

M Poems

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I stood and watched him, fading away, fading away, along the pavement, and could hardly tell whether he were an actual man, or a thought that had slipped out of my mind, and clothed itself in human form and habiliments, merely to beguile me.

--Nathaniel Hawthorne

1.

NIGHT'S EVERYTHING

Nearly a year later, the November after you, there was a party—industrial sized—a whole world of us— at the stone end of the month and outside it was black trees and sky and a city jabbed bare with chills. You arrived in a cowboy hat and, according to the buzz, had just returned from some southwest town of Tee Pees and Peyote, having just studied the methods of the old witch doctors. It was a night of a thousand hard bangs and jolty riffs and you were instantly everywhere—each corner vibrating with your breathy movement, each wall lined with your slight of the hand, graceful knee bend and spidering arms. You were in all of Baltimore's black velvet, mohair and sequence, bumming cigarettes and grabbing waistlines. You laughed at everything and everyone loved your laughing. You stuck out shiny and bold, like the coarse purple ripple that drifts toward peacock color on the neck of those otherwise ratty, sad, sad pigeons four stories below. I couldn't not watch as you became the most intricate parts of night's everything: the movement of a cool silver ear hoop, a keychain shaking on a hip, the wind hitting the window, the orange head of a cigarette as it fell to the floor. So many objects, so many shapes and so many ways to watch you move.

2.

THE SUMMER I KNEW YOU

The harbor was thick with the smell of dead crabs and the heat was threatening to turn us ugly but we kept glancing at each other anyway, sitting at the edge of the chewed up pier, the water blacker than ever and a jellyfish pacing nearby—close enough to lean in and

grab—white-electric and slippery—its uncontained head and pattern-less limbs being one of a million languages we'd cross paths with and fail to comprehend during our short time together.

We talked about things like the mind and universe— how the universe is 90% dark matter and therefore all one's problems are minor and sometimes, though rarely, it's possible to see ourselves as smaller than we usually think we are.

That day we made up simple debates, such as: if we died on this pier from mysterious forces, would it be so beautiful and tragic if no one was there to witness our end? If some toxic monster rose from the water and sucked us down—would it matter if no one were there to see? I said no and you said yes and we never bothered to agree.

3.

THERE WAS THAT ONE NIGHT

Even though I didn't know you so well then, for a moment it made sense to invite you— being it was only 5 days or 6 and being it was you and it wasn't this city: a quick pass through El Paso, north to Truth or Consequences, White Sands and Alamogordo.

And because it would get colder soon and because everyone always talked about leaving for the winter. We talked Portland where the bikes go unlocked. We talked Seattle where even addicts smile. We talked Austin where everything is made of music. We talked the Bay where the weather is kind. We talked Chicago where even our mothers would agree with our choice to run away there.

But that night it was the corner of Charles and Preston at a rickety table in a bar the shape of a submarine and just as dimly blink-blink lit and I now know I was lucky you didn't take me seriously when I said I'd take you, too.

4.

YOUR ROOM

Ingredients in order of appearance: Hand sawed table with black, intricate and sharp edges. Fiji and Tonga Kava Kava—powder form and won on EBAY—in zip lock baggies. Your grandmother's porcelain bowl, shiny and French. A mug—muddy from too many nights of your drinking rituals. Your mouth: deciphering for me the difference between Tonga and Fiji: one more like wine, one more like dreaming. Panty hose a color called sweet brown sugar—instead of cheesecloth—for straining. Your sexy drowse by 9PM. A bothered couch. Our mouths—dry caves. Your torso, traveling downward under the wrong side of the blanket.

5.

THE DAY I LEARNED YOU DANCED

It was childish, yes, but it was us. It was the water, the ripples, the sky blood orange with evening, softening the black water to gray. It was our laughing, which you said sounded witchy as it bounced off the planks. It was the dance we did that indicated we were functioning inside a slippery jigsaw of ideas.

Later we'd conclude it could be no other way—the magic that made easier all the hard blows and problems across the harbor, on the other side of the Domino Sugar factory, where there were things decomposing as they waited on us to stop avoiding them.

It was tidal wave ripples, as Water Taxies became monsters, or perhaps an invisible Jesus, walking over to reprimand us.

It was me saying: *the problem with this situation is that you enjoy watching the water change colors as much as I do, and my experience is that one only enjoys watching the color of the water with someone for so long before it grows boring and pointless. As we know, it isn't about the water at all.*

And it was you smiling, your face tilted downward and replying: *the water changes color almost as often as we do.*

And me—knowing just what you meant—and accepting your response for a while, at least.

It was the only response you bothered to offer and it made me want to keep on waiting for that monster to rise and indeed I would have—as a lost school girl would claim to do—waiting forever, with just you, the late autumn jellyfish and the smell of the ghostly white carcasses of the dissolving crabs under the pier who had come to shore not realizing that the dry light beyond the muck of their shelled lives was little more than the shock of their dying.

