

*The Spinning Place*  
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## THE SPINNING PLACE

*Mars rotates on its axis, completing one revolution every 24.6 hours.*

—NASA

Think of something you wish we had  
a word for, I tell my students.  
If our experience flows through the current  
of language, then how do we live  
what we cannot say? What would you say  
if you could? A student says, a word for longing  
for someone who is in the same room.  
A word for the particular quiet of the house  
just after loved ones leave, the spare bed  
disheveled, extra cups by the sink,  
alluvial silt of tea still warm in the porcelain.  
One girl raises her hand:  
a word for the way we feel when people sing  
“Happy Birthday” to us.  
*Yes*—that annual blend of pleasure  
and embarrassment, the sombrero  
tilted on your head while the other patrons  
look up from their salted rims,  
the birthday candles beading blue wax while dad  
pans the camera around the glowing faces.  
I last heard the song four months ago  
just as my daughter pushed free of me.  
Dr. Wilson began to sing, the surprise of his baritone  
rising in the midst of both our cries,  
*Happy birthday, dear Eloise...*her face purple  
and swollen, the slick curling cord that bound us  
then cut. I have often wondered what the doctor said  
when my sister gave birth to twins, one alive  
and one not. No song or word can sing  
into that abyssal joy, that sorrow. A word for the prayer  
of pure praise wedded to sheer anguish. A word  
for longing for someone who is in the same body.

How often I'd longed for my daughter  
those nine months, even as she turned and stirred  
beneath my hands, only as far away  
as my skin is deep. Perhaps there is no word  
that is *not* longing. When my sister and I  
are silent together on the phone,  
I can't help but think of the Mars Rover,  
280 million miles away rolling slowly  
through a crater of red rock and dust,  
singing "Happy Birthday" to itself.  
This is how my sister will always feel  
when she sings that song to her son—  
both elegy and ode, a tune that rises  
from a dark depth no one else  
can know. A word for praise  
struck from the flint of sorrow. A word for longing  
for someone who is in the same cosmos.  
A word for the look of the earth  
as glimpsed from Mars, twinned in its spinning,  
unsayable and green in its faraway light.

## ADVENT

Last week a jellied disc  
in one of my husband's lower vertebrae  
cinched, slipped—on the x-ray  
the bones' thorned edges gritted against each other,  
his whole spine yearning left,  
a lily stem arched toward the promise  
of light. Now the days shrink  
into themselves, the trees bare-limbed  
but for squirrels' nests and the green  
bloom of mistletoe, the opalescent berries  
suspended like droplets of milk.

All my comforts are questions:  
*Is it better, does this help?* and to wonder  
at the body as host, his to pain,  
mine to our firstborn. Unseen, unfelt  
arms and legs push into socket,  
joints form, the elbow a door  
swinging open. Before you, before your  
cloistral assembly of parts, I knew  
words waiting to become you:  
*face, hair, cuticle*. Was it this way  
for Mary, overshadowed by the Spirit?—  
her body not hers, reworded with the promise  
of flesh? *How can this be?* I echo her,  
though I have known a man.

*Here?* I ask him, and soothe cream  
into his skin, the two divots in the small  
of his back—gates that keep the invisible hurt.  
*May it be as you have said—*  
and I picture her trembling hands,  
the hour dusk, everything vague and blued,  
hour all the shadows become shadow.

## HANDS

I told her to look up  
all the definitions of the word  
*hand* and choose her favorite one.

—

My favorite:  
a unit of measure  
equal to four inches  
used especially for the height  
of horses

—

*This is a stupid prompt*, she says.

This year the fifteen-year-old girls wear  
choker necklaces and off-the-shoulder tops  
which both go well with that timeless outer layer  
of cool dismissal  
that protects you from anyone else  
suspecting you care too much.

—

I sent her the notebook  
because her therapist  
and the district attorney  
and the guidance counselor  
and our mother—everyone tells her to write.  
But she cannot write about that.

