

**Selected Poems by Laura Grothaus**

**Proof**

Proof of teeth is babies' gums

Proof of babies' gums is babies' mouth

Proof of babies' mouth is laugh

Proof of laugh is trust

Proof of trust is gamble

Proof of gamble is coin

Proof of coin is moon

Proof of moon is night

Proof of night is winter

Proof of winter is frost

Proof of frost is ghost

Proof of ghost is story

Proof of story is loneliness

Proof of loneliness is hunger

Proof of hunger is teeth

## The Tending

*after Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene by Hendrickter Buggben*

The women gentling arrows  
from your chest look as if  
they are pulling splinters— so calm—  
while dusk velvets your  
limp grey hand. I've heard  
you were patron of dispossessed  
queens and tomboys, diners at the altar  
of lady ham. Oh Sebastian—

I kissed her mouth  
on the couch after roller skating.  
Her cat stared, and it felt like God  
laid a finger on my spine. In the background,

the shape of the tree mirrors  
the shafts in your chest.  
We are meant to read the symbols:  
tree, arrow, crimson cloth,  
hands, and threes. I don't know how  
we pick our emblems or anchors,  
how you became a book in a library  
of velum eyelids and slanderous  
hips, how we wake realizing our bodies  
have been lighthouses all along.

Her mouth was soft. The couch  
was warm. A ship in a bottle  
sailed the desk. A tree  
touched its fingers to the pane.

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Home Again

molasses March idling like a car  
latch unhooked, lock parched  
my mother home from college—the first to go

palmed kolache from  
thick syrup months on the farm  
bee-stung fruit, the bites found under arms

her mother saying, *Your eyelids have been flying*  
*at half mast a year now.*  
saving it up for later, this season's excess

home now with the tin siding blues  
mulberry mouthed, hinges crack  
my mother taught me

earthquakes felt like nausea  
and a woman could eat her way  
through a cellar of unlabeled cans

my mother taught me  
doors with rusted rims  
and the hush they shut behind you

## Larded All with Sweet Flowers

*after Ophelia and Laertes by Benjamin West*

It was the only way he could paint her—

turpented, stripped

down to her canvas

bones, then softened

voluptuously, toned gold and

gowned.

Oil slick, she drips

flowers, robe held open, seams

braided with opium and morning glory,

folds holding fibrous stalks, feathered green heads.

*It's oregano*, she claims as Laertes finds her arm, then her hips.

He turns towards a king who stutters, *To each his own poison*. And I—

who once knew how to

unscrew the cap from a mushroom— I know

she scatters rosemary and rue, a patient

prick of blood where trembling fennel bites her fingers, but I

only recall pansies— relics of my grandmother's garden

and hospital rooms where a gold thread

trickled and hardened in her veins, her lips sewn with

spit. In hospice, she made roses from clay,

cluttered couches with bouquets that dried

yellow, tickled cotton air as,

bile rising, she slurred a prayer for death

ending in her husband's name.

A boy I knew once claimed:

*Every girl has a favorite flower.*

**Also Milk**

We were watching monkeys wring the wrists  
of each branch, spring babies  
losing their hands in their mothers' fur then  
letting go when you said, *My momma's letting go  
of language. She calls everything milk.  
Ketchup is milk. Water is milk.* You  
were still you, but also milk. And I tried  
to feel some of this for you, as if that  
would make you feel less. The monkeys' cages  
widened an ache in us. The quiet after  
one golden howler peeled a cry. Why  
were we here? Both of us at odds with corrals  
and coops. I spun out the iterations of grief,  
kinds of giving enough in the doing.  
Here is the tonic of crows and the thicket  
in your mind yielding to touch, here is the hand.

## The Selkie

The selkie shed her seal skin in the ocean  
to comb her hair  
with human hands. Her body was  
seamless and silken, a moon's blister,

translucent with salt, shins glistened  
loose light around her feet,  
her hands a dark thicket,  
her inky mouth gritted

with laughter. I listened for her  
after the sound had stopped.  
All seals took on a glow.  
Black butter eyes allured,  
a fishy gawp enticed.

The selkie knew what kind of girls  
watched the sea like that, let the rocks bite  
their toes. Girls who had learned sweetness  
to get by, who wore out their nights

with apologies. So this was not the story of a sailor  
hiding a seal's skin in rafters. This was revision  
like shore is revised: sand transcribed  
by tide, woman into seal into woman.

She let me stroke  
faint whiskers above her lips,  
dappled spine, rough knees,  
her hair like oil slick.  
My feet mangled

with kelp, my hands  
in the foam at her hips.  
Waves slurred against our chests,  
drunk on brine and whining.  
    The tide caught in our mouths,  
    did not stop rising.

