Gratitude

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Section titles from Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself"
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About the Author
I think I could turn and live with animals,
  they are so placid and self-contain’d,
  I stand and look at them long and long.

—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”
I. love-root, silk-thread
The Mole

Miracle enough was that I saw the young mole at all—exposed as he was, trundling clumsily, a furry chocolate sausage with legs crossing an ocean of asphalt alone, snout to the ground, pressing forward at top speed, which is to say, not very fast at all. In fact, every few inches he stumbles, does a barrel roll, rights himself. The road is no place for a mole: intractable, impossible to burrow. I stop in the middle. At this pace he’ll fall prey to a cornering car, stooping hawk or loping cat. Tenderness traps me, drawn to become his unlikely ally. I redirect with my sneaker, stand guard as a car rounds the bend. Up against the insurmountable curb, wouldn’t it be easy to leave him—let what may be, be—but instead I bend, clasp the velvet of his midsection, deposit him beneath shrubbery where instinct drives his little digger hands to turn earth, tunnel under, rump waggling until he vanishes, not so unlike watching my own son drive off alone for the first time, the distance lengthening forever between us.
Saltwater Pearls

An irritation in my gut, each son
first a grain of sand, layering up:
  mother of pearl, argyle sweater vest,
  thrift store Dickies cut off at the cuff.
Sons nested within my uterus ’til each
cone-head crowned my dilated cervix
to emerge fully grown, complete with
stubble, tattoos, zirconia studs, phlegm,
& belief that all the world belonged to them.
In the Checkout Line at Rite Aid,

Walter the clerk asks
*How’re you doing?*
and I say *Peachy*
and he says *You don’t look fuzzy*
and I say *I feel fuzzy*
which explains all
the Theraflu and DayQuil
in my basket. *Ah so*
you *have the uncommon cold*
and I say *Yes indeed I do.*
*I did too,* he says.
*How long did it take*
you *to shake it?*
*I missed a week of work,*
and I think he’s been here—
forever?—since my oldest
was a toddler, since
the photo department
mattered, since we used real film,
and those paper envelopes,
and the drop box,
and pushing the double stroller
to Blockbuster afterwards
and picking our weekend DVDs
The Matrix now a “classic”
and Walter, even then, was bald,
and now both of us have put on a few,
and I wonder about the girlfriend
he once mentioned, how her kid
that was not his kid is doing,
wonder about the play structure
he spoke of building, and did he ever
have kids of his own—or is that girlfriend, too,
in the past? I think this but never ask,
even as he rings us up, me and my
youngest son, who at seventeen now drives
a twenty year old car that, like us,
has seen better days but mostly
it’s just cosmetic and heck
at least it still runs. A line has piled up
behind us when Walter finally says
See you later, and I say Yeah.
See you around.
Autumnal Under Glass

The television is full of trees, screensaver set to Magic Fall.

A squirrel sits upright on its haunches, tiny hands raised for a handout from me.

I hold out my own but the squirrel can’t see, in fact is probably long dead.

Outside the trees sigh in exasperation against the pane where a real-live squirrel begs for entry at this second-story where we sleep. One squirrel taps the glass, then the other, both in rotation, and each equally real to me.
The Naturalist

Enamored of the habits of ants, my first born studies their procedural drama: rote tenacity. Together we watch as they carry off bits of leaves, each other.

For his birthday, we tour a lab, admire the butterflies pinned prone. Soon, from across the country crisp cicadas arrive in a brooch box along with the desiccated wings of monarchs.

Once in our backyard, a viceroy landed on his outstretched hand. He named it Buddy. Only later did we learn it was simply after salt, not evidence of any particular affection for him and only him.

His newest pet, a crested gecko, requires live meals, so we stop at Elliotts, watch the clerk reach hands into a tub of hundreds of crickets huddled in safety beneath cubbies of cut-up egg carton.

She lifts and tips about a dozen into the mouth of a plastic bag, swirls to inflate, then swiftly ties off the top. Driving home he holds the busy balloon: pop-pop-pop of crickets making contact with plastic.
Home, we cautiously remove the rubber band, dust calcium, shake to disperse
—Shake n’ Bake crickets, I say— before he slides back the cover of the terrarium to feed the mouth through the crack. When one escapes he catches it, cups it, observes, then forgets, until days later we find its husk, and he is a paradox, forlorn about its death— and yet, hadn’t he already doomed it?
Not like the time his younger brother caught

the preying mantis beneath the popcorn bowl and negligently left it in the sun. Year after year, the backyard volunteer fig attracts emerald beetles, bedazzling. He pulls back a branch, lets it go.