6.

THERE WERE WORDS. MANY

But how is it we ever managed to communicate at all? The night had begun with talk of mastodons and then quickly turned. I heard you say the words *if it's any consolation* through the smoke of a bar, over an oily plate of garlic fries and amidst the faux punk sounds of VH-1, there were words, though I can't recall what they were exactly, only that each palpated like a frightened vital organ or fish, some were so jumpy they landed on top of other words and rode them as they slithered out the door, those that chose to stay seemed proud of their efforts to hang out, forming tiny bright and visceral streams that leaked all over the floor—sending the whole room from dry and ashy to sloppy, unwieldy. And some of the words that had left came back eventually, only to hold slippery duels with those words that had stayed all along. They fought for my attention and it was hard not to feel special with so much drippy competition for my approval and I was eager to feel significant, as we all usually are, even when it gets overwhelming, so I found an edge to climb up and escaped all the flooding and I think I heard you call out to me or maybe it was just a word I heard that sounded like you so I ignored it just in case, propping myself up to rest. I think you may have stayed down there all night—swimming in the flipping vowels and consonants, listening and dancing with them, making them happy you stayed. No doubt, they were happy to have you stay.

7.

WHAT I FELL FOR INEXPLICABLY

Your collection of insects and fossils, glued down under carnival glass (because you were good at holding onto things that stayed still for you), a bone garden scattered by March, half finished (because you were good at starting things with zeal, at least). On your dresser, the potato left to grow into a plant (because you were good at letting things flow unpredictably).

8.

BUT WHEN IT WAS FUN IT WAS FUN, AND WHEN IT WASN'T IT WASN'T

The cops had 2 a.m. lit up and jingling like a game show and the Paca street carryout was bigger than it needed to be and as bare as our thoughts. *No check cards* said the man behind the bulletproof glass. And we were hungry. Under the loud neon, your 8-dollar coat was more ridiculous than I had previously thought— a pattern of constellations and pyramids, and then there was the dress you wore—torn black cloth, not to mention the slippers. Yes, I was stoned, but I wasn't too gone to be concerned about a boy in a dress on the wrong part of town.

And there was the sharp urine smell and sloppy white tiles and the dissonant sizzle of chicken frying and the man with the stitched up eye who heckled us about my check card. You said it was because of me that they didn't beat you up and I agreed. Grabbing my hand on the way back toward Franklin, you said you were scared and I thought it was one of the most believable things you'd ever said. Holding my hand out of fear, and then letting it drop at Saratoga, I felt the moment leave you—slip out as most things not already in you slipped out.

9.

THE BETTER LETTER NEVER WRITTEN

Dear M.
Truth be told, I've just never been good at getting high.
Sorry!
XOXO

10.

DAY OF FLIGHT

It was the last morning ever and in the spirit of the event you said quietly *this is all there is*, and the ghostly thin vein of the sentence drifted through the room and over the puddle of our hangover heads.

It wasn't easy, but I nodded and the morning changed—suddenly, little more than the weighty white walls of your room, a constant dry clicking from the heat pipes, dust and a single tightly curled sound springing loose from the bed as you rose, taking a bit of the day with you.

And it all happened quick as a small white shock heading straight to the nerve, cutting the metallic smell of the bed sheets in the process and the doughy rhythms of light coming through the window—the reflections of car mirrors, landing in my lap.

11.

MY FAVORITE ONE

It was a moment near the end. Your couch, lights off, too late on a Tuesday, our faces nearly touching as you held a lighter close to our eyes.
You said *look into my eye until it looks like an eye no more.*
No I can't I said, laughing.
You said *yes, don't laugh, stay still.*
But I laughed, looked away, looked again and focused.
You said, trying to be serious, *what does it look like?*
I said *I don't know.*
You said *figure it out.*
I said *I don't know, but it doesn't look like an eye anymore.*

12.

BUT YOU WERE ALWAYS

more 4 a.m. than midnight
more a knife than a spoon,
more a cough than a sigh,
a half moon, rather than full—to gain leverage with sharpened points,
the phrase: *I can see everywhere and everything and tell you about it later,*
a run red light,
a failed pause at the stop sign in a rush to the airport,
escaping winter, the holidays, the city waylaid with exhaust fume snow and the cold, cold winds that threatened to blow the rest of us clear to Annapolis,
black eyes that easily could have stopped the whole airport as you disappeared behind the frosted glass of the terminal's door, midair, continuing your course, not adapting to each season according to science or routine—only your own brand of rituals.
And I was grounded in the parking lot and moving away from the idea that something so simple as eyes could be more magic than eyes—and there I stayed.

