DARK BEDS
poems

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On the northbound lane following the river
I try to explain about horse paths, cart paths,
earth-eaters, the first dozers and rollers
laying hot tar over centuries of dirt. My daughters
still believe whatever I say, mine me
for knowledge practical and vast. Could the moon
have a moon? Ava asks and I don’t know—
it probably could have some asteroid chip
or space-station trash snagged into orbit,
natural satellite, a crushed Coke can
or a bottlecap. But it wouldn’t last,
we can’t steer the mothership, the girls want me
always in the kitchen like a planet,
steady sphere with gravitational pull,
slow burn on the horizon all night
anchoring their dreams in flannel
and cold cream; they want me cut loose
on the tramp, big crazy bounces, playing
Simon Says and Moonwalk Chase. I told them
Curiosity, the Mars rover, found water in red dunes,
trace molecules, ices, thin film in fine dust.
We hunted the meteorite
deep on museum bedrock, pitted hunk of solid iron
radiant in the velvet dark, 34-ton heart

from the asteroid belt, burned into being,
four billion years old. Carmen ran
pell-mell through the Hall of Human History,
past Cro-Magnon skulls and femur bones,
past DNA spiraling slow in a glass case,
to see what she’d been promised,
to lay her cheek against the cool
hard evidence of Space.
Racing the second bell I deliver
a hundred snacks for the hungry first-graders,
zoom home to vacuum the glow-in-the-dark stars
off the Berber carpet—sticky stars,
sticky burrs in the heart,
burr of resentment, burr of disapproval,
angry burr lodged prickling in heart-fibers.
Can I say it? Say I’m a good-enough mother,
flipping pancakes, slicing strawberries, mixing a secret
brew for giant bubbles in a bucket—who knew
an alchemy of cornstarch, water, and yellow Joy
could summon such glimmering tunnels?
Carmen screams and conjures
an undulating prism from thin air,
five-second mirage birthed from her magic wand
until *pop!* it disperses in ragged shimmers.
She’s lost her Day-Glo vampire teeth again,
begs me to search as Ava rips the wet brush
through ratted tangles. I’m threatening scissors,
packing lunches, making lists as you rattle
the dishes, rush to work. The dog’s ashes
wait at the pet crematorium, another body
I keep forgetting, like the gray mushrooms
growing slyly under the sink. I’m overdue
for a bikini wax or an act of discovery, sacred Braille
traced and retraced by an imaginary lover
memorizing an invisible poem.
Tonight I’ll cure henna and indigo
with lemon juice, beat the powder smooth
into a lush hair paste that smells of grasses
and wet wood, my scalp cool and spine erect
beneath that tawny Egyptian headdress.

I did everything I was supposed to:
covered the grays, planted the sunflowers,
watered the dry petunias till streams
poured out the cracks, seeded
rows of Russian kale and sugar-snaps,
cradled your sadness, buried my father,
fed my mother and took her to the doctor, drove up
and down the hill to pony lessons past fields
lit with buttercups and a sick white cow
who wouldn’t get up. Weeded the garden
where green poppy buds crouched packed
with crimped petals, gathering themselves
for an explosion, one week of sheer beauty
before they shed the rouge silks
and wilt, inconsolable. Meanwhile you tamed
the back jungle into a velvet lawn, headphones on,
crushing up a chaw of fresh dandelion leaves
as the mower roared and the whacker’s cord
whipped underbrush into submission.

