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[poems]

Theresa Sullivan

Senior Thesis  
Department of English  
Tufts University  
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*I didn't know you could lie down in such swift, opposing currents.*

- Robert Hass, 'Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer'

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## Orchard

It's the afternoon before the first frost.  
You are square-jawed with shoulders of  
cedar. It is October, and the insides of my  
elbows are white like the pulp of apples.  
Tomorrow the branches will wake singed  
with cold, twisting into the early wind.  
Tomorrow you will have dissolved into the  
Concord fog and my eyes will open but for  
now there is this. You help yourself to my  
basket and halve an apple with your bare  
hands, core-sides-up in your palms beneath  
the thin sun. You secret the seeds away  
in one pocket and withdraw a knife from the other.  
You peel the apples and string their skins together  
for paper, already curling at the edges. I wake up.

## Tuesday

Hospital mornings steal the breath from  
an afternoon. Scribbled lists read like  
notes from strangers in my own handwriting.  
*Buy bread, radiology, blood draw, calculus,  
beet salad.* In postcards we're barefoot,  
drinking pistachio milkshakes alone  
on a Savannah balcony. The trees blossom  
here now but after midnight the mercury falls  
below freezing. Winter is too long and the  
vein-bruise blooms too, always in the crook of my  
elbow. Tonight I write in tongueless languages  
beneath my blankets. Someday soon the windows  
will be open. Someday, maybe soon, I'll be better.

## This Northern Hemisphere

I keep polaroids of the towns and bodies we are just passing through. There's a cigar box in the glove compartment with instant frames stacked like cash, like cards, gentle testimonies of trespass that keep us always on the road. Remember the dog-eared atlas sagging over the headrests? Watch us tailgating a Winnebago and tossing cherry pits like cracked wishbones from the windows. Remember the church steeples in Bath, empty flea market lots in Camden, Bucksport's abandoned mason lodge? We don't know how to stop so we keep driving, south past trucks with propane tanks headed north for winter, your hands on the wheel, mine snapping smalltown smokestacks slow-burning through the swampy dusk. Tonight we

pulled over for gas and something hot to drink, alone beneath the blue stars, peering into the shadows of last summer's mini-putt turf. The burnt out neon of Route 1's only Dunkin' Donuts simply read *America Runs* and that was the first true thing I could think to say, there in that parking lot with the nation's fleeting pink glow spilling out onto my feet. Inside, they'd run out of cider and wouldn't have a new shipment 'til Tuesday. Will we remember Skowhegan? Will we have wished we'd stayed?

Back on the road, we're hurtling past the closed snack shacks and the cardboard signs peddling ice cream, past the dim fluorescents of Chinese food and the creaking girders of Boothbay's suspension bridge. Somewhere along 295 I'm telling you about blackberries and Michaelmas, how it means

that summer's ending, when traffic halts to one lane.  
Maybe a moose brought to his knees along the distant  
miles. Maybe everyone else is just as tired. So we sit  
eating donut holes as the coffee slowly goes cold, for  
once lulled into stillness beneath the bootblack sky, for  
once quieted, no longer racing from home.



## Body Catch a Body

The little landscapes ruin us, small ones we might never have remembered if their compass needles didn't all swing and settle upon absence. The summer we grew morning glories around the doorframe. The jeans chewed up by a bicycle chain. The slow crunch of tires on the driveway. Lukewarm coffee splattered on formica countertops. Bumpers bound with baling wire. Freckled toes browning on the dash. The going nowhere. The sun that creeps on fox-feet. Shaking the dry grass from your hair.

Always the morning crows. Always the chill after the coffee. Always the rumbling of boats across the harbor, and then the silence. The tenderness in the moments after.

But we make bonfires of our photo albums and kindling from our bones. I am just trying to piece together a story that I can live. It involves you.

## Nighttime Entry #13 –

Midnight at Bloomfield apartments, Dublin: Alex tossing pebbles at my window. The slow, insistent clink of stone on glass and our two lights on, steady, alone. Me, crawling out onto the balcony. Him, backlit over the parking incandescents, a story down. He'd unlatched his sliding door, padded out to the concrete, and asked me what my favorite poem was. I told him.

