

How To Fall

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KAREN ANNESEN



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for Mia

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How to Fall

Easy, I've been doing it all my life.
On cobblestone streets
in high heels, yes.
Off a bike at seven,
your friend shouting *faster*
some fear mixing in your blood
with yellow cake and pink icing.

Try a slapstick fall—
the ones where bodies
seem without bones,
seem to give way
somewhere low down.
Practice falling while smiling—
not wondering about your teeth,
the position of the furniture,
brain damage.

Off a train, out of a speeding car
like a stunt artist.
Remember to look like someone else,
like someone who doesn't fall for a living.
Then, when those moving trains no longer scare you,
try falling out of love
because you have to
with the one person
in whose eyes the world seems steady.

10.45 to Stockholm

In the dining car a woman sits alone in a booth,
her white hair wisping into a lunch
she eats from a margarine box.
No crusts and, when she leaves, no crumbs.

A few cars on, a sleeping woman in peach
paddles back down rivers,
tries to reach her green past
but always, just before, there are rapids.

A man distracts himself
recalling the waitress at breakfast.
Blonde hair teased its way
down the whole of her lithe back.

A child stands backwards on the seat
squealing in Swedish
to a Japanese couple behind. His hands move toys
up and down on some great journey.

Outside birch and quaking aspens,
wooden houses and shimmering lakes.
This could be home, New Hampshire or Maine.
Dirt tracks lead nowhere in any language.

Wishing

The boat lay low, weighted
by young bodies which rocked
the dark lake each time they moved.

Above, they hoped, were stars
waiting to die and in that dying
yield up a wish for her, for him

for anyone out that August night.
The moon was half-full, half-empty.
Crickets played a persistent tune.

They were almost asleep and then—
a bright arc across the sky.
A dog barked, crickets paused.

They rowed back wide awake,
believing in wishes,
parting black water.

Fishmonger's Café

Mussels jostle in bowls.
Lobster, corn on the cob,
everything, especially the man
you are with, drips butter.

Outside a bridge rises
and lowers for boats.
Either warm air or chilled wine
sends your mind back
to summers watching
this bridge, the boats,
the waitresses kissing the cooks—
mint mocha ice cream slipping
down your chin.

Tonight, at the Fishmonger's café
with your yellow dress and the moon,
take your turn.
Slip to that water's edge,
kiss his buttery lips.

Bridesmaid

Her veil blows across my face,
my hand tight in hers on the way to church.
We might be skipping along, seven and eight
except for that veil. The lace scratches
and I wonder again about her choice.
Why white at twenty-nine?

Mr Miller's cutting the lawn while his wife weeds
the borders humming a tune I can't make out.
I'm in apricot, last time pink.
My hand is sweating, or is it hers?
The church will be cool,
Father Peter's eyes will look past mine.

It's time. We enter and I smooth her dress,
ease the veil over her soft flushed face.

The Dunes

If you stay in that house you'll fossilize.
Get the purple bike, pedal fast
to the honeysuckle path.
Then rest a moment—tease
the golden centres out and taste—
no wine will ever match that clear liquid.

Look into the window at Patrick's. He's not there.
Carry on alone (best get used to it)
and stop again by the grey pier
where water laps the rowing boats.

The smell of ice cream and sunscreen
is thick now and seagulls call overhead.
The pavement is half-covered in sand.
Pass the street where Loni will steal flowers
and blame you, pass the boys diving off the bridge
(soon they'll shout words you won't understand).

Ease your body into the shallow water.
The sun is on your back.
Beach grass bends in a breeze.
Below you your handprints appear and disappear,
appear and disappear in wet sand.

Playground

Teacher's pet, Teacher's pet
my friend was saying, her voice
as flat as our chests at twelve.
After the first slap
I knew this was a real fight,
the whole class was clapping
and no teachers would hear in time.

This was East coast suburbia, spring 1976,
Jimmy Carter trying
to talk sense in an accent no one took seriously.
Batons would twirl
in Bicentennial parades in every small town.
Olympics. Nadia Comaneci would bend us
into a rare American silence.

On the playground the shouting grew louder, my hands
pulled hair, clawed skin and found soft places to hit.
After years of fending off an older brother
I knew I'd never win, but I wouldn't quit either.
Maybe the bell rang, maybe they got bored.
You're not a bad fighter, you know, my friend
said, smiling. And then it was over.