Light the coals, my love—this is our fierce
barbecue, this is our one-hit-wonder indica
bud in the shed, your six-pack in the cellar,
my secret poems, your prophetic dreams,
my insatiable fire. This is the salted rim,
the sweetly sour cocktail always on tap,
these are the salad days—our homegrown
spinach and arugula, bitter rain-spattered greens
cut fresh in late afternoon, the family bed
and the animal medicine, the anemone’s white blooms
hiding invasive tendrils—everyone’s roots
tangled up in each other.
Nothing like a valentine, 
pink construction paper 
glue-sticked to doilies downstairs 
in preschool, the sand table 
filled with flour, the Fours 
driving trucks through silky powder, 
white clouds rising 
to dust their round cheeks. 
Up here, the Fives are all business: 
four chambers on the chalkboard, 
four rooms colored hard 
in thick-tipped marker, red and red, 
blue and blue, oxygen rich 
and oxygen poor, the branching vine 
of the aorta hanging 
its muscled fruit, carmine 
blood-flower blooming 
in a dark jungle. 
My girl squeezes her fist 
to show me the size of it. 
Pulses it like a live animal. 
Taps the double rhythm 
that never stops, not a trot 
but the echo of a trot, not a drum 
but the echo of a drum, 
small palms on the art table 
laying down the backbeat: 
become become become.
WORD-FINDING

for my mother

Three words we must never speak: *Do you remember?*
My question is a stone

thrown into the deep waters of our conversation. Anxiety ripples outward:

tip of the tip of the tip of the tongue: *I’m sorry, I can’t.*
Words slip past, scatter

like minnows in a dark lake.
Awareness of the sense but not the syllables,

slippery things moving in reeds and shadows.
Don't hunt them. Don't grasp.

Cast a net lightly and the words swim back:
finned silver, triumphant

as we row the lake again in our quiet boat, all eyes and hands.
INSTRUCTIONS
FOR NOVEMBER

Put up the storms, cut down the corn,
shear the dead things
at their root—nicotiana, blue aconite,
the forgotten onions
I found in cold dirt, scrabbling
for the last of them, their shedding skins

and yellow flesh, soft to the touch
but still good for soup. Our girl,
dressed as a black ghoul,
danced the kitchen hissing threats,
lost a milk-tooth, her fifth
seed pearl, corn kernel wrought

from the wet red gap. Now she’s
licking the emptiness, leering
at the dark spaces, offering

a skeletal glove to greet us
as we toss the rotten lanterns
on the compost, turn back

the clocks, lock the hens in at dusk.
The coyote left strewn feathers,
dry scat, no trace of blood.
We lost only two—ten more
to protect. They hop from the coop
dumb with trust, pecking at ice water

with white dragon tongues, warm
eggs flush in the nesting box.

Night begins now at four o’clock,
smoky tunnel
to the season of lead. Let’s make

the same promises over again.
Shut out the lights,
come up to bed.
Another tiny thing the body makes, 
this membrane filled with fluid, sac 
without a k, not for Santa’s toys or 
long grain rice, not burlap or canvas 
or silk but some internal substance spun 
like a spider’s egg purse, suddenly full, 
pressing on nerve tissue, hence the pain. 
Is it the size of a pea or a grape? 
asks the nurse. I didn’t think a self could 
sprout a pea pod, grow its own soft fruit. 
The imaging room is a box of gray. 
The gel is warm, the wand glides like a god’s 
hand across my breast, blind pulses sound 
the dark interior, echoing until we know.
Anything can be medicine.
A jar of spring water,

a dropper of oil, windchimes
at dusk by a door no one enters.

The smallest cat venturing
onto your lap, circling
to make her day bed.

There is medicine in her purr, her paws
kneading your sweater,

medicine in the glow
of the creased old heating pad, borrowed
long ago from your mother.

See, it still works.
Lay it over your belly.

TV can be medicine
if you’re too sore to sleep.
Even the childproof vial

of hard white pills, concocted in a factory
on another continent, rattling
like teeth in the vitamin drawer,
is necessary medicine
for despair.
Stop gritting your jaw,
calculating your failures.
Anything can be medicine.

Open the cap, tip the pearls
into your palm.

Forgive yourself everything.
Swallow.
Call it lily of the valley, dense scent rising from dark beds. Call it a woodpecker knocking on an invisible door. Call it wet lilacs in sun breaking through mist, strands of gossamer web strung with dew. Call it mornings alone, black tea and Sappho, the poems I’d forgotten coming back to me now, everything I carried through woods and hedgerows, a month with no rain, slow river, slow stream, a dead tree collapsed on the power lines, one spark freed and the forest in flames, dry tinder of understory in a frenzy of burning, fifty acres alight like a vernal pyre for the goddess of change till the good men march with chainsaws and shovels to beat the inferno down.

