Time Is Always Now
TIME IS ALWAYS NOW

POEMS BY
Rebecca Starks

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for my family
Acknowledgments

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Foreword

There are a few poets whose work I have long wished to see collected into a first book. Rebecca Starks is high on the list. Her intelligence and talent are beyond dispute. She has survived the swarms of contemporary American poetry of the last twenty years, that manic lurching from one aesthetic to another and the pressure of the new and the shocking, by remaining unhurried.

It’s a quality of mind that reflects her strengths as a poet: figurative, emblematic, elegant, with poems that dramatize rapid movement from observed detail to mature insight.

Rebecca Starks writes with a sense that time can be stopped in a poem, lives suspended and drawn inward, even in the most aimless moments, where emotional potency is undeniable and marred feelings leave unforeseen imprints on the eyes and heart until you

\[\ldots\text{ walk away, crossing the tracks, arms free} \]
\[\text{to cradle your own problems, your own needs—} \]

There’s a wonderful clarity to *Time Is Always Now*, an electricity that feels bright and wild. It’s to be found in the roadsides and a robin’s “clutch,” in the retina that “registers pain,” in the sky at dusk and the “months of mud.” It’s to be found in the examination of pollution and the skull-and-bone chapel

mortared as Évora’s *memento mori*
under the epigraph *Time Immemorial.*

Her alertness demands purpose from her subjects which seem always in danger of being under threat, so that the
sheering thrust of power
jangles me until I’m
any civilian cowering anywhere,
hands pressed to my ears
only making the pulse of terror
more interior.

This sort of concentration radiates in a poem like “Lament at Exxon”:

You think of it at the gas station
pumping gas, keeping the pump
between you and a man doing the same,
now that you’ve both looked
and looked away in relief.

Maybe it’s only the transition that’s hard.
Lately you can’t bear to see yourself
in the flesh, even a glimpse
like handling a quartered chicken
while the oven preheats.

So it was your own body you loved,
as seen and felt by lovers.
Just look at the middle-aged earth,
its warming at flashpoint.
You catch the man’s eye again—

he’s known it for thirty years.
If you don’t believe your body
loves you back, what can you love?
You replace the nozzle, the cap.
What but your body can you give back?
What I admire in this kind of writing, as in so many other poems in this book, is the way she plays on contradictions between snapshots of private existence and public experience, between desires and disappointments—and in the nuanced and obviously concentrated way she turns a poem’s inquiry from hand to eye to inner mind.

In these deeply moving poems, incongruities are undeniably real. You get the feeling of a life being written before your eyes, with all its occasional dignity and awkwardness. Over this lie landscapes of complex relations, a flickering between time and place. It is clear how much, intuitively or not, Emily Dickinson has meant to her—her probing of a moment, so that the never-quite-final construction of her attempts to affix it echoes Dickinson’s own mistrust before her poems.

How can a poet be certain, and make sure you are certain, what is there? For Rebecca Starks, the problem is troubling, because she chooses subjects in motion—tree buds, fairy tales, animal tracks, brain damage, war, children, America’s contradictions, violent impulses, art, poets, politicians, and things that can’t be named—the opposite of Dickinson’s still lives.

The title of this book says it best: time is always now. Time exists before our eyes. We are reminded, in this book, that poetry is both mirror and window. Through poems—with a poet with an extraordinary talent for metaphor like Rebecca Starks, that is—we accept the invitation to correlate and connect.

I greet these poems with so much enthusiasm—these poems which crave, clarify, and propose sublime ways to become refreshed in our most confused times.

David Biespiel
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Notes
. . . we’re forced to begin
In the midst of the hardest movement,
The one already sounding as we are born.

—Adrienne Rich
Time Is Always Now
The More Things Change

*Every revolution ends, or it begins, in memory. . . .*
—Larry Levis

All the news in December is tree buds.  
After a warm spell, the ground’s sodden give  
is a springboard for global speculation:

everything cellular deems it’s spring—  
as if for longer than living memory,  
leaves haven’t prepared against their brittle fall  
the bulletin of their bursting forth again.

