Reassurance in Negative Space
REASSURANCE
in NEUTRAL SPACE

POEMS BY
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Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the editors of the following journals where many of the poems in this collection originally appeared, sometimes in earlier versions:

Aife: “Fourteen Minutes Too Late for the Cheese Counter” and “Reassurance in Negative Space”

The Ampersand Review: “Cakes and Ale”

Asylum Lake: “a call for catechresis,” “Falling Off of One’s Bedroom Slippers,” and “Shrovetide and the Sugar Rush”

DMQ Review: “To Older Cold” and “Netsuke III: Snake”

A Dozen Nothing: “Cloud Vineyards,” “Late Spring Travelogue, Outer Hebrides,” “Phoenix,” “A Poem with Three Lines from one Night in Portland,” “Roles and Reckoning Near Solstice,” and “Why Would Anyone Want to Live: Couplets for a Hero”

The Fiddlehead: “The Myrtle-Wood Bowl”

fromthefishouse.com: “Cladonia rangifera, Chernobyl,” “The River’s Mouth,” and “Your body’d gone”

Gargoyle: “Vanguard Aria for Minor Organs”

Georgetown Review: “Grand Rapids Arch”

Gulf Coast: “The Pedestal”
Hayden’s Ferry Review: “Reading Ostriker and Archeology Today for Spiritual Guidance,” “Tallow, Candles and Light,” “The Trapeze Is Always Flying,” and “On Rereading a Line from Leaving Resurrection”

Ironhorse Review (Supplement: First Encounters with One’s Own Femininity): “Preparing Trout Caviar in the First Trimester”

Matter: “Chival de Frise and Gone-Sweetness at the All-Inclusive”

Passages North: “The Red-Eye’s Departure”

The Southeast Review: “Night Being the Consort of Chaos in Milton” [Gearhart Poetry Prize Winner selected by Erin Belieu], “Cellar Physic,” and “Or What You Will”

Solo Novo: “The misnomer of Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams” and “On Looking Again into Wright’s Forklift, Ohio”

Watershed: “One argument for maple and pine-lined over marble”

Some of these poems previously appeared in the chapbook Inventory from a One-Hour Room (Finishing Line Press).
There are moments of such attentive and exploratory linguistic resonance in this volume that the effect is alchemical: as we read along the lines, something changes in our awareness and becomes a new kind of sound insight. I am reminded of what Hank Lazer calls this aspect of the lyric, which activates and enacts a cognitive musicality: thinking-singing. Hiscox’s poetry seems to me exemplary of this poetic element, for it is so often thinking via the sound of the words. Consider the closing couplet of a poem that begins simply as travelogue. “We are here,” it opens matter-of-factly. Dazzlingly, eerily (the speaker having heard a lamb being butchered), we arrive at the following stunning conclusion:

A shank an archipelago a fricative a plosive a butterfly a bone an awareness of skill
an acuity: the ease with which the air between us can be cleaved and made knowable.
(“Late Spring Travelogue, Outer Hebrides”)

The progress of the couplet seems to percolate through the bracing acoustic chain, but it leads to an exquisite—and excruciating—moment in which the Absolute is unexpectedly manifest. It’s a sudden shift that bursts forth at the poem’s end, but it’s not singular. Hiscox arrives at such insight again and again as her poems pivot and dive. Another poem, contemplating the visual sparseness of abstract painting (“a lone line/ will indicate landscape”), makes a fine sonic
connection, “there is tabula rasa to tableau.” Beginning in pure sound similarity, the line tracks a Steinian arc of aesthetic praxis: the blank canvas becomes scenic because “one cannot not construct” (“a call for catachresis”).

There is throughout this volume a deep and humane lyric wisdom, an almost fatalistically brilliant humor, perhaps culled from the loss of which Hiscox writes so wrenchingly in the central series of poems, which is at once elegiac and documentary of her mother’s fatal illness. One of the major poems in this sequence, “The Pedestal,” juxtaposes the clinical language of medical observation and the daughter’s account of her mother’s courage and suffering: “Patient born at White Sands, New Mexico”/ . . .” The mind is working, skin is trying-on slow sores.” Such poems record the invisible consequences of a specific political history (civilians as the collateral damage of the race for the atomic bomb). The poems surprise us with piquant diction—“Glorious sparked synapses” of awareness; “aural nettles” of perception, “gleamtooth” of psychically integrated grief (one daughter, no two, lose one generation, no two, of women in the family).

