

Disconnect

So you're up at one to pay the electric.
If it went out, what would the neighbors say,
next door in their clean kitchen, gathered
at the breakfast bar like a family from a magazine –
but that's not what's wrong; that's not what you forgot.

That lump on the dog's side is tender
when you poke it with a careful fingertip. She licks
your hand, grateful for your eyes falling on her, your breath,
the smell of you. You rinse her dish, and fill it,
but that's not what's wrong; that's not what you forgot.

In bed again, curled in rough blankets damp with your own sweat
listening for the scratch of robbers at the door,
pigeons in the eaves, for your husband's soft grunt
as he turns, dreaming again, of what?
You, younger, maybe. Himself, before his face was like a mountain
carved from dirt: that cold, that secretly alive. You listen
for rats in the wall, for the paper at the door,
for your child's cry as she wakes, and slips beneath again;
there's food in the cupboard. There's gas in the tank.
You shut the iron off. That's not what's wrong.
That's not what you forgot.

Santa Monica Pier

At the end, there's no right or wrong to it,
just a stroll down the pier, the papers tucked beneath
your arm and my hand jammed in my pocket,
in case you might reach for it. If you felt the trembling
you would lead me to that cold water and let it
splash over us, wash over us, let the clean waves lift us,
huddled at the break. I can't do that again.

There's the chained lot where we smoked a joint
in your orange Bug, the one with the broken gas gauge
and a cracked sun roof: all the luxury we needed,
the moon watching over us like a kindhearted big sister.
And here's the booth where we took the photo our daughter
keeps taped to her vanity: that big eighties jumpsuit
I saved all month to buy, your hair slicked
off your forehead and both of us, young and dumb
as water in a cup.

Night is coming, for those with shelter
and for those without. Gulls are settling at the shore
where we lay past dusk, tracing letters in the sand,
and making plans, big ones. The sand is the same,
the water, the moon hanging shamefaced
over the blurred horizon, all our mistakes
piled up like driftwood behind us.

The Last Time I Saw You,

you were crushing a cigarette on the stone steps of the courthouse, scanning the crowd but missing me, and I thought about a broad-shouldered boy, awkward in a wide silk tie and borrowed shoes, and a girl in cream lace, hair pushed back in a silky knot, both of them stuffing their pockets with cash, mouths with powdered cookies, good wishes falling all around like the first clean snowflakes in December, that dainty, that fresh, that melting away forever.

and we moved together up the courthouse steps, dark words falling all around like leaves in September, words like *ink spot*, and *leaving*, and *mourning*, and *hunger*, words like *broken*, and *duststorm*, and *smoke-choked*, and *gone*.

Esposito & Son

When the men arrived, finally, to haul the big table away,
I ran my hand down the battered length of it, as if along
the flank of some exhausted workhorse, overcome
by a sudden rush of absurd remorse. I'd never loved it,
being as it was first too shabby, then too grand,
for the way we lived (or should have lived, at least).

Six chairs, green velvet pressed flat, two more
with sculpted rests broad enough for a king's muscled
forearm (growing dusty in the basement, season upon season).
Two carved leaves should unexpected guests drop by, and these
still gleamed with polish though the tabletop itself was bleached
and scarred: ruthless curator of memory.

When the younger man went to fetch a blanket I bent
and laid my cheek flat against the cool mahogany.
The father shifted restlessly from foot to foot, eager
to be done with it, to be home, perhaps, king at his own table,
gesturing for his wife to slice the meat, to pass the buttered peas.

Three Things

There are three things worth noticing, he said, gulping latte from a doubled cup: *sunrise, sunset, and a pretty girl of any age; just those are enough to keep you going.* When you've been up too late, red wine rasping a hole in your gut, greasy chips around two a.m. and then that drunken call to the one you should have loved, but never could, despite this, you can leave the smoky confines of the small living room at the weak tail end of the night, sit out on the stoop where it's big, big, just air and space all around you, hardly a car or a barking dog, and breathe. There are the trees, as alive as you are: they're dinosaurs, that timeless, that vulnerable. Breathe in, breathe out, and let the horizon lighten and broaden with each breath till it's gold and orange and pink, morning breaking now; you've made it through. Later on, there's sunset. Same thing, but backwards, the wine still to come, the stumbling call, a cheap paperback until you're too bleary-eyed to see straight: dusk is a promise and it's one that gets kept. But the third thing, a pretty girl: maybe you are one, or used to be one, or once knew one. Maybe she's a tall slim thing with a short skirt and silly shoes, crossing State Street against the light, knob-kneed as a young giraffe. Maybe it's that neighbor upstairs who lets you use the phone when you get locked out, and she gives you sweet tea and pats the bar stool at her scratched kitchen counter. Maybe it's the infant you held for an hour at a party, all powder and milk, thick asleep in a waffled blanket—and the baby's mouth! A troubled wet rosebud, and her fingernails like pearlescent shells, each with its minute clean crescent at the tip. Oh, while we're living, let's drink in all this beauty! It made a certain sense, as things sometimes do, explained over coffee in a crowded shop, when you're not quite ready to face: well, the evening. The hollow room, the snapping clock, the stack of bills on the cracked piano. But when he got up to stretch I fingered his notebook, read the words scrawled in blue at the edge of the curling page: *Tonight I am so lonely, I might die.*



