

Morri Creech

House of Memory

for Julie Funderburk

1.

I put on my hair shirt and slippers in the house of memory.
I fold my name across the curve of a cane back chair.
I wander into half a dozen rooms where the dead loiter
in the incalculable poverties of dust, in the days that stop
for no one, while time weeps from the eye of a rusty faucet
and the refrigerator hums in the silence. I tally the beads
for a thousand private indignities on a broken abacus,
watching the stars glitter and drop from the rafter beams.
And still the years make their pinchbeck promises, still
the embarrassments draw their moonlit bath, still threads
of consequence unravel from cold pillows at dawn.
The curtains luff. The mirrors confirm their suspicions.
In the house of memory, even in the dark, nobody sleeps.

2.

In the precincts of breath, in the numbing repetitions of night,
wind gnaws at the bricks of the house and the mind believes
what it remembers first, a caress or a stringent correction,
a spider spinning its abstruse equation under the stairwell,
while the unredeemed hours rock in a hammock of thorns.
I peer through the parted curtains, looking out at the rain,
at the old paint flaking away from the porch rail and soffit,
and think of the jackets and sweaters moldering in the attic,
the mice in the drawers, the scattered dust and the carpets
hoarding their treasures of scurf, the nail parings and hair,
and in my mind the portraits come tumbling from the walls,
the peeling wallpaper curls like a cresting wave just before
it crashes, before it breaks against a house already in ruins.

3.

The questions scrawl their dismal ink across the page,
and the man who answers betrays his name to the eaves.
I hear the shutters rattle. Stanchions buckle and warp.

The dead take their shoes off in the empty rooms
 and drag their reflections from window to window.
 The ledgers of regret lie open in the house of memory,
 but where are the dressers stuffed with old letters,
 the beds and couches reeking with the sweat of days?
 Where does the rust keep its furious appointments?
 A cockroach scissors its wings on the granite counter
 as though it could sever the present from the future,
 and in the silence of rooms bristling with indiscretions
 the night ends once the clock hands close their shears.

4.

A white broom sweeps the floors in the house of memory.
 A vacuum's belly swells and sags with the filth of living,
 with the crumbs and grains of irrevocable subtractions —
 evenings on the lake, the dusk-drunk shallows of 1979,
 where the shirtless boy I was swims under a copper moon
 until what I recall of him now submerges and disappears.
 When the moment draws to a close, dry filaments cling
 under the living room sofa and the folds of the drapes,
 gathering in tangles and tumbling across the hardwood.
 So what should I say about the lint caught in the cracks,
 about the insidious dirt of the hours that will not return?
 In the house of memory, the past churns its fine motes,
 falling into my hair, settling into the lines on my palms.

5.

I have strayed long enough in the house of memory.
 I will walk away from the pictures in their frames,
 from calendars shedding their pages, from the leaves
 blown on the roof in sullen heaps. I will walk away
 from the whims of an instant fixed like ants in amber
 or the water stain's dark map of an inscrutable country.
 Images of joy or sorrow offer their brief distractions,
 spilling their pearls on a tilted floor, equivocations
 of a mind that cannot sort the sun from the rain.
 And, after all, what good does it do to remember?
 I will close the door and leave this house forever.
 I will give myself to the present, shielding my eyes,
 casting my shadow at noon in the narrowing light.

Verdict

Although it's late now, there is time enough
for my father in his black judicial robes
to bid me rise as he strides toward the bench
in the dream that wakes me up at 3:00 a.m.
The clouds eclipse the sky outside my window
and a bird broods on a limb not far away
as I stand looking through the mullioned panes
at the vast courtroom opening its doors
— the scales of justice balancing my sleep
against the clock hands inching toward the morning—
and at my father staring down at me.
Blear-eyed and broken, barely on my feet,
both counsel and defendant, I await
his name amid a gallery of shadows
whose jurisdiction sprawls beyond the margins
of an hour already stretching into twilight,
await the gavel's loud crack on the table
as the book I swear on with every breath
scowls up from the witness stand in testimony.
The jury files in from deliberations
and lawyers fidget in their swiveling chairs;
a grave hush settles over everyone.
Insomniac since twelve, I press my ear
against the glass and listen for the verdict
the clerk of court announces in the cold
while my father muses, lost in a brown study,
still faithful to the letter of the law.
Papers shuffle. The lights begin to dim.
He shuts his eyes and turns his back to me.
When I say a few words on my own behalf,
the court reporter reads them all aloud
and the bailiff bends to fasten my restraints.
Have I said too much? Too little? It does not matter.
Guilt is a redbird in the manzanita.
Sleep is a bare branch quivering at dawn.
There is time, before the haggard lid of sun
pries open, for the witness bird to fly
away into the weather of forgetting,
slurring across my windowpane that frames
the moon's plaintive appeals among the clouds,

my own bewildered face, so like my father's,
one small star at the mercy of the dark.