Call it bleeding heart in the dooryard, long-buried instinct unfurling in green, snow of apple blossom falling on grass and a child warm from sleep sliding into my lap, knocking pen from hand, naked and delicious as a hot cross bun. Smother her with kisses, her ducks and bears, her sister’s upstairs with a new dream journal, leggy daughter of deer and lynx thrashing at bedtime, too wild for sleep.
I don’t want to turn ten, she cries
at breakfast, tears in her Cheerios.
I want to go back to seven, remember seven?
Yes, we remember. Call it a magic number:
she discovered five moons of Jupiter

named for Zeus’s mortal mistresses,
cross-breeding Greek myth
with second-grade astronomy. Io and Europa
bloomed like pinpricks in velvet
through the long end of a telescope
back in single digits when childhood was vast,
expanding infinitely in a swirl of universe.
Now she shows me the first curling

hairs on smooth clefts, pale cornsilk
growing from bare flesh—how?
We can’t slow it down, can’t turn it around.
My girl, this is it, our singular journey,
one footfall then another as day
follows night chases one more day,
a strand of days strung like drops
on a web, the glistening thread held

by a trio of witches, unspooling our dreams
in the back garden. Call it fate, call it
flowers drenched with dew. Call it hungry girls
eating bowls of spaghetti. They’ve learned
invisible orbits we never knew, followed
Eris the dwarf planet spinning beyond Pluto,
iced and gleaming spirit of strife. At bathtime
the girls play Trojan War, stage battle scenes
with rubber ducks and one plastic Holstein,
that cow Hector lowing for vengeance,
Helen the pink duck and Paris the blue
bobbing uneasily in scented bubbles. We know
how it ends: the city burning,
blood and smoke, the plug pulled,

the water drained, the warm limbs
I toweled dry and wrapped tight now kicking
my hands away. Call it inevitable,
call it cruel, call it the fury of spring
breeding lily of the valley, my sweet
lonely mornings interrupted
and my desires exposed.
EVERYTHING BUT

Don't make me be fifteen again but god
give me one more pent-up afternoon
down in the den laid out on the couch
like birthday cake my senior boyfriend spooned

piece by sugared piece into his mouth.
Grant me uncharted hours of roaming hands,
delicious shimmy out of jeans and blouse
before all territory was staked and planned,

before latex, the expectation of release.
Fooling around we called it and we were fools
feasting on bare skin in mazy sheets,
artlessly skirting our parents’ rules

till the needle skittered across the black
vinyl and god the nameless world was mapped.
GRACE

Grace is a blank page after a week of chaos, a snowfield packed so my boots can cross.

Grace arrives in the guise of sleep overtaking my child after long restlessness.

My body feels hollow, she whispers as if disclosing a terrible truth,

no guts, no heart, no lungs, no anything—hollow. The night engulfs her

featherweight limbs, a pale bird adrift on cold dark wind. Grace permits me

to rub her third eye & the nape of her neck until she softens like cloth

& slips back to bed. At dawn there are birds again, loud crows

in late winter. Grace promises us spring like a cure for illness, my mother’s memory

dissolving in pieces, frayed patchwork of names & places, trips & birthdays,

Italian verbs & yesterday’s conversations unraveling in threads, her eyes darting in panic
at everyone’s whispered plans.
Mine take me to the field

at four below zero, alone, a lonely
snow moon on the wane, what I want

weighed clean against the needs
of others, the stroke

of another man’s finger on my cheek
enough to fracture a household.

Grace is restraint, the space
of a breath. Grace bids me bear witness, step back

from the brink, a snow dervish
whirling a spiral in plain air

while I wait and watch, another month,
another year, wondering when I’ll grow

too old for danger.