Carl's Bar and Grill

She sits another night at Carl's bar.
Only drunks come out on nights like this.
She'd never known nights so long or so cold
or a bar so warm. The silence came in waves.
The butcher's wife is pregnant
again, but he was 'done' after the fourth.
The price of logs gone up.

By spring she'd leave she knew—and they guessed.
Carl asked one night, which was better, arriving or leaving?
Oh, leaving for sure.
Arriving is always the same sweet mix of promises.
Leaving, well, you never know a person or a place
until you leave.

Getting On

He's young and insatiable,
but we are not alone in the room.
Others walk in and out:
my mother who says *You're getting on
you know*, a leggy Italian called Maria,
members of his band looking
for somewhere to practice.
Men who want to marry me
bring colour charts and names for children.
They have DIY plans and business cards.
I pull the duvet over our heads,
tell the band to play on.

Via London

One shoe slips into dull brown mud.
New asphalt steams from machines
held steady by three men in orange;
the racket drowns out our seagulls.
A black cab going the other way
spins around, takes us to Waverly Station.

I wait as you negotiate
a change of plan via London.
You are at that window so long
that I notice whole lives:
the strange older couple in trench coats,
hats pulled down. Dark leather gloves
clutch the handles of two immaculate fawn cases.
A thin boy with glasses whines at his mother.
In ten years time he will stand here silent
hug her and not glance back.

The red numbers of the digital clock move
with undue speed. The board tells me
London Kings Cross is Platform 19.
You are still at that window.
I blink hard to forget the blue-eyed baby
gliding by in her pram.

We will be in London at 2.57.
Another black cab, another few hours together.
Later, I will take
a smooth cloth, remove
all traces of mud from my shoe.

Late Night Window

This dark comes hours
after day. Layer upon layer
of light withdrawn.

A house stands alone on a hill
sending its inner light out.
Some meagre measure

of thick black dissipates.
We see edges of the house,
the line of the eaves.

What we cannot see, we hear.
Owls, bats. The grass we know
from experience is wet.

Our small lives make us watch
for figures at the window.
A man and a woman argue.

We walk the mile back
and sleep reassured we are not alone.
A streetlamp pierces the thin curtains.

A Boy Can Dream of Honey Only If He's Tasted It

The boy idles along a narrow path
pulling at beach plums.
At the end the path widens for a view of the sea
he'll never tire of remembering.
One day he'll whisper all the names of grasses
into a girl's ear in a meadow: Foxtail, Maiden, Upland Sea.

The city will have its pleasures too,
but on a summer's night the sound
sending him to sleep will not be a fan's
dead hum, but the sound of the sea
lapping at rocks,
filling all the spaces it has carved for itself.

Inside This Room

You whisper tales
of a younger you travelling
across my country. *Carolina*

you say, but now I am ready.
Boston, which you liked.
New York, which you didn't.

None gets me like that first *Nevada*.
I feel the hot sun,
the glint of it on chrome.

Outside it is cold even for Edinburgh.
A blue ship enters Leith harbour.
Men gather to guide it to a narrow berth.

Cheyenne, Little Rock, Cape Cod—
I could take you back there.
You hear what I am thinking, say

We're here now.
There are continents to explore
inside this room, *Nevada*.

Every Dark Place

Cast iron pans hung from hooks
over a Formica counter and below that a place of miracles
where a gluey mass became a risen loaf.
Nearby the wood-burning stove was fed and stirred.
The logs must be laid like this, Father would say
and Mother would nod agreement and do it her way.
The light pine shelves lined with tins of peas,
boxes of macaroni and bags of Pillsbury flour.

One day my sister stood on tiptoe, reached for a glass
and felt instead her hand on chocolate bars.
She searched for further secrets in every dark place
finding a rat who died for the love of cheese
and rows of old jam jars stuffed full of mother's stories,
half-finished, wet with time.

A Few Words

The old woman in black
watched me light the candle,
anchor it in the metal tray of sand,
drop some coins in the box
and stand before the flame.

When I turned she glanced away,
but, as I passed, she said a few words in Greek.
Perhaps *Thank you for the donation*
or *Take care*. I wanted her to say:
She is all right now, you will sleep again.