

Amylia Grace

February Rain in Milwaukee

The night is red. A storm
is brewing. Cold rain

on naked heads drawn skyward
in the late Wisconsin winter.

We all hear it too late; gutters
pinged with rain, sound

quicken like breath,
the tinny music of swelling

gutters, all rusty and surprised.
I touch my belly and think

of you--that emptied silo no longer
waiting to be filled.

Memories rise up like heat.

Merging Dreams of Lovers with Leftover Pizza

Our dreams are simple. Mid-mornings across the black
Formica counter. The Times
spread like sunlight over slices of cold pizza I serve
on paper plates.

Me in my spa robe, you inside it. The tender hours.
No need to practice
worse-case scenarios. Or hide behind the spill
of Mahler's Fifth

sudden & shifting between emptied rooms.
Oh, to live not like Mahler, but a symphony!
Like the world, embracing
everything.

Learning how to rejoice in the cacophony. Like trombones
sliding inside pianos. The wordless hours.
Your lips buzzing into a mouthpiece. The vibration
of hammers

and strings. My fingers like children on sea-saws, bouncing
through the notes—tethered to the sound of a G
stretching into itself. I am here,
as always.

Looking into a bruised eye like a peephole
with something more ferocious than love. Maybe this
time we don't fall after all--and love is not destined
to deteriorate.

The future fluid and connected like dreams or Great Lakes,
only far less dramatic. Like water evaporating and falling
as rain over Boston. As snow over Maine. Forever merging
with the salt of the Atlantic.

Meditations to The Max

You are all oomph and spunk directed outwards. You run
me in circles, sleep still in our eyes. Energy like light filling
curtainless rooms. Today I am six again and digging for gold

in the sandbox. Our filthy feet banned from the house. Instead,
we dip toes in the river. Secret handshake marks the spot.
The language of hands another current. Christians (like you?)

imagine God with hands, but I am not so sure. Even monkeys
are taught to speak with their hands. Babies discover their hands
when they are six weeks old. They ball them into tiny fists,

slowly turning them back and forth before their eyes, amazed.
My own hands dug and dug and came up with only this:
Silt and sediment once buried deep now carried on wind

and water. Fast flowing rivers and freshwater lakes. Reminders
of home. Chubby clouds in crowded skies. Springtime. The grass
lush and lime. Lilacs already browning. But they're still good.

Enough to explain a little of the world and life to you and tell you
why it should be lived. Like musk. Persistent and penetrating.
It is closeness and the memory of closeness.

An aroma that smothers with thickness. It is locker rooms,
babies' skin and feet. Sweet smelling, earthy and unctuous.
Even now I remember the musk of men I loved and nestled.

Babies do this too—tuckling tight against mothers' necks.
I smell you even after you're gone. Life moves on without you
and I have only these words to give. Some are sodden. Flimsy

balled tissues from Papa's funeral. Bones like silver hidden
in the earth. Here, touch the evidence: coins, jewelry,
swords. All burdensome to hold. Even the word itself is soft:

~ s i l v e r ~

Shout it and no one runs. But be weary--one could crush all
you love with other soft words. Like no. Like yes. Like gone.

--for Max, b. 2002

Over the Transom

Mom and I mapped a route to the U.P.
and Northern Wisconsin but drove no further
than Door County--a pseudonym of Grace.
Champagne was her ballast.

I napped and poked about the pool, spying girlhood
dreams like a one-track navigator. She'd jerk awake
on the king-sized bed, soaked to her eyeballs in alcohol,
struggling to stammer

You have no clue, honey. A bucket.

I'd heave to and mark my place in an Atwood
book, uncinch the scarf, a caterpillar clutched
about her neck, covering the scars surgeons left
in lieu of glands.

Sometimes, I'd read aloud to her, plunging
stanza after stanza for fear if I stopped, I'd end
her life. Mom out on the balcony to smoke again,
watching the contrail solidify.

Dreams tethered to consciousness, to breath.
I don't document her days with pen or lens.
Can you picture sky striped with artificial clouds?

Old hat, blue and white late-day, late September.
Searching the trees for a secret closet. Twenty toes
dipping in a chlorinated sea.

Before my feet could touch bottom, Mom got swamp
nosed and honked like a swan. Swimming agape
in a handful of glitter, flirting between the underwater

legs of strangers. Grandpa peered through old parochial school windows to capture her. We were in the deep end, she still a catch with a slit throat—her slit white and striking

(all the Rugby boys used to say). Like the potted orchids beside her hospital bed, a nod to all her richly colored blossoms--sensitive like her, and hard to care for. Exquisite lives made of brevity and beauty--more idea than flower.

I put up boundaries and she unfurled them, like her faded black bikini—raised in surrender or offering before flinging it at me, naked, her story in a nutshell over the transom and lost in an orbit of bubbles,

such desire universal. Like Twilight, like Bella, and the wish to be undead before fucking. Or not— for me: a one-piece underneath the black pencil skirt I insist on wearing poolside.

Our bodies still damp at dusk; Mom and I, two white orchids left atop his headstone. Then shame is the prize, cadaverous, trapped sables.

Goodbye, Daddy. Goodbye, Grandpa.

I sputter out. How easy it unzips from my mouth, like this skirt worn for him, its zipperteeth torn apart with Mom's help in the back of a Buick.

Variations on the Word *Leave*

-After Margaret Atwood

I would like to watch you leaving,
which will not happen.
I would like to watch you,
leaving. I would like to leave you,

to exit with grace and nonchalance,
like the leaves on the late autumn
trees: their downward fall
short and to the point.

I would like to leave before becoming
brittle and walk out of the house without
you, appearing lost and lonesome
before appearing no more.