All the news in February is bird song,  
as if it didn’t break the ice each year,  
the cardinal’s *Do what you know, you don’t know*—

as if no one up north had taken note  
of how the *chits* resume when the light fans out  
even as night’s wings dip twenty below  
and the lake stiffens under the air’s touch.

I’d like to respond to the next-to-last caller:  
look how, even taking the longest view  
you want it immediate, chafe at delay.
You want to prove what we fail to imagine. The revolution will begin with pruning, anticipating memory—*We’ll have to leave that thought. We’re out of time.*

The news, again, the eye-on-the-sky forecast, variable clouds and sun, winds out of . . . No, not out of time; helplessly in it.
Thrown

Those first days after time springs its catch
you’re nagged by jet lag, a constant thirst
and asynchronous hunger, still restless
at lights out, then waking to your alarm
mid-dream, rocking, washed with a forgiveness
you hadn’t known you were holding out for.

Still you come up short all day, the minutes
skipping in unremitting inspiration—
no time to breathe out artistry, only thaw.

—

But also the feeling you’ve been crowned, cut
loose from the dull rhythm, discharged by Osiris,
freed for the moment of your long too-much—
the sky climbing the nearest hill, pink and golden
first thing when you venture from your low cave,
the drip line as you duck off the front porch
melting pools in the strata of boot-packed ice, 
the dog pouncing on each lost ball nosing up

like the first balloon breath of a crocus.

—

The walk to the car too easy, the air 
balmy, shaming the outworn brace of defenses

still clinging to you: the chip on your shoulder 
from months of subzero, the down coat you’ll want

tomorrow, feeling the crunch underfoot. 
But today the dirt road’s turned to slip

on the mushrooming clay, each rut 
shifting under the tires as you grip the wheel, 

thumbs drilling down into the vessel being thrown. . . .

—

Not flung, but coaxed up wobbly as a fawn 
finding its legs. Dimpled and then pinched to pour, 

the way water everywhere streams from the rocks’ 
pitcher of clemency, as in your dream
passing through a doorway you met a friend,
and forgetting she was the one who turned away
from her betrayal, rushed to forgive her,
flooding with a too easy happiness,
carried away on the slant of its current
until wrenching the wheel back to center,
thumbs thrilling with the whir of stone—she was you.
Hansel’s Gretel

Once they’ve gotten past the siren calls—wood thrush, white-throated sparrow’s whistle, the robins’ alarm—and waves of darkness slap against them, Hansel mistakes a broken eggshell for a gleaming pebble.

Gretel suffers from heightened stereognosis, seeing everything shaded by a hard pencil—tree roots, acorns, her stone-bruised, impetuous feet—her pupils vulnerable to the faintest light.

While Hansel stacks branches, Gretel gathers thin sticks for kindling. She falls asleep to the fire’s crackling. The bread becomes gingerbread slab, the stepmother a witch, her saccharine scolding burnt sugar.

The instant Gretel pushes her into the oven she wakes, still hot with impulse. Hansel is blowing on embers. Only when his story struggles does it come to him: the thing to notice is that Gretel doesn’t call her dream strange.

Only after having children does Gretel understand: the thing to notice is that Hansel wants to go back. As even now she wants to follow the dimples of light, crouch under oak trees with the little round people
with hats, gather the dropped crabapples, dig for worms,
read out loud to her rabbits in their hutch at dusk
under the black cherry trees. Doesn’t every home
hold them both: simmering love, simmering hate?

Even now she wants to run back to watch the pots.
The Long View

As far back as second grade, you remember lagging behind your classmates with two boys, one telling the other how his dad said to choose: it’s the ugly ducklings who grow up to be swans like their mothers. “Then there’s still hope for me,” you put in, struck next by how they glanced at you with surprise—that you’d spoken, or would say that of yourself, or that they’d never considered you a girl—but still your heart leapt they found you already beautiful as Goldilocks despite your bland forehead and pointy teeth, not knowing yet how nearsighted you were or what a long view they were taking, these boys who would one day inherit their fathers’ stocks.