The National Geographic Society, 1968

Rainwater streaming, breaking and joining,
clear as brown agate, clear as marbles smacked hard
across another cracked walk, years ago, now.
Decades. Grass sprouting through the cracks, ragged
leaves of dandelion, cheap flowers cheerful
as a sun that was yellower then, and beneath the broken slabs
if you dared look, blind red worms, a potato bug
with fringed legs at the curve of its pearled shell,
fat cream-colored grubs, dappled slugs, beetles
with orange bellies, and always
that loop running, running in my head, like
nature films projected on a yellowed screen
in a darkened auditorium, tape crackling
and snapping: *an excellent source of protein,*
raw or pierced with a stick and broiled over flames—

*(I would squat beside the men, their skins shining like leopard pelts. I would scorch the stick and
scarify my hard arms, I would wear my hair in matted knots with beads worked through, I would
be shirtless, flat and muscled like a man, like a cat. I would gorge on grubs like shish kebab, like
rinds of beef, like passion fruit, like honey—)*

—Wednesday nights we'd board the groaning city bus
pushing past the weary workers coming home as we
were going out, three girls in prim dresses and white socks,
two boys chafing against starched collars.
At Society Headquarters we were all in a line like wild
ducks, like materyoshka, like Appalachian measuring cups,
filing neatly toward our usual row of grey metal folding chairs,

already lost in chimpanzee dreams,
grubs on sticks, smelted iron and gandydancers,
then a bus ride home in the deepening dark, drowsy now
between my brothers, just a girl again. Quarters tinkled
in a metal box beside the scowling driver whose bristled
neck rolled over his collar in grubby yellow folds.

The Five Children and It

The children stood round the hole in a ring, looking at the creature they had found... Its eyes were on long horns like a snail's eyes, and it could move them in and out like telescopes; it had ears like a bat's ears, and its tubby body was shaped like a spider's and covered with thick soft fur.

E. Nesbitt, The Five Children and It (1905)

We've stared too long into a cracked looking glass,
or rubbed a clean spit spot on the black brass lamp
or opened the wrong cupboard and tumbled
into this strange place, the five of us, our sister
bobbing grey pigtails and barking orders, our brothers
feckless and charming, bad knees and grizzled beards making
them at the same time the callow boys and the wise
professors of the stories we read so long ago, the ones
who knew the secrets of the cupboard, how to escape
the enchantment, how to live a whole life, then make it home
for tea before dark. And there's our littlest, solemn still,
pear-shaped and owlsh, pointing out landmarks as we navigate
this cold land. We're in charge, finally—all our wishes granted:
What we like for supper, and cursing aloud, and some nights,
no bedtime at all; we sprawl about putting cigarettes out
in half-drunk foreign beers, like grown-ups. *Our father is dying,*
our sister shrieks. *But there are cards to play and debts to pay*
and numbers don't add up right here. Our shadows are shapeless.
I can't think what comes next. The little wants a story; that's my job,
even here, so I call them close and hand around sweets, wishing
the boys would do something clever with hairpins and sealing

wax, but they're slack-jawed, too, and waiting. I take her
little hand in mine.

*A long time ago, a long time ago, I huddled at the bus stop,
a nickel clutched in one cold fist, but as each bus slowed
I waved it away; it cost a dime to ride. The wind whipped
my plaid skirt and chafed my cheeks and when the sun
began to slide beneath the skyline, outlining the church
in melting gold, I heard a faint cry, and turned, and
there was our mother, arms open, coat
flapping, and she
was calling
my name.*

In Practical Terms

What it will mean then, is no one
left who remembers you before you
remember yourself. No one
to forgive the grey at your temples,
that roll of fat atop jeans that should
have been tossed a dozen years ago,
no one to overlook that bit of pettiness
at the florist last week, willing to forgive
just because they remember the weight
of you, the thick damp sweetness of you bundled
in your yellow blanket, a string of gold stars
on lined paper taped to the refrigerator,
the day you learned to read, to dance, to make spit
sisters, all arms and legs sunbrowned and
clean, pedaling away into a future that stretched ahead,
dark as an unlit road.



Because the Nurses Wore White

Those last days you found yourself on a vacation cruise
with relatives you'd shunned for years, glad
to know them, and to be known, baffled and pleased by
the rocking of the water, the neat portholes,
the smart cabin attendants—imagine, they'd come all the way
from Ethiopia, from Senegal, to make your ocean voyage!
The hospice guitarist played from the shifting deck, my
nieces brought desserts and tea, but you could not
be tempted, eyes fixed on that bright shore, glistening
with tears. It was hard to say what you were thinking,
your great jaw slack, big hands folded in your quiet lap.
My mother's cries might have been the tinkling of laughter
from the promenade, or the mewling of your firstborn sixty years
before, or they might have been the clink of cocktail
glasses, a murmur rising like smoke,
or they might have been a woman's cries, after all. Who
could have told me you were full of all the secrets
you're telling me now, as I sort your papers, listening
at last, knowing all the ways death changed you.