The airplane to Madrid: Asleep, I think. Someone named John touched my shoulder and pointed to the Alps outside of our window. The peaks were splintered by the ice snaking up the pane. 32,800 feet above the ground and yet their first glimpse put frost on my tongue. They prised the horizon and we sat quietly, curving away. He said, 'I just wanted to make sure you saw them.'

To write: a poem for whomever leaves the light on. I never thought about passing strangers when I thought of home. Airplane seats, your pebbles, lamp switches, new days.

## Notes on Abandoned Farms

### I. Achill Island; County Mayo, Ireland

Everything can be forgotten, any village left behind. In Achill the villagers just walked away. Even now we sometimes tread through the forest into a clearing and find an empty home, real except for the stillness in the chimney. One night I swore I could see the chalky ashes of the hearth cooling but you told me to keep walking. The breadbox was bare, you said, and who would keep cobwebs weaving over a baby's cradle?

Living with the jumping cliffs for neighbors, their siren songs for lullabies churning through the slate blue and beckoning froth. Living some kind of heavy just to vanish, walk off into the moors, leaving the clocks ticking in the ruins. A new definition for the word heartland. All night the air thinking it was water, the water thinking it was stone.

### II. St. Madeline's Farm; Poughkeepsie, NY

Some things can be remembered. In Poughkeepsie's smallest motel we found our names and birthdates pinned to maps as we whittled down the family tree, seeking the core within the trunk, the whorled fingerprints within the rings. From patchy albums we pieced together what we know, yellowed notes on widows, notes on war, droughts and the summer the creek dried. Photographs with

the shadow of a woman, dry husks swaying, faint  
grass stains in our mouths. Farm. Spring.  
Constance. We've come to find her fences, toe the razor  
wire where the quiet becomes too much, not enough.  
To stand in the soles of her Carhartt boots and walk.

Come dawn we turn into the woods cased in ice  
yielding to April, the new lambs pawing at the mud,  
the green abandoned pastures, her stovetops and stockpots  
once rolling a boil in the silence. Here we remember the  
woman at the barn, at the oven, and understand.  
She smoothed her braids loose, pulled out the  
last loaf. Hung up the apron. Walked away.  
This is a different kind of story. A different kind of  
love. Loss flickers in the legs that take us places,  
in the heart and in the hands that quit.

## Self-Portrait; 9.12

These pocket-mirror eyes belong to someone else today. I am too far from everything I want to call the purplish rings of sleep my own. *There's a story I want to tell you*, I'd said, a story about two stone thrones on the edge of the world. About a man who wore through leather gloves hefting slabs of granite over to the bald face of the mountain, stacking up one chair and finally another to keep the first company. I like to think that he changed his mind about loneliness, shifted from *absolute* to *almost* if only to know that someone beside him would hear his breath in the silence. In this story my boots meet mud and my back meets stone. The mountain yields to nothing but air, scooping out beneath my feet and hollowing into the bowl of the empty valley. But here I am short on time and secret places. There are few chairs of emptiness, no radio waves that broadcast stillness. I want to be well. Where is the pen, the ink that should be staining my fingers? What happened to my bare and yet-unwritten mountains?

## On Visiting C., Who Was Starving

*and who are you to ask for more, who are you to insist  
on hunger?  
- 'Morning,' Conchitina Cruz*

You wanted to talk about celebrities because you'd been so long without the pictures. Instead I braided your thin hair and told you about science class, about salts set on fire, about insistent violet flames over Bunsen burners, something besides bone. You never stopped eyeing my hips. The blue of your veins reminded me of the river, stuttering along beneath skin translucent while your Connect Four pieces clicked into place. How long could you live before the current finally stilled? Everything was slowing inside you, coming up for air, then coming to a halt.

I'd wanted to bring you a plant but it couldn't come in a vase. The glass, the warden said. It breaks, and then. I'd potted it in half an eggshell, surrounded the bud with backyard dirt and awkwardly placed it on your windowsill. I wanted you to see something growing, I'd murmured. I wanted you to see something flower.

