

LOREN GRAHAM

selection from

The Ring Scar

Sonnets & Anti-sonnets

“It is our kind to wound”

—John Berryman

Dream Song 219

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Imaginary Conversations

Don and Emmy six months after their separation

Estranged

Don

is such a word to use for this obsession
with all that is so entirely familiar—
and for the inadvertent ghosts that hover
on the few books, the lone CD, your stray possessions.
The bed, of course. Your empty closet. The succession
of old notes from you still taped to the refrigerator
half a year now after your departure.
I feel as if I should have drawn conclusions
by this time, poetic ones about love, passion,
and loss. Instead I picture the strand of your hair
I have not yet found, but will find in some
untouched, undusted nook—or in a drawer
long unopened—or wound around my shirt button
as though my heart's strange ghost had reeled it there.

The Past The Icicle

Emmy

I thought I could melt it in the right spring
thaw given a city that makes its own weather
the job new the phone my rings newly

in a matchbox the address new furniture clothes
new site of our history's shrinking dripping
running out downspouts down storm

drains down river ocean and goodbye
what water does what I wanted that icicle
of oil to do that mounted the air instead

in its defrosting rose evolved its own
cycle to come down in dribs and drabs on all
in my gaze on the crowds I brush through

thinking somehow you also have passed by
on the street where old cobblestones show through tar
in a tunnel far below where subway trains pass

a greasy flutter of light a film off the sprocket
a man in your coat and glasses standing silent
like a newspaper holding onto the rail

which bears the same grime that settles everywhere

A Language of Birds

O for a language of birds, to say
ourselves! To call us as the chickadee
calls itself—chik-a-dee-dee—and the phoebe
likewise, and the whipporwill, and the jay.

Or to summon ourselves in a subtler vein:
the towhee with his endless drink-your-teeee
or that low trembling whistle in which we
perceive the misnamed screech-owl's secret name.

Could we then meet ourselves in all of these
and form from them that one call of our own
that would lay claim to us? And would it shear

away the distance and the constant drone
of traffic and TV, and would we hear
again the flickers' laughter in the trees?

Admission

Ochre detritus under naked rose
stems sepals like crushed
insects clenching withered

blossom heads blasted whose
collapse I observed aloof
annoyed at first with this token

you presented for admission to shut
doors or was it a question
as to their opening dissolved

those blooms shadows those
petal remnants persisting
please no more questions no

more questions

Spring in Hell

A new outbreak of anger and desire
falls down with snow on limbs alive with green
sparks, on maples in red eruption, on fires
of hyacinth flaring up amid a sheen

of phlox and pussy willow, on the blaze
of tulip and azalea, on raging tongues
of new grass—flame descending into flame,
ignition spreading to poplars, fire flung

across jonquil and forsythia—over the strained
obscene logic of pistil and pollen,
unquenchable longing versus utter rage,
both uncontrollable, and both in blossom,

and both reminding me how easily
a tenderness can bloom inside a fury.

The Escapee

Spark on wings yellow flash that lights in tiny
park next door jauntily pecks ground
for seed sustenance among such dull

pigeons I would bring you bright budgie
inside to comfort to cage if in your eye
were not something like relief something winter

and alley cats could not dismay which stays
my hand with you who without plot of departure
have surprised even yourself in electric bolt

through door or window left open just enough
for something smoldering to flame out a flickering
wish for Bradford pear tree seen from tidy

confinement from contented drowsing before some
revealing glass so that I will say never to myself again
one thing causes another nor to world

you are just what I suppose

The Other Man

Listen: it's not so much the other man
himself, not the mere fact that he exists
and has a foreign accent and a wit
like broken glass, an elf's face, and a stand-
ing invitation to your bed, that lands
on me like a death.

It's more that tiny twist
of smile that lingers on your mouth, the wist-
fulness in your cheekbones, in your laugh lines:

the way that your demeanor echoes mine
on the few days when I can feel, the days
when I imagine my new love, when I'm
convinced that she is standing in the line
at the market or waiting in a dry doorway
during a storm, though I don't yet know her face.