He catches a beetle, submerges it in his waiting jar to be placed in the back of the freezer for further study by him and his little brother. In stasis, the body waits until the thaw.
Real and Pretend

In the planetarium the poets
read poetry beneath starlight

by flashlight while the night sky
revolves above. I consider

the difference between watching
this false sky and observing the real.

I've never learned the constellations
except for the big and little dippers,

offering us a drink of the Milky Way.
I lean back, relax into melted dark

while above us days come, days go,
a lifetime in minutes, a chorus of spent

lives arcing over the horizon. My eyes drift
as we watch the stars dis- and re- appear,

again, days in fast forward. Imagine
bringing a child and saying, This is

the true night sky, the one outside
is the imposter.
This Old House

House feels like home.
Traffic sounds taffy-stretched from one
end of the block to
the other—snap as it
breaks from

our piece of street, moves
on. Water heater’s
drum corps in

the basement—
that snare, that low tom, thrumming.
Scratch of little cat hands

in the box making bowls,
throwing sand, which
collects in drifts, beachy

beneath our feet.
Distantly, the washer
tumbles clothes, its porthole

window into the roiling sea:
these waves, that foam.
Birdsong ornamental as stained glass.

Up the street, the home’s original owners
rest beneath heavy stone.
On walks, I say hello to their old bones.
Orange Tree, Night Vision

Nose first, pointed earth-ward, opossum descends the trunk, and in slo-mo, drunk-stumbles forward. So this is the why of the bitten rind, those teeth that fang the juice?

I expected to spy the overhead electrical tight-ropewalking rats, traveling their usual route: tree to roof to lifted clapboard flap. Once, on a night like tonight, I flipped the porch light, startling what at first I thought a rat, but, no! It was a baby opossum on the stoop. Frantic, it was circle-turning, loopy, searching for a hideout from the hideous brightness, bumbling down the top porch step to nearby tabletop. A hop from there to the sidewalk, then, gone. Could this one be that one, grown? How quick they thicken, lengthen, toughen up, in the hardscrabble life homesteading in my backyard.
At Twenty

Nine PM and my oldest comes into the kitchen to feed the cats, the fish.

We talk as he loads the dishwasher, shrubby curls wound into a man-bun, his live-in girlfriend trailing. Earlier I could hear them fight—or rather her, her voice above it all, and his a calm corral of her wildness, her flight.

At last, they have emerged and she wraps her arms around him as though everything is all right, and it is. We talk stocks. He downloaded an app. He was up but now he’s in the red. He bought bitcoin instead. An “investment.” To trust that it exists. Blue dish gloves cover his wrists. He has made an art of this. Now, lying in bed, he sings it back. I hear the balm of his guitar, the near melody, neither tragedy nor love song.
As Much As an Agnostic Can Pray

Near midnight and I click the circle that homes in on my teenage son thirty-five miles away on top of a mountain and as I watch, the icon of his small face darts across roads and lakes while the satellite pings, locating him.

Much is given up to the engine of technology amid prayer that it won’t fail at a terrible time, like rounding a narrow bend with the valley arrowing below, or on a night drive to “spot bear” or whatever it is that boys do in the dark.

I thumb the app open, closed, open, closed—like worry beads—my face aglow from the screen of my iPhone as I watch my son’s avatar slow, settle, and I let go.
At Fifteen, My Son Swallows Buckyballs

Not nanotubes
nor interstellar
dust; more akin
to magic beans:
those four rare-earth
magnets, neodymium,
made their way into
his silly open
mouth, slid down
esophagus
into stomach
like story returning
to origin,
and do not, as
had been foretold,
tendril into
beanstalk—which,
frankly, might’ve
been easier
to grab hold of—instead,

lodge at the ileocecal
valve which locks them
in, the inverse
of the safety
of the wishbone gate
at a RR crossing,
trapping them between
the arms, linked
like cars on a cargo
train, or the elements of a spell

to keep him
in this hospital bed.
But bodies are
magic too, and
just when we think
science has failed,
he poops.
I told him if you’re just going to black out for two days, you should bring my skateboard back, he says. I am just waking. How long have you been up? I ask, swinging my legs off the side of the bed, opening the cabinet for my morning meds. Since four, he says. I don’t sleep much anymore. When he called yesterday, I said, Call anytime. At least he waited until morning—He didn’t go in to work again today, I say. Yeah, there was a picture of him in someone’s story on Snapchat, passed out on the floor last night, says the friend. What time? I ask. Ten hours ago. Oh. So my kid drove home inebriated? No, he says, not drunk. Stoned. Driving stoned is just like driving tired, as if that makes any sense. I just miss my friend, he says, crying. I miss him too. I need coffee. Can we talk again later? Okay. I love you. I love you too.
California Poppies