Over your angular shoulder I stared at the shell, ragged side up, the thing now daring you to crack, to let it famish, watch it wither.

## Saying Our Names (June)

If the family tree is the one in the backyard  
then I have some image to work with.  
She is dry and struggles to change with  
the seasons but the limbs are broad and  
bending and the blossoms, all mirror images,  
cluster and grow full. This summer the  
climber in me crawls down, pawing at the  
stump, plumbing the source for the roots  
that steady the thing as the bruised  
magnolias drop one by one, saying our names.  
Mary for the oldest, Catherine if she sings.  
Theresa born too small in the summer months,  
tender and cautious. But June has never been  
one to ask for fortune or new leaves. Here I am  
without answers in the month where Aunt Ann  
dies, taking my middle name with her. When my  
Grandmother goes, so will my first. Inside,  
lingering by the stove I catch my reflection  
shining ghostly and small in the tinny  
backsplash. Annie nose, Mary eyes. We all  
wear the same faces. In funeral blacks some  
called me a woman, crafted from the  
same trunk as their ever-able arms. I still  
wear my hair in braids. I can barely crack an egg  
one-handed. Am I the daughter they dubbed  
grown? Who was I when I named myself brave?

## Meteorology and Other Circular Fears

I worry about the scale of things. Of a selfish sky that laps up the liquid sun and only returns precipitation to our winter-pale and desperate palms. Of an earth we call a globe – which is to say spherical – but that does nothing but bend upward to meet my feet. I worry about the chemical composition of the sky – is it thick enough to cradle the bellies of your airplanes? Thin enough that we can breathe? I worry about the accuracy of prediction, the assurances of weathermen, familiar seasons promised to find you clean and shining in Paris and me, grounded, muddy and waiting.

Here the squaredance of guesswork quilts our dirty streets where the rain that wasn't supposed to fall falls anyway. This little world – our secret backyard – someday filled with brickwall sun, lying low between these high-rise neighbors, blankets bellydown between the spring-damp weeds. Here on the ground I become acquainted with earthworms, learn the true meaning of *saturate* after a record year of snowfall.

February now and I've learned to fear groundwater, the perpetual wet, the world never drying, the runoff leaking into your boxed-up life waiting in my cellar where the concrete holds the cold in soggy cardboard. I fear I'm becoming a wet candle, a tealight when I wanted to be a bottle rocket. Gone soft through these relentless winters. A hothouse flower waiting on a spring that won't arrive.

*But tell me about the trees where you live you'd said and I compared you to a sugar maple, me to the pinched up white birch by my front door. Here am I, dampening like*



birchbark. There are you, arcing through the sky.  
And here you've caught me believing the world circles full-tilt;  
roots meet groundwater to dig their way through to Paris,  
tumbling out the other side – look, the sky again;  
look, there's your airplane carving its way through  
the clouds, and see, they're drying;  
    look, there's sun –

## To Secession

We were satisfied once, quiet-rooted in Anchorage, content before the surrounding vacancy looped like herder's rope, cinching our locked horns. Before our silence became poverty it was richness and those summers the sun set gently, without a bite. Now most evenings we are captive to the hush of the fields as we each imagine neighbors – a vegetable pickler, a girl on horseback, a man pawning real estate – that might prove the antidote to our disquiet, the pin-drop in the stillness. These nights when we're running through the emptiness towards other people and some clearer air, we don't think of these bodies – our small wordlessnesses and even smaller joys, our forever-winter skin and mouths of frost. We regret ourselves. We regret ourselves when we open windows, close doors and darkness rushes into the house like burnt embers filling a porcelain bowl. When everything else that breathes halts frozen in their tracks. *Ruin or be ruined*, declared the graffiti down at the crossroads but we'd expertly swapped conjunctions, substituted an 'and' for the 'or' and the rest is a history, layer on layer, ice on ice. The rest? Ours, the emptiness we've cultivated, the silence we've harvested. A bedrock of permafrost. No longer believing this static world is round. Yet just before the ending, when we lose ourselves in the turning away, we're unaccustomed to the final measures we barely hear of that threadbare gratitude and well-worn abandonment.