Humanities Eumenides

Invitations engender paperless regrets
via daisies each like a pale enormous
eye via valentine with silly birds and photo

you in pine woods back of our house via seed
pearls in manila left taped to my door via
chrysanthemums thirteen sans card the first

day I went out with another silent dragon heads
accusing mums from my mom I assured words
that made me ill that forced me to recall

your love like a bee's for the hive the polite
messages my machine is full of offers
unstated full of silent Furies beckoning full

of the ominous quiet in your voice

Imaginary Conversations

You say whatever it was you ever said
that left me flat, that vandalized or burned
me. I say words I wish I had returned
but did not.

Then you recede, and I explain
in great detail, in words I never said,
how shame and anger are seldom long estranged,
how in a lyric from a country croon
I hear our diminution and am embarrassed,
enraged and appalled at the tidy vacuum,
the perfect lack that we made of marriage.

But always silence is your last reply,
silence presented as a negative quantity,
a nothing that can settle any score.

(You say the absence of your knocking at my door.)

The One-time Mrs. Van Winkle

To walk hand-in-hand with someone
else in the city and think of you on the other
side of the mountains was to be incognito

a thief safe from all surveillance
but unable to enjoy what I had stolen
Though I would wish to I cannot stop

this larceny so I fantasize about putting everyone
to sleep a year of sound and dreamless slumber
you among the sleepers only my friend

and I awake to wander empty streets and shops
unhurried unremarked to take what we wanted
needed and in that gap of time I could choose

whether to rouse you early with exquisite kisses
or steal away in that year-long night let you
awaken on your own puzzled at the length

of your hair the calendar's strange inaccuracies

The Ring Scar

It should have disappeared by now, this faint
line of pale skin where my ring used to ride,
but it persists. It faded overnight
from my palm, but on the back of my hand,
part of me most familiar, it has remained
for months: indented, obvious, a fine
shadow, a delicate burn never quite
healed. Nothing will erase that little brand:
I've stretched it, flexed it, held it in the sun,
but it will not be exorcised. It hangs
on like an old unwelcome ghost, a crank
spirit biding its time, making mortals wait
until the day when, for reasons unknown,
it leaves off haunting and suddenly is gone.

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The Transformed

before the separation

The Match

Tennis days days in synch when we hit
in brisk rhythm return for return another
game another set a competition our co-creation

but late evening unnoticed the darkness
collected imperceptibly in our eye sockets
beneath our chins in the bends of our knees

a gauze hanging over the interstices
of the net a web over the faces of our racquets
over fences that enclosed us as we played

in decline cast long shadows that swelled
swallowed until the ball faded when I hit and I
felt myself grow dim though against the sky

I could make out outlines towers and floodlights
both of us now invisible the ball lost
why didn't why didn't we try

those lights

I Don't Love You

—your words. I would have preferred accusations.
If only you had spit in my face, struck
me, screamed in shrill and furious impatience
bastard! son-of-a-bitch!, claimed I was fucking

our pretty neighbor, set something on fire,
shattered a window, slammed a door at least,
thrown down a book or piece of silverware,
broken a glass: anything with the taste

of passion in it, anything with heat.
If you had said the same four words enraged,
bellicose, hissing, I could have made retreat

and waited for you: there would have been room.
But you were tender—tearful and engaged,
yet full of a cool and unruffled gloom.

Translation

Suddenly present in an unknown place
on foreign sheets your strangers' arms
around me I rose and dully dressed

in another woman's garments put on her leather
shoes molded long by such alien feet her tank
tops that let my bra strap show used her brushes

that pulled hair out in clumps off-brand
toothpaste mirrors that showed a face like mine
but never quite true the chin off somehow the eyes

just too far apart the hair longish not the correct color
Who was this stranger whose existence was the original
of my sudden and poor translation whose lip

gloss and eye liner I expropriated who had folded
her underwear neatly and placed it in the wrong drawer
who never returned whose husband I allowed to

hold me he didn't know I wasn't his wife

Actaeon At Acheron

on the ferry to the underworld

I have not been cold long enough to ponder
what could have motivated her to a rage
so powerful that she would make me wander
eternally obtuse among the shades—

but it must be the bathing, not the skin,
that deity dreads us to look upon.
The sudden apprehension of perfection
in need of being cleansed gives apprehension,

not so much to the watcher in his awe,
but to the goddess in the act of washing
what was presumed forever to be pristine.
To be seen naked this way makes for gall.