So This Is the Afterlife

You wait in your armchair or on the darkened stair
or in the glazed glare of pots that line
the patio, patient in a way you never were in life,
seeming to need only to know and to be known, folding
the newspaper, nodding until I draw too near. Then
it's all shadows and cats, as if I'd imagined you, imagined
the rustling, imagined this needling need to explain
the missed call, the forgotten card, the words that will
not be unspoken. It surprises us both, I think,
that I'm no longer young, and you—well. Better
not to say it. But I know you aren't there, and are
there. What we say or don't say can't change that.

I'm finding it easier to explain things
to you, than before you strode into that thick
blackness beyond the sky.

I remember standing hand in hand
on a hillside, searching for Andromeda;
You said I could be an astronaut, and I imagined
riding a bucking rocket to the stars, a space age cowgirl
in white boots and silver lamé, mesmerized
by the spark of tiny lights against the purple fabric
that cloaks the earth at night.



Sheba

All that beauty never got me much; strangers laying claim to what they think they recognize, every smile a promise, and most the kind you hope they won't keep. Beauty's an old dog that's too faithful, that sticks with you despite the curses and the kicks. They say it's a mask but it's the opposite in fact; it reveals what's inside, and everybody wants that sweet cream at the center of a chocolate éclair. What am I, now, but an old broad with glitter at her temples, scattered in her hair, yet I can't stretch on the bus without staking a claim. All that beauty never got me much but trouble, and a taste for trouble, a folded note, a couple of drinks at the bar.

When I Could Still Be Seen,

there was a party where I poured *grand cru*,
teasing other women's husbands till they were silly
with delight; there were turquoise boxes tied up
with pale ribbon, and a ramshackle hut on a cliff
at Big Sur, drenched in moonlight. A clumsy hand
traced silvered shadows along my naked hip,
before I vanished like fragrance, like fog.
There were armloads of scarlet roses,
and orchids like furred moths, a black spangled
dress, and glossy chocolates from Geary Street,
before I disappeared. A man draped a web
of coruscating stones against my throat
and lingered on the pulse, fingers thickened
with desire. This cloak of night,
this umbral shield, were not my first magic.
Once I held a boy to my breast as he raged,
and released him, gentled like a dog,
that grateful. I tapped nails like painted shells
against a compact of mother of pearl; I felt
the hot stroke of eyes against my taut skin.
When I could still be seen, I brushed by a man
in a blue cotton shirt and he sighed in wordless
longing and reached as if to catch me. I pretended
then to be invisible, as I truly am now, pushing
my hair into silken masses, then letting it go,
letting it go.

The Nature of Objects

There was a time traveler who moved
very slowly through time, and in just one direction,
in halting jerks, made baffled and headachy by dials
to pushbuttons, the dog's grey muzzle, a cracked lipstick,
her daughter's Easter shoes: first stuffed with paper,
then too tight, then tucked neatly in a carton
marked cheerlessly, *Goodwill*. Stumbling left,
then right, as if her limbs had grown too heavy,
or else too light, she ended staring at the window,
as the dirty river flowed, or flows, beneath the overpass
then swelled, overran, and dried again. Leaves flamed,
dried, dropped, the car died—the dog, too—while the daughter,
grown large as if by potion, telescoping distant
and close again, fled, came home, and finally shot
away, a comet trailing books, socks, blocks, outgrown skirts
and scratched CDs, a plastic cow, a spaceship.
And the traveler moved very slowly through time,
as if baffled by a bent enamel dish
that once held the dog's water, a cracked flowerpot,
by the layer of dust that conceals and reveals
the nature of objects, the crush of gravity, the thinness
of our atmosphere, the proximity of the sun.



DC, 1978

"The past is a foreign country—"

Leslie Poles Hartley

The past is another country; you can barely recall
your brief stay, stacking chipped red bricks
and boards for shelves in a room at the end of the hall

Painting sagging walls white in rooms so full of light
the rusted screens couldn't hold it all,
while down the block dogs barked warnings to the night

And there you are, leaning far out the window to call down
to a boy who smoked and loved to fight
and drive fast, a boy the girls said really got around

He never made it out. He lives only in that lost place
a cramped apartment in your hometown
And in his mother's candles, in her bewildered face

The past is a country of fruit-bright sky and bursting dawns
where you tip-toed home, carelessly laced
sandals slung over one finger, across dew-wet lawns

To find your sister awake, breathless, admiring and shy
your parents safe in their dull bed, radio on,
the front door bolted shut but every window flung wide—