## Toulouse-Lautrec Visits a Barcelona Hostel

i.

*god from god, light from light, diesel smoke from passing trucks and storefront grates receding, things begotten and not made, one in being with the city ... I believe in churches, broken brick, bakeries and restaurants for cold eggs and dry cheese, the city's thick coffee steaming in my palms... let there be more of this and the kingdom will have no end, these dawns with no rain, hot baths and crumpled towels, rickety balconies for two, the life everlasting, forever weak on tourist legs, forever and ever, amen*

ii.

Even from behind I can tell that her eyes are closed. Small frame half dressed, knees drawn up, legs folded in the early sun. I think she is whispering, the ends of her hair just beginning to curl. The first time I've seen her alone since January. This is the back, these are the mornings I am missing. I enter the room, slide the curtain closed and leave the door ajar, afraid that the latch click will steal more from me. More than what I have already given up for these days of wandering away.

## Postal

Spring finds us grounded, your letters, and trains running zippers across countries. I think of pounds of paper, and then of weightlessness.

In the absence of wings – and out of an abundant caution for the world that kindly shelters us despite our scribbling tendencies – I have begun to contemplate more sustainable forms of correspondence. Destroyers of forests in the love for one another, we are unwitting philatelists affixing forever stamps of Liberty bells and seasonal conifers to envelopes with the hope of deliverance within our uncharted corners.

Fluent in the international languages of breadcrumbs and smoke signals, I tap Morse code into the trunks of trees so the roots will run messages to the places that shade you. I tell you how cut flowers can be arranged into stories and that ship captains can raise flags in missives to other vessels. I tell you that I can never recall the name of this waving from mast to mast. But when you remember and offer *semaphore* I scatter letters and find *hear poems*; I fold them into paper birds, tie them to the legs of pigeons and let them carry what begs to be held, from hands to expectant hands.

## Barceloneta

Nobody lives for ordinary things  
except us, so it seems. After dodging  
train doors and plane flights even  
weak tea and twin sheets are a foreign  
marvel, tinged in the miracle of  
waking in the quiet beside you again. On this side

of the world the wind greets us with a  
fierceness whistling through the pier  
and tonight thick fog rolls over the  
beach, brown waves tossing over and over  
as we hold cold hands and make our  
stormy peace with the undertow. Before you

I inventoried holes, the  
emptiness instead of the flesh.  
I catalogued all the places  
where life had taken something  
in return – the scar through my palm,  
the knuckles I've scraped,  
the knees I've skinned, failed leaps of  
faith like falling up the stairs.

But here the Mediterranean is dark and beneath my feet  
the sand forgives this pavement, water lapping  
over the stains of spilled wine running in rivulets  
through the slate and crimson cracks. Here I want

more of this, more midnights  
and chances at wholeness,  
wet ropes of hair clinging to my back,

the slow sting of Spanish rain. Nearby

our lamplit friends sit drinking  
cervezas on this plaza but we're  
dancing, slow-revolving on the wet tile,  
tiny beneath this velveteen sky,  
laughing, always running and  
running out of time.

## Morning

I wake with you rattling around in my head.  
Some days the clatter is too much to stand  
so I sing to you while I make the coffee.

The water runs in rivulets from the dishrack.  
It looks like snowmelt but this is only the  
beginning of your long winter. My heart is  
building a house you could live in.

I still want more of everything. More time,  
more of the right words tumbling out of my  
mouth. More sun, more daylight hours, more  
paths to forgiveness. More chances. But my  
radiator ribs are clanging hollow and  
the cold has settled into the trees. I'll

wake tomorrow and do this all again, wounded  
on the ragged edges of the blush morning. On  
you, gone where I cannot follow.

## **Moth**

If the sadness were a moth I'd  
flay it wide and pin it down.  
Wriggling on corkboard, suede  
wings unfurled and defeated, it  
would shudder and finally go still.  
Then I would stare into the  
dark at the ones that have yet to surface.  
Always just one more, lurking on  
the porch lamp, hovering around  
the bulb, clouding the light.