I want to see the superbloom, I say,
so we slip on our sneakers, don sweaters,
head to the van with only a mild
complaint from the teen-aged boy-child who’d
rather be playing Fortnite. Soon we’re on
the highway and the exits tick by, first
quickly, then slower, slowly, as people
like us study the hillside for any—
Poppies! Which at first we think is just light
tricking the eye, but no, a stroke of
cadmium orange, then swaths, a whole tube
smeared against phthalo green, saturated,
otherworldly after the downpour.
Siri admonishes us to exit,
circle back to—Wait! The freeway...? No! Stop!
to find Walker Canyon, but it’s too late,
our child’s head tilted toward his phone, he
now revolts. Car sickness! Hours spent
in the back seat! Poppies already seen
through windows. Whole herds of hikers abandon
cars, pose by the side of the road, and now,
having lost our shot, we’re swept up in
the thick of leaving, my husband muttering,
You’d think nobody’d ever seen any goddamn
flowers. Jesus Christ. Heading home, I still
imagine us detouring onto a different road.
But no. The poppies are already closed.
Climbing into the Ambulance at Midnight with My Teen-aged Son,

what strikes me first is the missing shoe, then the hole in the big toe of the black sock on his foot poking out from beneath the blanket at the end of the gurney, the other clad in one checkered Van (can I even make it plural, Vans, when one is missing?) my mind zeroing in on the singular detail before I can take the rest in. Meanwhile, in a parallel scene just feet away, my teen’s best friend also lies on a gurney, his own mother hovering. Less than an hour since both boys were pushed out of the moving car reeking of Jägermeister, after which she called 911, then me. It’ll be hours before I notice his glasses are also missing. Against the glow of the ambulance, his lanky frame, mouth agape, eyes closed. (Is he asleep? Is he dreaming?) Slurry of green bile and god-knows-what-else slicks his shirt. Later in the ER, our sons lie in twin gurneys while we mothers wait.
What to Expect: The Teen-Age Years

A distant echo, like fruit belched up from breakfast, I remember how it felt to house your body in my body, how it knobbed up to meet the palm of my hand, how every gas bubble even before you could was a kick. Then, you grew. Plop, you fell out of me like a menarche clump of red cells except you were pink and frail and required oxygen. Then, suddenly, you were pushing up to standing, then walking, running, playing Matchbox cars, and now here you are, only a toddler, with your own car and license and my time is my own again and I don’t know what to do with it. There was nothing to prepare me for this. I read *The Baby Book* until the spine cracked and pages leaked out like my nipples oozing milk whenever you cried. I read *What to Expect When...* each stage a fresh new hell, except, once you hit puberty, there were no guidebooks to tell me how to teach you to drive, how not to wind up in the ER after a drinking binge, or how to make you love poetry, or me. That book doesn’t exist, but I imagine if it did it might begin with a chapter or two on mourning who you’ll never be, and accepting that. Forget college. Forget the golf scholarships. Never mind that homework. I forgive you for giving up on me not giving up on you. Instead, I give you the freedom to fail, and my unwavering love as I watch you clamor at the guardrails, pulling yourself back up, up, and then off again, while I sit here barely daring to sip my glass of wine, phone beside me, volume high, waiting, waiting.
Praise Song for Sons

Praise dirty socks left on the bathroom floor!
Praise checkered Vans and the clods of dirt or
sometimes dog poo they bring in!
Praise the car keys missing from the rack by the front door,
and praise the car that my teenager rode off in.
Praise the wheels on the car, and praise the tires
that do not deflate while driving.
Praise the windshield that shields him from wind!
Praise the horn that alerts the car that cut in front of him at
the light!
Praise the bumper that collapses upon contact, but spares
my son.
Praise the professional photos they didn’t want taken,
but sat for anyway, and praise the frames
that hold their youthful faces.
Praise their acne, praise their obstinacy, praise their hair
that has grown past their shoulders.
(Oh how luxurious it is, their long locks,
and the spiral curl that dangles from a ponytail
that springs back when stretched taut!)
Praise their feather-soft hair when they were small.
Praise the Moisture Maniac that tames all!
Praise bins of baby clothes collected in the dusty cellar.
Praise my sons’ friends, too, because I love them as my own.
Praise the gods that do not take them home
too soon, though one was called
home last Saturday.
Praise that one’s grieving mother.
Praise that she still has one son, and forgive the one
gone, for he knows not what he’s done.