What I mean to say is  
hand it to the page, shift the weight of it  
little by little until you don't carry it all.

But what I say is

*Imagine yourself as a flower. What kind of flower would you be? and*

*Make up a knock-knock joke and*

*Imagine the contents of your closet as a city. Who is the mayor? and*

*What do you think is the opposite of "father"? Think hard. You can't say mother.*

—

*Make a list of things that are blue*

My list:

blueberries

a bruise swimming to surface

Virginia mountains

the ring of flame beneath the pan

one line for no baby, two for yes

Her list (as I imagine it):

the sky

Kool-Aid

eyeliner

the veins in my wrist

the lines of this paper

—

Also blue:

the butterflies

my sister draws on her wrist

when really she wants to touch it

with a blade

(fine white scars

marking their tissue wings)

—

If her sorrow were a horse

I would not be able to reach my hands

high enough to measure it, to say,

it is this many hands high,

here is where it ends.

I will have to go on placing one hand,  
then the other, careful to touch the heel of one palm  
to the crest of my other hand's tallest finger,  
repeat, repeat.

Careful not to lose count,  
not to let the fierce snorting and stamping of Sorrow  
distract me from my task. I place my hands  
against the hot sleek coat,  
the unbelievable passages of muscle  
that ripple beneath my touch.

Eleven, twelve, the tallest horse alive  
is twenty hands tall,  
but Sorrow is taller. Twenty-one, twenty-two.  
I tell my sister when we reach the top,  
Sorrow will carry her  
to where she wants to go,  
they will gallop across the earth.  
But we both know

—

We both know Sorrow may outlast us  
So we must not lose count  
We must not remove our hands

## SESTETS

*with a line by Simone Weil*

1.

Two forces rule the universe: light & gravity.

The child fills the mother's belly,  
suspended as a winged thing in the web of her ribs.

Sunlight passes through her skin:  
the luminaria world of shape & shift.

Afloat, he turns, turns,  
until her pelvis is his crown.  
Defiant, now: but loosening in his heavy cloud.

2.

*Uppgivenhetsyndrom*

In Sweden, refugee children denied asylum  
sometimes slip into an unwakeable sleep for months.  
We have no word for this in English. Not *sleep* because no rest.  
Not *coma* because no disease, no harm to the body.  
Put them by windows, the doctors say, let the light enter their skin  
& wind the circadian clock of their exile.

3.

Twilight. The pines saw the light in half  
& nail it to the grass. I walk the planks  
beneath the nascent cones, opaline in their sap caul

& drop to my knees to search. Two forces rule the universe:  
light & gravity. My grassblade sift yields this seed—  
daughter's tooth—pink cling of its broken root.

4.

A dragonfly moves in cursive  
over the flaming stalks of tiger lilies.

*Tigers willies*, she repeats. Her soft halation of hair  
is the crayon sun I drew for her—

not light, not fire, not filament—

just a bright, brief scribbling on the air.



## EARLY RESURRECTIONS (NEWS FROM THE WEEK)

A man broke out of the county jail.  
Reports list him as barefoot and still cuffed.  
Wednesday of Holy Week and *alleluia*  
has not been uttered in this town for nearly forty days.  
A wounded opossum limps down the sidewalk,  
its graceful glitch returning to me  
when the knife slips as I put it to the bread—  
my finger instead—and my love hurries  
to part the wound, red buttonhole in my skin,  
to see its depth. Yesterday in the garden  
I saw a silkmoth had failed to spin its whole cocoon—  
but without its cirrus, monastic piñata,  
it went on transforming anyway,  
nearly clear wings nubile, jade,  
tucked into themselves.  
Could we have watched?—the stone  
heaved away, the angel not yet dispatched,  
the body still softly scarring, untrue,  
untouchable, its grief flinching from our eyes.  
As handcuffs glint in a glade  
in their stolen slice of light.  
When I saw the secret of the silkmoth, I confess—  
*alleluia* burned on my tongue.