## What He Left

Because I can't have the blooming tree  
and its peeling bark shoed in copper. I can't  
have your crunch of gravel and the  
lighthouse beacon of the headlights that  
sets the dark lawn on fire. I can't have your  
breath on my back, tugging me out of  
sleep to say *see how short the night is*.  
I can't peel back this skin, pear-white and insistent.  
I can reenter the world of the living but I can't  
have the words *strong* and *whole*, or press my  
face to the mirror and recognize the ghost  
staring back. But I can have the dream  
of us in a rowboat after the tide rises and  
we push off from the porch, bobbing up and  
down, eating plums while the houses on  
Main Street become islands. I can have the  
shirts you left folded and the business you  
left unfinished, the mountain we were  
supposed to climb. Recently I have many  
mountains. I can have the Atlantic so  
cold it freezes my feet until I learn something  
about the hands' ability to pull myself back  
up to the surface, legless but victorious and  
beached on something that looks like fortitude.  
There are barnacles that open to the sun,  
kelp that thrives in the darkest places and sea  
stars that wait out nor'easters and cling to  
my arms like your five fingers. And when  
that isn't enough I can recall the time I pedaled  
my bike off of the brick wall because I wanted to  
know what flying felt like. How even after I

crumpled to the pavement tangled in the chain I  
remembered the kickoff, the weightlessness and  
brilliance before the crash. I can still have the scars  
on my knees and the proof that I flew and the  
voice that says *even now you're never so broken,*  
*get up and move.* The voice that says he's long stopped  
breathing but you can still have love.

## On the Fifth Anniversary of Your Suicide

*for TRF*

My room still in boxes, I took the Blue Line to the Aquarium. There, in the touchtank, manta rays the size of hubcaps swam up to my palms barely breaking the surface, diverting out of their neat ranks only to circle in once more. With tentative fingers I stroked their sleek backs as they wriggled by, the wet suede of their spines rushing beneath my skin, furiously lapping the pool they might call home. Manta rays can live until twenty. You did not live as long as a manta ray.

The afternoon passed, my fingerprints shriveling in the salt, and the exhibit emptied. Precipitation dripped through the mangroves. That didn't mean it was raining. We marvel at the simplest things.

The blush, soon-winter sunset met me at the door. The next day we'd set back the clocks, I realized, rubbing my bare wrist. I walked home softly, the rays, perhaps, on my mind. How swiftly it had all passed. How silently.

## **They Said He Pedaled to Tennessee**

Sometimes I find myself dreaming of fast things. Waves breaking, truck grinding, then nothing. The cool clink of spokes disappearing into the night. Even now I'll startle awake, draw my knees to my chest and stare down at the streetlight burning through the stillness, the empty driveway, and think of something old like home. Was that you screaming through all my sleep? Where were you when I believed in signs?

## Penultimate

It's like this, Elizabeth says: Wrap your palm around an egg and squeeze because once you read that an egg won't break like that. It doesn't break.

I put down the old poem with the ruined ending and pick this one up instead. It was me who carved doubt into the underside of the bedframe and it will be me who grinds it back down. In the mirror, my face, porcelain and steel, chosen, the only. Enough.

A breeze sinks bellydown in the valley and I loosen my hair, exhale and then breathe 'til I am made of nothing but bone and salt air. *Give it up. Give it all up.* Sweeping out the hollows. Coughing up the sinking stones inside me.

This is the part where I unclench my fists, crunch the twigs underfoot, and throw it all in the creek saying *here/you take it now*, ripple by ripple, down and down.

## This Walk (Lurvey Spring Road)

Island, mostly: a rock, cleaved  
in two by a fjord, dotted with kettle ponds.  
From its shallow mouth we  
lurched out of a glacier, tumbled  
into opposing harbors and each  
stood on our ashy headlands, waving.