I would like to be left
in the forest of loose ambling leaves
with its slant sun and bonechill.
Leave me please

between patches of sinuous sun
and dollops of stillgreen grass. Chin up,
nose skyward and pointing to broad
shouldered cloudshapes, little tufts of breath
atop the crooked world.

How It Ends

I dream you up sometimes late at night. When I wake I hear this pitch in my ears--an unfamiliar sound, something like gravel in a tuba--low and sudden. And I think maybe this is how it ends, each death a concerto. No streams of violins or the haunting din of loss. Just a small room. A lamp beside a bed. Sleeping children at peace. And sheets and sheets of loneliness. Not a big finish, really. Suddenly there and then not. The bread of the body brought to His lips.

What Remains

Outside in turtlenecks we tend to our fading
garden of peppers and pumpkins. You call for the dog
and ties your shoelaces while august flecks of gold
and rust fall piece by piece from the trees.

I would like to touch you now, but we've been
unrecognizably replaced--these bodies, like our lives
beyond that now. The minutes pass on with each
non-touch--like suffering, like skin, like grief.

I water the garden and see you proudly pocket the last
orange and yellow pepper. Everything we have
planted has survived. The sun droops downward
in the sky. We pause to watch half disappear. What remains

seems brighter. I am happy until I notice you have turned
to go. The moment has passed and I am holding a watering can
and not your face. I call your name to tell you I need you.
You smirk. I have leaves in my hair.

After Visiting an Unmarked Grave in India

Once in India
I stood on the edge
of a grave and looked
down at the bones

inside; I could not tell
women from men, or
which hands killed;

dried pelvises all
opened the same,
like prayer books
lacking words.

Delicate wing bones
forever cinched
around the spine

like tea saucers
about to snap—
broken things

being taken away:
the moon behind
the clouds, the proud
lean of tall grass, and us

keeping watch
like herons and loons
that wait for fish
that wait for smaller fish.

White bellied gulls
swoop down to dine
on garbage. The water
still rubs the shore.

What Was Heard [Cat and Bird]

If you care about something, you have to protect it.

-John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

I.

Last night Andrew Bird fiddled his compulsions like tin, announcing his Big Thoughts on laptop speakers. And there was Zeus, belly up. My arms cradled around him--the purr of a higher vibration.

It felt something like love, like the start of something good—and Zeus pounced on the chance to court Mr. Figgy's rump with his tongue.

Elsewhere I knew what creatures were doing to other creatures: the chase and capture, the joy in killing others' joy. But I rejected all the proof that the strong always prey on weak.

I rejected the pine tree in the small of my backyard and the brown horned bird on its bow, but took it back on functionality after admiring the varmint free yard.

I rehearsed rejecting Christianity again--before the neighbors could repudiate me for refusing to play tit for tat. Yes, rejection felt good in my bones! Subdued surges of endorphins, a temporary siege on the body, the regurgitated sick of wrong remembrance brought on like relief. Like tension relief after coming.

The tingle of toes. Oh, I practiced it! Reciting His name, courting constructs to add to my list. Like fidelity. Like love. Like us. A nest beneath the roof with feathers bound in twine-- a silent ornament of delight. Watching the cats watch the sparrow through thick panes of glass.

As a girl I learned the hymnal. Singing God's eye is on the sparrow--but not taking men at their word (divine and human alike). I lifted the glass and Zeus rushed toward the breeze, wet nose pressed tight to the screen, the window opened to truth. *My!* Curious cats craving chance after chance to ruthlessly

capture their prey. I denied my flimsy faith in a nonchalant God, then practiced rejecting Him, too! What use is a father who doesn't protect you? How easy to repudiate Him! I practiced once more before hearing my voice reject my own name.
II.

The Blackberry buzzed. Two texts from a lover in Odessa: *Remember reading Owen Meany at night in separate beds?* (Oh baby! It was better than phone-sex!)-It read like invitation.

Turns out he's just a fiction born into fiction, something like the biblical Jesus. All miracles rendered invalid—thrown out on some obscure technicality by the female judge from Kamchatka.

But people like us, with Andrew Bird on tinny speakers and enough extra hours to enjoy a room filled with music, should remember armlessness does not equal surrender—which is what my two thumbs texted back.

I felt some validation after no reply came and Zeus licked dried jam off my hand. I would not reject Zeus, not even that haphazard black speckled tongue. How could I? I chose him (or was it he who chose me?).

Winking code between cold shelter bars. Spending each evening of this (God given?) life grooming Kitten with his sandpaper tongue. It isn't much, but he is met with applause from this audience of one, impressed nightly

by the sheen of fur coats. Imagine! Man grooming man in joy for the coming of love—not just aching to poke into bottles and bodies of water or women, in dogged service to ancient needs of the flesh.

Reasons to Stay

Because it is night, because we fought today.
Because it is raining and rain is a reason to stay
alone inside. I recline the old Lazy-Boy, sides stuffed
with yesterday's crumbs: pen caps, the loose,

forgotten change that isn't mine. All the unknown things
we lose hide in obvious places. One copes with helicopters
by choosing a bird to listen to. I invite the outside in
again--a fight you never win.

Refusing opened windows when it rains—a habit carried
over from girlhood. Even then I could feel the air and know
if a storm were coming. Or not; the difference essential,
like our fights, the subject same as always, historic.

Let's forget all that for now, okay? All I want anymore
is simple. To putter with you in the last streams of sun,
clear and shattered--a slow notion of marrow in half light,
determined by aperture; and sanity at too long intervals.

Anger is made stranger by self-editing--suddenly
the sun's a stone. To forgive you each day is my ritual.
There, where least words thaw taut water and everything
wants a narrative. All I ask is that you make me laugh.