

Imagined Days

I am with you on Saturdays
watching you mop the floor too many times.

I am three thousand miles below you on Sundays
refusing to go to church.

On weekdays, we write. Your second book,
my first. I am kind to your drafts.

In June we get mom to sit through the flight to New York;
we repeat the twenty-block walk across the Upper West Side

to the museum with her, and her legs do not hurt.

So you plan for the Barcelona trip

you could not bring her on
when you were both young.

And you are both still young. Her lapses in memory
nothing that cannot be fixed with a little mahjong.

Your cancer scare was just a scare.

You still run ten kilometres around Bishan every day.

On nights when you do not come back sweaty and triumphant,
I accept these apparitions as my own.

Mise en Scène

The city at sundown

like an apple that's been bit into—

someone on the second floor

opens the lid of her piano

and touches the keys awake;

one chord moans into another

until a whole chimera

slithers out the window

to rest helpless on gravel

where it's crushed underfoot

by a man dragged deaf by his cigarette;

behind him a purplehaired woman

pivots a bouquet on her wrist,

thrusting fragrance into his hunched back

and all he does is exhale

while the girls beside me debate how Catholic

Catholic school should be;

Honestly, even a little

is more than enough, the girls agree;

I think of my neighbour, how even a little love

could push her large body across the ocean

back to India, where two minutes of fire

were enough to consume all seventy years of her;

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a week later her home was made a Kindergarten—

two walls demolished,

fine concrete settled over her garden

like sharp snow;

the crickets and cats and cowgrass,

deep in an ascetic buzz,

didn't question a thing.

Letters to Bone

I.

All the day death

and the spring bloom of death

cells like red tulips

along his spine

visible only when the roots deepen

and he closes his eyes.

II.

As with all abandoned vehicles
the mechanic tries a long recharge
and says to hope for the best
which means a year or less,
sometimes more.
It would take hours
before his assistants come
to warn that if too much has been spent
the only thing to do might be to wait
for the batteries to die—

I found you in the morning,
pain like an ignition switch left on overnight.
In their eyes they were ready
to replace everything.

III.

You are less

and all else

must become more.

A kind of spring

where death packs itself

into a moment

so other things

grow and begin

to die. Still,

there are things

that echo back

your absence;

fast eaters and loud laughs

and fathers dancing

for their kids in shopping malls,

their wives embarrassed;

Vitalis hair tonic

and runners' back profiles;

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parts of a life resurrected

and resown.

It is not that God

seeks to compensate;

shadows argue for light

well enough.

IV.

The man wakes to continue working
towards death, making names for it, trying
to apprehend the thing. To pretend that death
is more than death, that humanity
is more than what is human. God
is the last name he finds
and he asks God why.

It is a question to the air
but the air has become more than air
and the man's pretending more
than a pretence of bravery,
the way virgins say they know how to kiss
and so kiss all the more passionately.

It is in pretending there is more
that more is found. So the man wakes
to apprehend the thing.

V.

Now I see the sender of all bones,
love heartgrippingly woven and achingly naked
ripping through every street and wire and ventricle
that in the hush of a birthday surprise waits to be found.
I see in the subnatural buzz above pain-moistened skin
the torrent of extra-ordinance and omnilogic
that is God.

God, who lets us say to his face
there is no God. And to that face
brave is the hypocrisy of my father's smile
brave is the sound leaking from his punctured trombone mouth
brave is the rout on this nowhere bridge his spine
brave is the cocoon of his hand holding mine
brave is the *it's okay* he says when I ask 'is it today?'
brave is the parade of urine jugs the nurses have become
brave are his muscles, that like old dogs whimper and drag themselves to his call
brave are the generations of painbearers whose stories are written in urine
along the toilet bowls of his ward.

So I say *wreak joy* to my wreck when she asks is it today:
wreak joy into the nightlights
wreak joy into his bones
wreak joy through the valley till the valley is a road
wreak joy with fenced eyes and bent breaths, make them into joy-clouds
wreak joy, my mother, my root's river
wreak joy into today.

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It is today, it is today,

it is today.

No Unwilled Illusion

Your face in the toast today,
tanned and overwhelmed by waves of margarine;
more alive you looked
from when your skin had given up its whole share of sun
to keep your mind from walking out the ward

—but I blew into your eyes
and your eyelids fell like scales,
kissed your forehead
and the wrinkles smoothed over;
from your lips,
the words you never got to finish
spiral moribund
into air;

I remind myself
it is Saturday morning
and I am making breakfast
but the painkillers you left on the countertop
keeping turning around like they recognise you.

Poem in Which You Return

You'd die again, of course.

By the third day, the way your body was,
your last breath heaving that same devastation
into us again—

but first you'd tell me why you'd wash the mop in the shower
and use a Harley-Davidson steering wheel in a Mercedes-Benz;
you'd name how many of your thousand books you'd actually read
and where among them hide the *Star Wars* tapes;
you'd tell me if you'd heard me when I said
I hadn't said I love you enough
and then didn't say I love you;
you'd tell me if you did smile
each time I thought you'd smiled;

you'd solve me these dull mysteries
and you'd go. I'd put you back in your coffin
like a boy reboxing an action figure
stolen from the toy store.