Hiscox trains a laser eye on death, loss, and grief and does not flinch, but she will also be down to earth enough to find religiosity in a bowl of soup. Coincident with her intellectual verve is her sharp, wry wit. Thinking of Keats, she exclaims, “Beauty is a blind alley.// It’s the Truth. And this is why I can’t ever/ get to what’s next” (“Cakes and Ale”). Think about the rare truth of that! Hiscox holds opposites in tension—philosophical depth and sparkling whimsy—and at the same time, she nimbly explores how far she can stretch the lyric (very far). The sheer formal range of these poems is marvelous, yet the volume retains an eloquent, tensile coherence of vision. These poems pulse with a complex and delicate insightfulness that neither dismisses sorrow nor submits to it. Here is a debut collection bold enough to cast an eye on Truth in poems that are both narrative (storied) and innovative, necessary poetry.

—Cynthia Hogue
Acknowledgments

Foreword

3 Tallow Candles and Light
5 Netsuke I: Crab
6 Reading Ostriker and Archeology Today for Spiritual Guidance
7 The Trapeze is Always Flying
8 Shrovetide and the Sugar Rush
9 The misnomer of Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams
10 Inventory from a One-Hour Room
11 a call for catachresis
12 Or What You Will
14 Falling Off of One’s Bedroom Slippers
15 Cellar Physic
16 Late Spring Travelogue, Outer Hebrides
19 On Looking Again into Wright's *Forklift, Ohio*
20 *Cladonia rangifera*, Chernobyl
22 Netsuke IV: Ashinaga & Tenaga
23 Sonnet to Room 411b
24 The Pedestal
26 Cakes and Ale
27 The Religiosity of Soup
29 The Red-Eye’s Departure
31 On Rereading a Line from *Leaving Resurrection*
32 Preparing Trout Caviar in the First Trimester
33 Your body’d gone
35 The River’s Mouth
38 Mead Memo Notebook Spiral, Yellow (II)
39 The Yield

43 Four for a Grandmother and Her Past
45 Netsuke V: Octopus
46 One argument for maple and pine-lined over marble
47 The Fourth Dynasty in Limestone
48 First Season’s Monsoon
49 Cheval de Frise and Gone-Sweetness at the All-Inclusive
50 Cloud Vineyards
51 Phoenix
52 Early Artichokes
53 Tasting Notes for Two Liquid (de)Vices
54 Netsuke III: Snake
55 Shiny Magazine on the Finer Things
57 Fourteen Minutes Too Late for the Cheese Counter
58 Roles and Reckoning near Solstice

63 “Grand Rapids Arch”
65 The Complex of the Yolk Base
67 Netsuke II: [ ]
68 To Older Cold
69 The Myrtle-Wood Bowl
70 Why Would Anyone Want to Live (Couplets for a Hero)
71 Barcelona
72 Vanguard Aria for Minor Organs
73 Reassurance in Negative Space
75 A Poem with Three Lines from One Night in Portland
76 Night Being the Consort of Chaos in Milton

81 Notes
Deity is in the details & we are details among other details & we long to be Teased out of ourselves. And become all of them.
— Larry Levis

The heart wants to be— anything in it.
— Beckian Fritz Goldberg
Reassurance in Negative Space
Tallow Candles and Light

It is the story. That poverty
leads to consumption of light itself.

It is the sidebar that is, mysteriously, often the core.
It is the tallow candles after

six weeks’ rain and longer fallow potato fields
that give warmth to systems entirely internal.

*The trivial is not trivial. It is intimacy.*
The rendering of fat, the rendering
down to a moment in the dark
where you take your hand,
take what’s left of last fall’s slaughter,
last November’s open barrels,

that hot day of dipped wicks and swirl,
and unfold all in your palm like a sacrament:

keep this house alive for a number of hours.
Hours counted, *God willing*, on two hands.

Tsunamis, earth-shatterings, Minoan hair twist
of newly set curls cinched quickly under
tide and rubble—these are sex in the middle of the kitchen floor. Sex in the town square.

