And in that moment,
we are all okay,

all three
generations of us, speeding

down this long road
to the ley
and the birds dancing
in the air above it,

the birds floating
atop its surface
which waits for us, sparkling,
like a promise.