The Hour under Scrutiny

1. Song

When time, under
the spell of the winter
stars, strummed his

blue guitar, the song
grew wings & flew
into my open mouth.

2. Erosions

In the erosions of evening, when lovers
do not touch, when jealousies smolder
& the anger of hands smothers itself in
pockets, when the voices on the porch
croon mischief & the garter snake coils
in the clover by the mailbox, the mind
goes back to the hour under scrutiny: so
many looks & delights, the lips & eyes,
so many manic adjustments, with every
minute peeling off a layer until nothing
is left but the emptiness before creation.

3. Matins

Morning will speak to you amid the green crests of the sea,
its limpid distances, its erasures. Press your ear to the seashell

of the moon at dawn or a little after, when the wind hushes
& the sea sleeps in her stone bed, in her white skirts of foam.

4. Night

Hours perch like magpies in the honey locust
in autumn, when the thermometer's red tongue
sinks in its mouth. In a gesture of wind, leaves

float up toward the limbs they fell from; stars
hang lanterns in the hectic, fevered branches;
& night air is delicate as the lace of memory.

5. Encroachment

One theory of the past, how it lengthens slowly,
expanding its territory with the inch of minutes,
with the precarious rise & fall of every breath,
preoccupies the mind. While the iconoclasts go
on raging at the walls, & eternity is no more than
an old woman at noon dragging the hours to drown
them in the river, while flesh & bone cry out for
the tenderness of their own begetting, write down
the equation for the day's drift toward what no one
remembers: the season swinging on its hinge, the
quick & the dead preening in the promise of winter.

6. Weather

Rain, rain in the cedar tree, & the bitten fingernails of the moon.
The drops fall like the sift of moments into moments, each one

beating its pewter drum before the cloud, wrung dry, makes way
for rainbow, the hush of mist, for the long & arid tyranny of sun.

7. Archery

To honor the anniversary that I pass each year,
that broods on the calendar, an unknown date,
one afternoon I carved a bow from alder wood,

strung it with buck tendon & set the tension,
then whittled a stick to a spindled straightness
& made from the dead crow a fine fletching.

The head I honed down from a chip of quartz.
Across such a green distance, a haze of hours
or years, I can't see the bull's eye. But I know

when I nock the arrow & pull back the string,
when I let it go, on the day it strikes the target
I'll fold my hands & close my two blue eyes.

The Poems of Sun and Moon

1.

When the poems of sun and moon littered the floor,
the dusty sage leaned from his lecture stand.
Wind swept the threshold. Just beyond the door
a few dark notes stirred in the baby grand.
The song went, *write your name down and be saved;*
it went, *scratch out your neighbor's and be healed.*
Saints in their hair shirts stood outside and raved.
The dead lay still as starlight in the field.

2.

When I am old, weary, and growing weak,
someone may still go with me to the sea;
someone may press her cheek against my cheek
as the world dissolves to less than memory.
Everything else amounts to arrogance,
those delirious hours I keep to please myself.
Even the past can speak in present tense.
The books I wrote collect dust on the shelf.

3.

What pilgrim in his right mind sleeps till noon
while husks of sun batter the bedroom walls?
Storm clouds came and went, leaving the day moon
dressed in a windblown twist of misty shawls.
I could have said the road less traveled by
was a choice made in quiet stands of pine.
That it made all the difference was a lie;
reader, whatever fault there was, was mine.

4.

The trunk stands, but the roots grow underground,
The sibyl told us, combing her black hair,
and stretched onto the grass without a sound.
Her hands were dirty and her feet were bare.
The stars are night seeds buried in the sky,
she went on, and I saw them overhead,
glittering as she told everyone goodbye

and disappeared into all that she had said.

5.

Each time you traded vision for revision
the magpie darted into the poplar trees.
The pensive sisterhood watched television
while winter made its marginal decrees.
We drank and talked of nothing all night long
— the nil, the abject zero at the bone —
then imagined nothing changed into a song,
the one Orpheus only played alone.

6.

The fat sun goes sidling down the gutter.
The skinny moon goes mincing down the stairs.
It gets so quiet you can hear God mutter
curses to catch the devil unawares.
Go on, relax. It's midnight. Things are slowing
to the pace of a lost traveler in a wood.
Pilgrim, why do you struggle forward, knowing
the future never comes to any good?

7.

Once told with polish, confidence, and skill
in houses, empty now, where silence grows,
the stories read out loud with time to kill,
the poems of sun and moon, draw to a close.
I lean out of the doorway, facing the street,
and listen for tomorrow as it nears;
in cold winter wind, in the mizzling sleet,
fate, on the corner, shakes her silver shears.

