

A Brief History of Time

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*For all of my teachers, and for Lee,
who teaches me every day.*

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A Brief History of Time

Now that we each have someone who knows how we take our coffee, that smallest but most telling of intimacies—you, black, three sweeteners; me, cream, no sugar—we're each eating breakfast with other people who don't drink coffee at all. There seems to be a message here, but I don't know what it is. I'm no good at this love thing

nonetheless, I keep on trying, like the benchwarmer who begs to be sent in and is carried out crushed every time. I wish just once someone would cry out from the stands, *Quit putting her in there. For God's sake, she's just a kid. She'll get killed if she takes much more.* Then I could go back to my regular duties of pouring Gatorade, wiping away sweat and shards of bicuspid and incisors. But this never happens. The Elizabethans were right, you know, that love is just another type of insanity. The Greeks thought the seat of love was the eyes; the liver, the seat of desire; and the Tongans of Australia believe it resides in *manava 'o fafine 'a e nofo'anga 'o e 'ofa*, the womb of a woman.

I'm sure it's an electrical impulse that travels our most twisted neurons, axons, and dendrites—or why would we fall into the trap of doing the same thing the same way and expect different results, which is one definition of insanity? This would explain why my father is still married to my mother, even after she tried to knife him just days after coming home from jail for two other attempted murders.

This definition was put forth by one Gerald Nadler (Ph.D.), President of the Center for Breakthrough Thinking, the people who write those books about how to be a “team player” and your “best self”

for the purpose of making other people rich. When I tried my hand at financial planning, I did it to help people, probably another symptom of my psychosis, wanting my neighbors to be able to send their kids to college, and when other planners asked what I did the rest of the time, I said *write poetry*, and they asked me to write about our company, which wasn't at all poetic.

So I left. But not without a huge life insurance policy and annuities, so that if marriage is a war of attrition, the survivor will come out loaded—and to me, this doesn't seem cynical because I think we've both earned our field pay these past six years. And it makes us better off than the *bushi*, who were paid in rice and had to barter the rest, but not as good as the *hatamoto*, who received fiefs from their *daimayo*. Because after all, isn't one's own space the best refuge? At least, according to Virginia Woolf, who couldn't get enough of her own life, and chose to end it.

I think I'm through with being in love with people though I'll love mountains as only a flatlander can. To be awed by something so big and unyielding that your desire to conquer it never dies, though you know in your heart, liver, neurons, axons, dendrites, and womb, that it will never happen. Because the Rockies, my latest non-human love, were born 65 million years ago, maybe the same year a meteor crashed near the Yucatan, rendering the dinosaurs irrelevant except to squirmy kindergarteners who love them and to paleontologist Paul Sereno, who was named one of *People* magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People" which, unfortunately, is probably how most people know him, not as discoverer of *Deltadromeus agilis*, (Agile River Runner) and *Eoraptor lunensis* (Dawn Plunderer), although this isn't entirely true because these were discovered by members of his expedition team

but have the most lovely names, so I've decided to change
history, by writing these untruths, the way
Lydia Howard Sigourney rewrote an entire culture in 1841
with her *Pocahontas and Other Poems*, following
James Fenimore Cooper's lead of exchanging Mohegans
for Mohicans and claiming in his novel that they'd become extinct,
which perhaps has caused teenagers in the Hudson River Valley
and Uncasville, Connecticut to wonder if they really exist at all,
the way I used to wonder if I really existed
when I sat with Jenny on the hood of her 1983 Cutlass Supreme
on nights when the moon was full and we'd talk about how
it looked like a good night to die.
That same moon I liked to picture as a baseball, years earlier,
a baseball hit so hard and far that nothing could ever bring it back.

Would you know me

if you had met me in my natural environs
wearing the uniform
of the hardworking rural poor—
straight-legged jeans, plaid flannel,
ponytail pulled through the back
of a John Deere cap,
a nondescript girl with hair as dun as after-harvest fields,
eyes the color of a Midwestern sky
that doesn't
even make it
to blue
nine months of the year,
a bleak heart to match the landscape
of that land where winter never ends—

there's a chance you would have stopped
in August
at the roadside stand
where I used to sell the extra produce
my family could never use by season's end—
sweet corn, twelve ears for a dollar,
tomatoes, still warm from the sun—
you would have named your price and maybe wondered

about that quiet girl
who deftly filled your bags,
her small hands,
fingers flat and broad from honest work,
but you never would have thought
of all that she had done for your
dollar ninety-five—
hefting hay to feed the calves
and shoveling mounds of warm
manure to fertilize the soil months before
those tomatoes and corn

were pushed into the earth,
dropping fat green tomato bugs into coffee cans
of gasoline, pulling weeds in ninety-degree
sun so the ears would grow full
and yellow and ripe

so you could take them away
and forget me
until you meet me years later
in my favorite disguise—sophisticated city-dweller
where I am cast under silver lunar streams
in a platinum glow, no longer
grey and dun,
a new creature,
and you could proclaim it destiny.

