Jackie Airhart

Honors 499

*“Walk up into the hills*”

When I can’t sleep I stare at the ceiling and watch the fan blades

chase each other in circles like starlings. I think about that voice.

I heard it when I was very small. How long have I watched birds circling;

wondering where it came from, why it told me what it did.

When I close my eyes I drop back into Tennessee. That wide state of my grandfather’s youth.

I can’t unwrinkle his face but there are dim frames holding a wiry boy

who would spend thirty years breathing a distillation of coal dust and honeysuckle.

I think everywhere he goes his feet still seek an incline.

The last time we walked there,

The sawgrass went two feet beyond the top of my head,

I pulled burs from my socks but left the ones in my hair like a crown,

following the crunch of his feet to a stream buried under a pleasant rot of leaves.

Kneeling, he touched the bottle lip to the swirling waters and it gulped down the glass neck.

Did you know there are springs that cannot freeze? He said it will never matter

how cold it gets, you’ll never have to crack ice on that surface, not once.

You can tell his whole life was there -- even when his body wasn’t.

He sat at his desk in Lexington Park drawing real estate appraisals,

Pouring over county maps and stencils, typing documents while his feet

tapped beneath the desk, tracing the trail.

Do your dreams order you around too? I don’t know how to say it.

I heard it when I was very small. I lie awake trying to decide who came to who.

There is something that orders our dreams; its dominion is far and lonely.

It says to search for the angle at the edge of our sleep,

to lean into its slope, to meet it at a place where we cannot freeze.

Flare

I pulled the last flare from my pack

My hands shook hard, my salt lips cracked

The moon loomed high

The sea stretched still

The raft half sunk

With kelp and krill.

'You are quite small'

I sighed, 'but bright'

They're bound to glimpse

Your sailing light.

I shot my dream up to the sky

I closed my eyes, I let it fly.

I heard the burst

Then watched it arc

A golden scar

Across the dark.

I shot my dream up to the sky

I closed my eyes, I let it fly.

Piano in the Maple Leaf Nursing Home

The quiet cold radiates like a frequency and

Approaching does nothing for it, except increase the potency.

Its hulking shape overfills the allotted corner and

seems to beg (or maybe that’s only me) a conversation;

a moonlight sonata, a lady madonna, something to let the keys

blink awake, and remember how to see the self that it was.

I create a quick history of ragtime dance halls,

of smoky air filled with the sweet

thuds of landing punches,

while saloon girls drenched in explosively colored skirts

swish to the syncopated crash of breaking glass

and a song bounces out to the street.

Beneath the window, a contracted landscaper twirls through squares of grass,

his errant notes scattering to the curb in green clippings

and I have to pause the chatter till he reels away.

I look back and for the smallest moment there is an echo

of shadow, a hand grazing across the keys,

so sudden it might be my own.

They must think it still holds something

for it to be here. Some power of suggestion.

That at any time it might waken,

that someone right here in this very room

might waken it; that the right whisper, the right touch

will make it stir *I'm here, I'm here, was just resting my eyes.*

*The Kindest Way to Crash Your Car*

I realized this Wednesday

 while I waited for a tow,

The kindest way to crash a car

 is to crash it in the snow.

And like an idiot does, now I know

 exactly what happens after, as pickups

 barrel past, burying the wreck

 and whiting out the windshield

 while I tell my name to the phone--

punching in my digits for geico.

I assured them of my deductible

 then confirmed my general health,

 and I just thought over and over again

 that the kindest way to crash your car

 is to crash it in the snow.

If the metal must twist into an angry new mold--

 if you must be inside, hearing the

circular whomp of the spinning

tire suddenly freed from the ground,

If you have to shift your weight uncomfortably

to unclick the belt and kick out the door,

then save your car from the embarrassment

of organs revealed and shattered disarray.

Because like dogs at the vet, attuned for the

silent hiss of a depressed syringe,

your cars will suffer to hear the

warbled scream of a skid

when you should have checked and slowed.

Instead, let there be silence:

a casablanca goodbye between

the wheels and the road, separated

by a sweet onslaught of snow.

Bay Center Liquors

She meddles through the day,

crossing her arms constantly,

her hand clawing at her chest

as if the air is a cloak that requires

adjustment; muttering maledictions

always, patrolling the crumble

of sidewalk, sweeping the dirt

off the dirt; the birdy twitch

of her neck turning towards

my feet first, then rising

as her face unfolds, the wrinkles perilously

shifting and settling into a whirled flower

of flesh, and I have the same things

to say when she asks her same

questions of the last twelve years.

Still, I’m content with our shared dislike.

Not everyone is so dependable.

She asks me if my sister is still pretty.

I ask her when the committee

Will tear this building down.

She picks up, swipes my card with her fingernails,

I pocket my gum and turn to walk out--

look back to nod a mutual frown.