Once I told him I wanted to  
learn how to paint the space between  
the trees. I paint now, although not  
the spaces, the convergence, where boreal and  
deciduous meet with pitch pine  
snaking through. The woods are thick and  
filled with guidebooks at junctions with  
messages penned to strangers. We speak in  
such versions of sadness and trepidation,  
fondness that yet makes absence real.  
*Fare/well, we say, so/long,* before shutting the  
screen door or disappearing over a ridge.  
The road is as much a departure as an arrival.

To travel North one must travel uphill. Beyond the  
trailer homes and potholes rutted in the dirt is  
the town dump, reticent, sprawling. We  
empty our kitchens of cereal boxes and beer bottles,  
abandon mattresses, burn newspapers, send  
chalky smoke curling up and into the mountains  
while the trashyard seagulls circle and wail.  
The tire crunch of trucks on gravel is the compass,  
the shifting wind the shaking needle.  
There is no reason to stay.

I pause at the barren, mostly true to its name,  
with scrubby blueberry bushes and dry rushes  
that pollinate in the wind, that lash and sting my ankles.  
I used to walk out to the sole boulder in the field  
and haul myself to the top, but for what? A  
silhouette of Beech Mountain? A better  
view of the smoke from the fires?  
The sense of a summit, however small?

His house is just up the road. After a mile  
the streetlamps end. They always do,  
as if to say *you are not lost/you are here*,  
here where the yellow dashes end too and  
the pavement disappears beneath your feet.  
I don't wonder if he's there. Here I stand amongst  
starflower, dogwood, goldthread.  
The air is light with cinnamon fern.  
It is the last day of August. Oak, birch, maple,  
shed your bark, unhinge your leaves.

## Lucid (California)

i.

I visit you across the country. Here, you have a lemon tree in your backyard and an orchid with a broken branch on the kitchen sill. On clear days the west side of your living room is San Francisco. In the fog it is thicket and bramble, shifting glimpses of your neighbors' homes terraced like steps. The air is damp, reassuring, a balm to the brittleness of days. I am tired of crumbling.

You knead my shoulders with your palms, tell me that we'll drive down the coast. I bring a lemon towards my face until all I see is yellow. I agree.

ii.

My lungs open with the miles. My hand on your driving knee, we trace the water, cutting across cliffsides into strawberry fields. Pick-your-own kiwis aren't in season but artichokes are ten for a dollar and we buy them from a truckbed, salt and sand still burrowed in their leaves. A place to make a meal with only a pot of hot water.

iii.

In Santa Cruz I climb a lifeguard tower and draw my knees to my chin, rubbing the windworn boards beneath my palms. In this place the off-season brings late sun, broad beaches and dry sand, an empty boardwalk. I look up at the gondola cars, suspended, creaking and gently fading as



they hibernate. The groan is comforting. I imagine being airborne. You smile crookedly and nod.

We wander through the sleeping attractions, bright, plastic, and expectant. I photograph you by the tilt-a-whirl, sneakers scuffing at the warm concrete. We peel a clementine and the skin falls to the pavement. The citrus is light on my tongue. The sun makes shadows of my eyelashes. Is it possible to feel my hair reddening?

When will I paint again? Will I ever collect back what these six months have stolen from me, my freckles, my breath, muscle, quiet nights at home, what little faith I had?

iv.

In small towns we are amazed at parking meters that allow two hours for a quarter and billboards still advertising last year's movies. We used to tell each other epics when we had no televisions. Perhaps once we expected less. Or more, maybe, but things quieter, less demanding. I may ask to be healed but I am unsure whether to expect it. Here we live within the days, asking of our bodies what they can do and no more.

In Moss Landing we buy a hot dog from a one armed man. Monterey is rocky, Carmel boasts gentle surf. My pocket is filling with instant photos of shorelines, jetties slicing across the frame like razor clams or slivers of a California moon. The sun rises and sets occasionally. When we head for home I sleep through the entire drive.

v.

There is a color that I could live inside. It is Hansa yellow and I smear it by the tube on canvas with my knuckles. It fills this windowed room with light. I would like to stay here for a while.

*With Thanks –*

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