First Love

Anxious for the nine o'clock break,
at eight-thirty I would light the porch,
line the sink with gauze, cotton balls, peroxide—
austere tools of love—
wanting him to bring his hands to me—
small, delicate hands
an artist's or surgeon's
displaced by the lack of a diploma,
twisting wires ten hours a day.

When his Grand Prix rumbled into the drive,
I would look not at his face
but his hands
and nightly make the same, sharp sigh
when I had counted *ten*
like a new mother,
knowing that metal which cuts bricks
could lay siege to fingers too.

I'd fold his hands in mine
like folding sugar into butter
and lead him past my disapproving parents
to my makeshift triage
under the fluorescent buzz of bathroom lights.
Awed by the horrid beauty
of miniscule rivulets of blood,
the muted glitter of metal shards
just under the skin,

I'd begin my gentle ritual
of tweezing out steel slivers,
flooding the red rivers white with peroxide,
softly blowing away the sting—
then, I would send him back, bandaged,

with a sandwich,
to the big, block building just outside of town
and return to my geometry.

Elegy for a Past Life

I miss the honest life we used to lead
scraping up odd jobs so we could see
a movie the next town over,
and stare for a few hours at people
on the drive-in screen who weren't
like us—who didn't wear too big hand-me-down
flannels and mud-caked boots—
and even if they were playing farm people,
had never known that pinching pain
in the sacral spine that paralyzes
as you heft the bale by the twine
and let it avalanche down to the ground.

For days, after seeing a show, we'd sit in the loft,
legs dangling over the bleating sheep below
and dream about the life we'd live
when we'd escaped. Back then at sixteen
I thought we'd make it out together,
and become writers, the only job we could imagine
where we wouldn't smell like shit or hay or cows

but too many months passed when I didn't bleed
and when we were safe, the test negative
and burned in the rubbish heap behind the barn,
you left, too afraid of being trapped
in a cornfield town
to wait for me.

Red Heifer

There was the year of all-black cattle,
except for the small, red heifer
I wanted to be mine

from the second she ambled down the ramp
of the livestock truck
just because she was different
and a “she.”

I begged to be taught to milk her,
counted days until she’d be old enough,
asked if I could spend the night
in a sleeping bag

out in the barn
waiting for her to give birth
the way that I’d seen grown-ups do.

Names of other cattle have stayed with me
Floyd, whose name was later prefaced
by *Fat*, and *Maynard*, who,
weighing in at 2,000 lbs
would still come when you whistled

but I can’t for anything
remember the name of that red heifer,

just that she took away my pain
when Grandpa yanked my Band-Aid off,
pointing to her across the field
as a distraction.

Stretching out that fifteen minutes

Exploding flashes of cameras. Crackle of microphones magnifying wind. So much attention. Dizzying. Unreal. Excited yips of dogs picking up the scent. Beating down rows and rows of corn. Looks like a TV special on crop circles. Shouts, sometimes carried far on prairie breeze, *Kohhhhh-Deeee*, sometimes choked down throats in the rasping wind, *Koh-dee*. Internal film reel replaying pleas on Channel 22 News—*Please help me find my son . . . I just want Cody back. If you've seen him . . .* Pull picture out of purse. Look imploringly at Camera One. Sheriff warns of gopher traps set in fields, pack of wild dogs spotted on Johnson's farm down the road. *Not trying to scare you, Ma'am. Just want you to be prepared. Just in case.* Neighbors bring over dinner *so you won't have to cook, more important things to worry about, but you still need to eat.* So much food—peach cobbler, beef and noodles, a whole ham, peanut butter pie—so nice of them. Watch for his face on the nine o'clock news. Wonder how many hearts are breaking—*that poor woman. Darling little boy, only six years old.* How many gruff men saying, *Damn kids shouldn't play in cornfields, 'course you'll get lost—nothing but corn for miles. And they crush the corn.* Next morning, sunup, search resumes. Everyone soaked in dew, chipper, hopeful, volunteers handing out free Dunkin' Donuts coffee. Feature local story on the early news at five—wary farmers watch for trading price of grain, soybeans, hogs, over morning coffee. Bewildered cry of a hound, excited shouts, *Over here! We found him!* Large man has swooped him up. *He was just here, huddling between the rows.* Sheriff brings mylar blanket. *He's cold, but he'll be fine!*, he announces. Crowd cheers. Your few minutes of fame are up—next time, you'll have to hide him better.