Agreement

There are all sorts of things

I nod my head to,

stamping the bottom of my glass

on the table a few times,

my tongue clucking away

in reckless conciliation

as a room full of my shaggy-haired

and sweetly slurring friends

swig frothy guinness tumblers.

I prefer nodding and I think

everyone appreciates it

during the corner rants on women’s issues,

the solemn nods for bingeing tragedies

while my fireball shot waits awkwardly, and

something I couldn’t completely hear

over bellows and fists detonating

from the flicker above the bartender’s head

as 22 *practically gave it away*,

and I must admit I feel like a muppet

with my head always bouncing.

You need to understand

I’m very worried about myself.

I am constantly trying to push

myself back into line. Sometimes

I worry I don’t care enough

about changing football team names

or about equal pay equal work.

I am so concerned I just want

to be married and taken care of,

that I don’t stand for anything

I want to want to stand for,

that I might actually agree

my way into an empty house,

that this neurotic bit might really be

all there is to women, anyway;

that I’m the problem.

Four Days Ago

Four days ago, I held

a mouse underwater.

I found him sunk in a glue trap,

lunging pitifully, in a useless

struggle with sticky chains.

At our rainwater tub out back,

I watched the soft surface stir

then slow  to a tremble,

While seconds ran in gentle

twitches ticking up my arm.

But each day, I squint

under a screen’s cold glare;

and my hand softly clicks

and drags to sort and file

and discard and shift.

And I know it counted.

It's been forever. I can’t find a broom

to sweep the tiny, dripping

shadow, scurrying through

the walls while I work.

Two Photos of Family Jumpers Off Elk Falls, TN

In both photos, their

feet point down and their arms

rise to their sides like cranes,

like the right gust could find their spans

and they would gently glide down.

They must have hit hard, sucked

deep into the water violently,

as pointedly as though

some giant threw them, aiming

to spear a large fish dead center

with their bodies.

My grandfather's is in color but

muted with a green bleach from

hanging in a sunny patch of wall.

He is on the right and very small.

You could almost miss him.

His grandfather’s is black, white,

dark. The shape of him a grey

blurry thing that seems to belong
to what he is a camera click

away from dropping into.

The water is falling in both like it always has,

in love with the river beneath it.

It races the two jumpers to the

murky basin, its quiet

rush, their sudden drowned

yelps gurgling out of a silence

the frames strain to hold fast.

I have been told you cannot jump

you must run. There is no option

to weigh uncertainty, to ponder, to whisper

encouragement, to gaze over the edge

or stick out your foot to test the icy thin sheet of wind.

The air must blow past your ears.

You must commit fifty yards back,

set yourself sprinting, hellbent and

gracelessly skidding over glorious mudded slime;

briefly interrupting a scream that suddenly

doesn’t look like yours as you leap away from it,

reaching for empty arms of air

that do not care to catch you.

You cannot jump you must run.

Ah. That’s it. Where poems come from.

Rain

The rain has been falling steadily enough,

A constant rhythm in gutters and eaves.

A perpetual induction to the cracks in the roof

and haphazard pulp of rotting leaves.

All night’s been this. Unruly clangs’ve careened,

A gallop of sounds skipping wild and rebellious,

tossing about in the tops of the trees.

I look out and up, half incredulous:

Someone is typing up there, in cumulus.

They are at a battered desk puffing on tobacco.

A crackling cough from a cavernous

cloud; a long lone light surging, sings staccato:

And my walls chatter; the dog sinks into his fur.

Thunder yawns a tired yawn

the trickle of keys keeps tumbling on.

The Bird

The shape of him from over here reads uncertain, a silent quivering

of white, grey, and brown

against the grass next to the dock.

Ten slow steps, the car door un-shut, and here he is still unclear

but more wild, the frenzy bleeding through as shivers
cascade down his speckled feathers like rainwater.

I am near enough to see the scythe of his beak

retreating red with sinew and soft tangles of flesh.

He has caught a fish. Perhaps a squirrel.

But I am too close. That’s why his head nods

close to the ground even as his right eye swivels.

A black point of pupil flares deep within, poised as an arrow retracted on its string.

It is silent, sudden, when his long sleek wings

bloom and arc before plunging downward;

sending his body bursting into the air.

Rising limply from weeds the meal goes too.

A bundle of polished black. The dead crow’s wings graze the ground

in slender charred feathers before the osprey pumps them higher.

I can’t stop watching as they depart into a dot. Out, and over the river.

Hunting

It carves a song through

the air, in steady vibration of string.

A drolling hum for fling of the arrow

punctuated sudden by a

metal thwack.

And I awaken as if from a dream

to the singe burned in forearm,

ardent red gathering on skin,

then catch the gaze of beady eyes

painted on the wooden target.

In front of me, the bow, sleek and lean,

keeps metronomic time:

a black rainbow arcing lazily

across my vision as I test its

balance with twists of outstretched arm.

Punctuated sudden. I pull back again.

refill the bow. Pick up the pen.