And this is why, perhaps, I was pursued
and torn apart by what I thought I knew.

The Transformed

When I was someone else how could you
remain the same not become my dead
father older brother who still treats me

as a child boy who was my high school
life who said I was pretty boss who paid me
well talked to my chest pursued me vehemently

bitterly young professor to whose class I wore my
shortest skirts whose gaze could mute me
anyone anyone I used to be used to be in love with

collection of fading images never fading away

strange faces on stamps on old letters saved not to answer

The Way You Said We Should Divorce

and I should let you go you unbuttoned
the last button on your blouse let it fall
We should I mean I should It isn't fair
you pulled the clip away so that your hair
cascaded onto your shoulders *I feel*
I'm in a stupid novel you unbuckled
your wide belt holding your skirt with one hand
the other on my arm *I shouldn't call*
myself I sliding between the sheets bare
beside me *Hold me Closer We're beyond*
repair.

Pained and Painful Words

spilled out of me decaying words with half-lives

words whose remnants mustered like ants gained
a potency unintended explanations that would accuse
answers to the wrong question words in a stoop

like a bird of prey's provisional utterances accepted
as permanent words like *mistress* words like *controlling*
expressions of regret misheard mistaken words like
oncoming traffic words that gathered force acquired

power until new words failed to oppose until your
brooding silence became perpetual until you sat
hours next to the cold woodstove stroking

the cat staring

Homeopathy

Your words were torture, but that was why my mind
rehearsed them endlessly, as though to find

and reproduce with full fidelity
the precise sound that caused the injury

could make the throbbing resonate and heal
me thereby. For that, my thought fixed on *I feel*

like a whore with you, trying to get the gait
of *whore* and *you* just right, to imitate

with skill the way you said the final “r”
in *You’ll take a mistress—it’s only fair*

or to match the pitch, the timbre, and the tone
of *I married you because being alone*

is so sad:

solution of the millionth part
of a pain so pure it was a kind of art.

The New Woman in His Future

will not have to try will never look fat could be
anyone our attractive gray-eyed neighbor who lives alone
a college student waitress one day leaving

her phone number with his bill She might wear her hair
up might be immaculate in sundress her spine
forming a perfect row with the button at her nape

might walk so innocently toward him with the sun
through the blinds streaking his office with a picket
fence of light I know he is not out to leave me

but she will say something brilliant over a glass
of wine brush his arm at just the critical juncture
inadvertently set his world aflame and his unhappiness

alight make what is obvious obvious that I am not
her not the one who will inevitably prove
wondrous in bed appealing in conversation peerless

in all he must know he is without

The Trance

My life became a trance.

Even asleep,
when I could sleep, my body was aware
that I was lost, and every waking hour
was a broken wreck.

Inside I never breathed,
swallowed, or blinked: somehow I'd lost the need.

I came home from my job staring, prepared
each night to find the closet door ajar,
your dresser cleared, a note left to repeat
what I would never need repeated, words
that every ghost in every ruined house
recited, that the smallest spiders knew
and whispered incessantly, that the mouse
inside the wall and skulking catbird
repeated as a tale they said was true.