I am speaking of corners. I am speaking of the mirror held to nostril.
Netsuke I: Crab

You are the one I scuttle to first,
because I’ve taken you apart.
I know the joints of your legs,
that slight shell mocking the nautilus
with its gymnastics—you are not even
molehill in your ascent.

How can I want to hold you more
having consumed you, parsed you
out of being into mine.
Reading Ostriker and *Archeology Today* for Spiritual Guidance

And, what if we are just as much as the symbols suggest? Peace and harmony; scissors on the table; crystal skulls? Held to the light what wouldn’t our minds clip to bits, prism into shades of citrus fruit and strawberry, try to parse into reconciliatory sound?

_Damn the fathers. We are talking about defiance_, you say. I wonder. Like we haven’t read tarot cards at high altitude base camps—reviewed our plans. Found absolutely everything wanting. Found absolutes. Like chances aren’t already the fiction of our peculiar taking.

All day I’m seeing fractions where none exist. Parallels would be nice. I thumb an article on Lake Baikal’s one-off species count, that lake the “Blue Eye of Siberia.” The whole earth a head made of glass and that window to the soul populated—are we surprised?—by the endemic. Native to our scope.

And what if our scope is only to focus? And, what if we are as much as the symbols suggest? _The weddings of innocence and glory, innocence and glory_. The gun on the wall in the first act, I swear, could never make a sound—would still bear beautiful weight.
The Trapeze is Always Flying

Calls himself an artist, but he’s just tide-riding
like the shag carpet catching light
on the night boat moored,
all disco and barbecue downwind—
downstream—from the cathedral.

In the over-etching of the bohemia glass
(that stained window for the lips’ pressure)
a frog is dancing (ballet, hoop) and crickets bicycle.
Liqueur becomes sacrament to whimsy.

This is the renegade nature of tradition:
fraying at the edges of a century.
Generations eating their own eyeballs,

the flyer for a hog of unusual size
is a hundred-year-on legible
the gathering place is again
nasturtiums and lollipop wrappers:
no net and, as always, Free Admission.
Shrovetide and the Sugar Rush

Hearing *Gloria* again and again: en masse.
Amassed before yanked from Mass, the masses.

Mardi Gras, too, from every storefront, cracked car window:
*Gonna make ’em all stand in place until I see the Zulu Queen.*

Fatback and pancakes thick on the lips;
this is to make us remember what is lent:
a hairline moment of ecstasy and sound before
silence and ecstasy, *in excelsis Deo* day in, day out.

Doesn’t seem like any way to approach a throne.
False kneel and pretense of an even keel.

Pass the chocolate rabbits, already. Hollowed joy.
Fertility and its absence run amuck.
All bright yellow and marshmallow.
Turn down the carnival of excessive absence.
Sluice me through to Sunday.

*I’ll be seeing you again,* says the Zulu Queen. The King.
The misnomer of Akira Kurosawa’s *Dreams*

is the Miłosz line I can’t get right:
*panting the boughs* is not how the angels come.
This may be how Kurosawa went after
the inner sour: to imply the impure
exists within the confines of the holy.

All angels pant as surely as they part.
That under the apple trees
there’s always going to be something stuck
in Adam’s throat and one need not say.

Doesn’t the very word nightmare frighten more
if implicit.
Inventory from a One-Hour Room

The universe: a bull of green slipped with purple and dried daffodils in a pile on the lawn. Moon dish rising, armpits softening down the sides of hips, you walk into the room in an apron with a candle sniffer. Nativity calendar at the end of March, small doors still unopened and a wooden bird with a low tail looking always west. Tight-set hairstyle of a previous generation. *He sees the day and the cypresses and the marble* and a now child pulls a clutch of wild eggs from Easter’s inside pasture. “A bad neighborhood my sister in. Barred windows,” she smirks, and there’s that low-slung bear-faced section of floor again.
a call for catachresis

a *wot not what* that painters know

when one discovers a horizontal line
a lone line
will indicate landscape

and a vertical will

to something quite different

the grin of a doorway
a loft of figure

any gesture  any color anatomizes

red rushing to
whoever views

there is tabula rasa to tableau  there is the first *impatient* step

one cannot not construct

green always at a remove
any movement does
any line will do

° read “impenitent”