Triptych—The Light, The End, The Light

The lawn is a coarse, green carpet
waiting to shred my feet
so my oxygenless blood can feed its roots.
Heavy clouds suffocate my cries.
It has picked a perfect day to drown me.
I slide into the soil.
The metallic taste of dirt fills me—
nose, mouth, and lungs. Days pass.
A sharp stab of light wakes me
when a shovel breaks ground, just missing
my head. It is little Jimmy Millican,
from next door, attempting, again,
to dig to China. He has heard the women there
are beautiful, and he misses his mother.
No, he doesn't miss her, but the *idea*
of her, a different idea entirely
than the one his father has, every night,
sitting in his boxers on the edge
of the narrow bed, downing another oxycontin
to bring on sleep. "Dad!" screams Jimmy—
"A girl is buried in the yard!"
"Stop fucking around Jimmy—It's not
funny! That astounding sound of loneliness
when the first shovelful of dirt
hit your mother's coffin—" but he trails off,
train of thought lost in a cloud of numbness.
Jimmy reaches down, pulls me out—
his father's gone again. He has to be the man now.
"You better watch it, Blondie," his father mutters,
"Next time, Jimmy here might not be digging
for worms." An orange glower from Jimmy
aimed at Dad—"I will so be digging—Now I know
we have a pretty lady patch in the front yard."
"Qué loco—" his father nods knowingly.
We all worry for Jimmy but not enough

because in ten years he will think the electric fence
is talking to him—asking him to feed it things—
At first turtles and frogs,
then kittens. Until one day, he walks naked
into its embrace—finding the light
a shovel makes when it splits the soil.

A Man Walks Into a Bar

He was tall, well-built, blue-eyed,
a guy most girls would want to take to bed.
Then he reached for the beer with his left hand,
revealing the stump of his right.

We could tell the second he knew that we knew.
We'd smile, but the smile wouldn't travel
all the way to our eyes. He'd turn back to the bar,
fold his arm closer so that we could
no longer see

as we rushed off to sling beers for guys
not as good-looking but more whole,
the ones who leered lecherously,
on "Short-Shorts Night"
and left ten dollar tips for two dollar beers

always expecting more, always bitter when we didn't deliver.
The quiet one, we wounded week after week, a guy
any of us would have considered "out of our league,"
"a long shot," if he had been unbroken,

the sad, blond man we were afraid to love.

Why Gold-digging Fails

I.

Because there was the tattoo artist
who took us for rides on his motorcycle
and gave Jenny the hand-sized fairy on her stomach
that she swore she'd never ruin by getting pregnant

and the most beautiful guy we'd ever seen
who was cruising with his friend in an olive green
hooptie that we hoped was a sign of his rebellion
against rich parents who maybe had bought him a Mercedes
which he traded for something "more sensible"
because something about him seemed rich
and not at all small-town, and we didn't know
who he was, until on a break from college

I was out with a friend who said, "I should stop by
and see my friend Mike. Want to meet him?"
We waited in a dark living room decorated in
early nineties thrift store—dank green sofas,
padding pluming out the cushions—talking
to a doughy blonde girl who must have been pretty
thirty pounds ago, as she pushed a fat, laughing baby
in one of those yellow and white gingham swings
that clickety-clacks as they unwind,
when in walked the guy we'd always wanted,
not dressed down for a rich guy but dressed up
for one of us—
neatly pressed flannel tucked into Wranglers
nearly hiding tawny construction boots,
like the ones I wore when roofing—
and there was that odd moment of recognition
and fumbling for words
when quantum theory hit me and I realized
if we'd tried harder instead of merely flirting

in parking lots at the beach and the Dairy Queen
and the drive-in that sold gallons of homemade root beer
either of us could be that chubby blonde woman
with the fat baby
and the happy husband waiting for green olive burgers
in our own little utopia
ten miles further than our mothers got.

II.

Because every time we hung out at the billiards room
of the Condos at the lake,
the rich people gave us dirty looks.
They knew what we were up to—
two blonde girls in Daisy Dukes
and bikini tops
in a borrowed sports car
hunting for rich boyfriends,
anything to get us out of Argos, Indiana.
My grandmother, also, must have tried this bit,
working as a dishwasher in the kitchen
of the academy. My brother, too, worked there.
Maybe his motives were more pure.
All I know is for Jenny and me none of this worked.
Her one rich boyfriend used to beat her
to a pulp; and I decided to leave my marriage
with enough money to fix a timing belt,
just in case my engine decided to go.
Our parents had tried to warn us. They knew our game.
The rich aren't like you and me, my father used to say,
The rich aren't like you and me.