Isolation Abhorrent Presences Terrible

I learned it seeing a snake black with gold collar
on weedy field edge sight that made ripples in my
marrow my breath hold itself for awe of that cool

sinuous thing and the fellowship contact implied
even of my own shock at seeing one who didn't
know I was watching who was watching as well

small dark birds copulating on the ground one
perched repeatedly on the other flapping
twittering mad circular scurries in grass

Then came shushing in dry pine needles above
something moving toward us invisible though I glanced
around overcome with that common inexplicable sense

another looking squarely at me monitoring my steps

waiting knowing everywhere everyone was watching

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Strange City

before the separation and after

Infidelity

Falling was not a matter of a fall.
There was no awful moment when my ledge
collapsed or when my step mistook the edge
and let me tumble down.

I did not fall:
my feet were slipping, so I jumped—and all
that followed followed not some tragic wedge
of circumstance or destiny, but the mad urge
to throw myself from a height.

Across the hall
at work, my sympathetic blue-eyed friend
and co-worker now tossed her hair and beckoned,
smiled and proffered until I did not care
that it was certain we would soon be found
out and vilified.

One day I simply reckoned
her a window and leaped into the air.

Connecting Flight

The door closed behind me we were already
moving as I found my window the man
with the aisle beside me enormous obese

rose to admit me nodded politely but overflowed
the small coach seat flesh draped over me hip
to chest I called the attendant pleaded fervently

indiscreetly for another assignment the flight
full she said sympathetically I stole a look
at the stranger the fellow traveler he with eyes

closed maybe asleep already maybe in pain
himself but perhaps to awaken find me staring
desperation and horror on my face so I settled

closed my eyes created the illusion if he chanced
a look that I too might be not awake so we two
flew perhaps in a feigned sleep a subterfuge

we undertook jointly to avoid one another
conspirators in an intimacy unintended
unfelt a discomfort that imposed

sleep as a decency a duty

The Contemplation of Divorce

In an old quarter of the night, I tried
to balance reasonable expectation
against the overwhelming force of grief,
as if the weighing out of guilt and passion,
the urge to remain and the will to go,
could somehow ensure rescue and relief,
or at least could make catastrophe recede.

What makes love fail? Really, I didn't know,
but I had my suspicions: maybe it fails
when Fates decree its failure, is dispatched
without forewarning and without appeal,
precisely as we ourselves are dispatched—
while we eat lunch, when we go to get the mail,
on a birthday, on Christmas Day perhaps.

The moment of collapse
arrives at its leisure and keeps to no clock
or calendar. It has been known to break
down doors—it does not knock
politely, does not wait for us to dress
or comb, and will not hear any request.

Washing Clothes

I threw my travel clothes in the washer you still
at work I said it out loud Why do I Why
do I not love you I could not weigh

or count it how your gaze wove me a close-fitting
collar embraces exhausted life transformed into
heavy robe I trudged through my days in garb

forever gapping to reveal clashing colors beneath
raiment turned to stone when the dryer buzzed
I replaced it all set the suitcase in its usual

place it looked perfectly normal

Evening In

The sky falls all night, it is nothing new
You gets hoarse earlier on you could never understand, don't say that you
I slump on the couch, hand on my head, wonder if there is beer
The cat hunkering on the floor
You turn to the kitchen to make words out of dirty dishes
Moments line up in rows, silent as eggs
I say I don't want you to think we couldn't if
You say why don't I just go ahead and if
I think you are passing over, as though my voice had expired
I say I don't like it when I've
A shadow moving quickly as a mouse
You go out with a suitcase, rattling glass
I sit quiet in the counsel of rain
You turn the engine over again and again in the cold driveway

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Notes

- "Estranged": The final two lines echo a Guy de Maupassant story, "The Spectre."
- "Humanities, Eumenides": "The Eumenides" (the Merciful Ones) was a Greek euphemism for the Furies, goddesses who punished those whose crimes could not be punished by the justice system of the time.
- "Actaeon at Acheron": Actaeon was a hunter in Greek mythology who inadvertently saw the goddess Artemis bathing in a stream. She turned him into a deer on the spot, and he was torn apart by his hunting dogs. Acheron is the river across which the dead are ferried to the underworld.
- "The Contemplation of Divorce": The first line is borrowed from Robert Penn Warren.

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