



Volume 14
Issue 1
2019

Commonplaces

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Born into this world, common enough,
our bodies arise like winter trees, those
stick frames fixed against nothing but pale sky.
And where dried vines cling, our arteries
wind under and over bone, organs tucked in
like hibernating poor-wills under fallen logs.

The impulses at work inside our skulls,
the caprices that twine through brain tunnels—
all kin to a summer storm's far-off clap and crack,
synaptic connection of lightning to ground.

The spiral of the galaxies, the same one
we see in deep eddies, in the clouds
that proceed from a hurricane's eye,
in swirls at the back of our skulls, hair
rooted in patterns that unwind from the center—
proof that we've been spun outward, into our bodies,
blinking, as light glances at us from distances we
might be able to calculate but cannot fathom.



How we quicken when all is in balance,
a pinch of this, more of that: cobalt and iron,
copper and manganese, the world in us
again and again
as the stars, hot brilliant minerals,
a promise that we are after all immortals
who won't be destroyed but rendered
into other forms.

Still Life, with Questions

When I approach from the tree-draped road, my small house appears huge. It's a trick of the porch light, and a few lamps left on in the house, their glow pouring through the high windows.

Here in the deep silence come questions, swarming like plump mosquitos—did I ask to be left alone? Did I ask to lie fallow for a season or two? Or did I feel especially fertile, wanting to make a life on my own? My second-guessing stings like insects hunting the dusk.

Now you've sent word, you might be dying. Whether it is cancer or heart disease or something else you have yet to reveal, what must you want from me? Am I to travel across the open fields of my own heart back to you? Can I ignore the last grief of a man so practiced in love's incantations?

Daddy-o

That man with the blinds pulled
is like an eclipsed sun or moon that can-
not ever emit or reflect light again.
Pale-blue eyes he must shield from light
—the light hurts so much now—
blue as a mountain pool on a hazy day,
cloudy like the milk-glass plates on the shelf.
There are fourteen types of noses
according to the *Daily Mail* online—and his—
not bulbous or fleshy or hawk, but snub,
a handsome one under a high forehead,
a Mount Rushmore forehead, a face
smoothed by wind and war and warlike sports.
Thin-lipped but not tight-lipped,
always good for a joke or a brief quip.
A smile like the smile an old napping dog makes
when it dreams or daydreams, content
to be the aged one, housebound, world-shy.

Notes on Extremities

By three that afternoon, the backroads were leading me through miles of ruined crops, the field corn stunted, blonde, and crisp. My cousin near Austin bedridden with MS. Her voice on the phone that morning faint as the birds' in the summer drought. Breath lighter than the corn leaves on a hot breeze, lighter than a fine mist that dries before it has a chance to settle on the skin, on the crops, on anything that wants to live. Not as alive as Dean Martin on the radio crooning about lilacs in full bloom on the street where you live. As desperate as that wayside sign on Highway 77 proclaiming a service to pray for rain. While I no longer bothered to carry my umbrella, I wasn't immune to the prayers that year—even from those of us, who in a good year, professed little. I suspect, as in other tragedies, *Whatever Held the World Together* was suffering with us, but *What Should Have Been Enough* simply wasn't. And in telling this, here is where I usually break down, having arrived finally to find my cousin cocooned in the cool darkness of a room, in a hospital bed, her cropped hair recently dyed red, glowing like a night-lamp.

On Her Way

This will be the last time my mother will rise
on her bird legs and take to the window.
The chipping sparrow and Inca dove
will criss-cross the panes. Her voice, thickened
these last years, will thin to a silver wire.

My mother will rise and ask me to
bathe her. And I will wipe away the mites,
soap off the dander, the last bits of molt.
I will sponge the yellow to soft pewter
and stem, for a while, the odors that tell me

it's time. Time to provision her. Time
to perfume her with the lilac she loves.
Time to settle my new griefs, feathers
that attach one after another
daily, sometimes hourly, onto my skin.

Take heart, my heart. She begins to look
like the mother I have been looking for—
her brown eyes returned to green, her brood-
patches covered in eiderdown and oil
so that she won't be cold when she flies.

I smooth her grey-feather coat. She coos,
soothing her worries and mine for now.
The suffering done, her caretakers begin
to take their leave, their business with her done.
I fill her haversack with silly notes,

raise my downy arms to wave her
on her way, and she is rising to fly at last.
The beaming grackles and cedar waxwings
will lead her to earthen mounds where
my father has already made a place for her.

Before, I Was Childless & Wanting

The child alone hasn't settled in.
Other travelers on this northbound train
half-drowse under the spell
of passing farms and nearly vacant towns
or they talk into the cloudless calm
as daylight thins easily toward sunset.
The moon-faced boy whispers
as he tiptoes up several rows and back.
He counts to ten, the mother tucked inside
a dog-eared paperback on self-help
while he paces, touching the seat backs.
A few others look up.

One makes a half-smile.

Soon the horizon will shut out the sun.
The mother will doze, her low breath swirling in
and out her open mouth.

I'm familiar with
this time of day when red-winged blackbirds
empty the fields and pastures, and gather to roost.
They conceal themselves in sedge and rushes
for the night. I know to expect this of the birds.
And of people too—all along this route,
they're collecting in their yards and houses.
A pact with each other, to gather and settle
at dark when we are exposed, easy prey,
having gone away to dream of ourselves

and awakened only by daylight to hear a zwir
of blackbirds. Some nights I still dream of a boy
cradled, hidden away in the rushes, watched
over. It's an old story. It stands in for all
the children who've grown up and left. The child
we lost before it was a child. The adult child

we could or couldn't save.

In a savage time,
and I don't know of a time that hasn't been
savage, to keep the child from harm is
a lonely labor. I pat the moon-faced boy
on his head. Suddenly his mother is stomping
the sleep out of her head. Grabbing the child.

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