## Mary Magdalene Washing his Feet with Perfume

Messiah with loamed toes, with mired heels.  
Mary mucked with the mountain, her legs  
carrying it still. You, who go to the mountains

wearing boots ordered from the internet,  
who have not read the Bible—I send you  
perfume in the mail.

We are apart this year, as we were last year  
and the one before. Never have we kissed  
on your birthday. Mary poured a litra

of nard, heavy and hotly fragrant  
over his ankles and arches, lending  
comfort to a man who when faced with

the smell of his mortal body  
went to the desert, sand in his hair,  
sun parching his back, peeling the

skin from blisters. I sent you  
the smell of sacrament, of sex. Your hands  
oiled, you call me to say, *All I smell is you.*

You call me to say, *Come here.*  
Mary took her long, dark hair from its braids,  
pulled it free to wipe his feet, pressing

her brow to his toes, wiping  
with spice, with earth, with musk  
sweet dust on the heels,

her neck, her shoulders, her back  
bending to it, her mouth, her eyes, her mouth  
touching his ankle, the rough arch of his foot,

wiping, warming, warning that  
you are loved now, you are  
loved now. And I tell you it is so.

## Coda

*after Wisteria by Claude Monet*

Monet, I reach the end of the notebook  
given to me by my high school art teacher,  
and it is already two months from her death.

Is this like losing sight—

holding brush strokes too close to see the volume they form?

I wanted ripe, ripe summer, to un-smell the whiskey  
on her breath, to un-hear the grey gluttony of Hail Mary.  
The seams of the pond are knotted  
with weeds. Sometimes the wisteria  
is not in bloom and the perfume  
of pinks and blues finds its artifact framed.

She would say, His hand touched that,  
a map, movements  
in an orchestra, every stroke echoes.

## Linguistics

Even now, I try to be generous with language,  
like bats with blood, who turn out their stomachs'  
larders for hungry drifters. I tender my bluntness

and barber my temper. My hands dance  
open with speech. Tell me again how  
wings and tongues make consequences out of air.

## The Mountain

Deep, dank, and dizzying girl,  
come out of the water, come out  
of the moss. Trick tongued  
girl, wily and riled girl, girl  
of white branch, of speckled  
bark, girl with tender bows, with  
thunder gloves, with jade  
in her eyes, stone girl  
coated with flies, itching  
girl who has forgotten  
all you were, remember  
you sat on a rock and saw  
the purple world all around you,  
mountains in every direction,  
rutty trees, knobby kneed,  
pools of resting water  
flecked black with tadpoles.  
You dipped your finger in.  
This is important.  
Remember, you were there  
to watch, to keep time,  
to witness the earth  
dip off into blue  
and it was not easy  
to climb up, your heart  
in your stomach, how hard  
the stone was,  
girl with raw feet,  
sappy, sore, and oozing girl,  
swarm of limbs, gentling yourself  
through your own thoughts, jamming  
foot after foot into crag,  
straight up. You climbed  
and did not stop  
until all around you was the wide world,  
until there they all were in front of you  
waiting for you, only half waiting.  
You must remember the way  
they didn't even move,  
didn't even look up, so certain  
you would make it  
and clean with readiness.

## Baba Yaga In Conversation with her Home

Under the roof, in the bones, I bent double. You quivered:  
underfed doorframe, hollow rafters.

*Remember soot. Remember spruce.*

I lined the lock with baby teeth. You couldn't unclench  
sky from memory, startled easily in a storm, winced at snow's weight.

*Remember staleness. Remember ice.  
Your skin young and tight. Remember cramped.*

Now we only know ourselves when we are moving—  
calloused chicken legs.

*Remember Vasilissa. Remember Ivan.*

The children came with questions. I knew from schoolyard games  
how asking could tame flesh with wrinkles.

*Remember you aged a year for every query, crumpled further  
into pine bark skin. We*

*are a bristled shadow, blood dappled,  
arms thick with birds.*



**Pinocchio Revisited**

I wanted to be floor—  
my under-beams, my littlest  
knots and private  
crannies for toes. Wanted  
cotton sounds  
of footsteps,  
back cracks  
from cold at night,  
crooked groan. Holy holy  
of a well-placed  
nail. Want to be  
doored, even  
framed. Wanted  
a maker, who sucked life  
from deadbolts.

Felt always  
crawled through,  
each part moved  
to rise, to speak.  
Could not trust  
it was me who did  
the rising, my eyes  
leaking sawdust.

Dreamed often  
about trees I once was.  
They say Lazarus  
felt most calm  
hands-deep in dirt.



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