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HALF PAST PRIMOSE

by

Laura Wilson

B.S., University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, 2020

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts Degree

School of Literature, Writing, and Digital Humanities
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
August 2024

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THESIS APPROVAL

HALF PAST PRIMROSE

by

Laura Wilson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in the field of Creative Writing

Approved by:

Allison Joseph, Chair

Emily Rose Cole

Andrew Hemmert

Judy Jordan

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 9, 2024

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Laura Wilson, for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing, presented on May 9, 2024, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: HALF PAST PRIMROSE

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Allison Joseph

Half Past Primrose is a climate memoir in verse, exploring the experiences of growing up with climate change in Wisconsin and the fundamental life shifts it poses.

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DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to all the friends who drank tea with me, read my work to hype me up, let me vent about how, even with all this education, still don't know any words, and told me "that should be a poem!" Lyra Thomas, Alexis Barrett, Salaam Odeh, Sarvin Parviz, Bryce Patterson, Brittany Zine, Morgan Mack, Rebecca Corcoran, Jessie Paluta, Annalee Roustio, Rachel Grohn, Alexis Steinke, and Katelyn Schwitchenberg: you are all wonderful, and I now love all things stuffed dates.

As one of the very few "creative people" in my family, I am forever thankful for that same family who sought to understand what the heck I'm doing anyway, especially my parents, cousins Eric and Lorelei, and Dale and Becky Hughes. To my lovable furrballs, Daisy, Chopper, and Moon. And to those who didn't get to see the end of this project, I wish you did.

Finally, to my partner, Jo Christian, who never ran out of encouragement, advice, or hugs.

“We must cultivate our garden.”

– Voltaire, *Candide*

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Murmuration in the Mall Parking Lot

They are silent
as extinction, starlings
swinging from tree
island to tree island, small
maple saplings bowed
with the weight
of birds on branches
before a sudden rush to find
somewhere to roost.
Like a ghost
searching for rest.

I

A Burnt-Out Bulb

six years ago above the bathroom vanity. I unscrewed the dead-dull glass, stuck it in the closet thinking garbage? recycling?

I'll figure it out later. Next, the batteries from the flashlight, then the whole flashlight when it turned dim as a goodbye-smile, then the broken glass from the family picture frame,

the 10-year-old Kohls watch that slowed to Pluto time, clothes with holes that might (not) be fixable, speakers whose sound resembled an empty-gut groan, stacks of empty glass jars,

and five-years-expired Dramamine with a dusting of mold. It wasn't until I added the Edgar Allen Poe book with water damage that I realized this place had become my own household

landfill. I can't possibly commit anything to the actual one so it stays put, not yet outgrowing the closet, year after year. Until even at moving time I can't bear to disband it,

so I pack up all its eccentricities, all its sharp edges and tears in a cardboard box. Bring it along to the next closet. The landfill grows, adding never-opened chocolate frogs and a shattered heirloom

wineglass. I move it again. Then again. A reminder: don't own anything you don't know how to lose.

Lesson on Resources During a Wisconsin Winter

We fourth graders had ambition:
to build the best snow fort in the rural school's
memory. Each recess, we ran
to our mountainous pile, gifted
by the plow come to clear the last

March snowfall from the parking lot, scraped
back to black asphalt and yellow
lines. Our dispatched scouts scavenged curbs
piled with tumbling snow chunks
like the froth that precedes

waves. Hunted the baseball outfield,
the iron fence of the cemetery. The fort grew:
two stories and thriving, more tunnels
than a block of Swiss, watch
towers, walls we could walk on, a moat dug

down to grass, and entombing it all, snowballs
stacked as stones in an ancient castle wall.
A week later, we had scoured every inch
within range, spent every moment stacking
walls higher, adding antechambers

and courtyards. The game was up. No one wanted
to play pretend in the inner sanctum. The best
part of the snowfall was the build. Now, then,
we'd wait for the next snowfall
to cover grass blades and trampled

patches of exposed mud like circles
of skin rubbed raw, connected in dizzy
strings of mini zagging bootprints.
A snowfall that never came.

Ode to the Decomposers

There's a carousel marking time in measures of rust. Waiting for children, waiting for collapse, who's to say? We met first when the horses still had color left, chipped turquoise hoof here, cherry-stained mane there, but the rest was long gone, whittled

by wind and the staccato of downpours. The benches rotted next, broken by clashes of squirrels with bobcats on their heels, decayed into small hums of mulch and maggots. The roof fell too, eventually, threaded through with saprotrophic fungi,

white strings looping round cell walls. I peel a few shingles back from the ground-suck, trace their twirls. Pluck them with a needle, the legend says, and they'll sing. Orange-rimmed chicken-of-the-woods shelled the wood pillars on the outer edge, keys of a sideways piano,

breathing whole notes of middle D with each drift of wind. I find them everywhen, everywhere: the tiny mouths working, always working day and night. Thousands of pounds of metal and wood swallowed whole and remade. Transposed by the artists of earth.

Carved Walnut, Two Months After the Funeral

The box is shining. Surface mirroring
my father's office lights like a moon,
not mine but one out there somewhere,

a reflection on a deep lake, seaweed still
as a portrait. I don't know what my uncle's
ashes look like inside. Maybe they're piled,

like a stack of arrest warrants. Maybe
they're flat like a hospital sheet pulled tight.
Maybe they're not there at all.

When I see that box for the first time,
I set my palm on the top, somehow expecting
warmth. Not surprised by disappointment,

*Say hello, has the decade felt just as long to you?
Say, I finally read that book you mailed me
Say, I'm sorry it took me so long.*

On the Question of Control

Eat just enough
to compose the raucous
crowd in the pit, control the rumbling:
a dog-dug hole, exhaustion-
emptied, exposing the tough
muscle. Just enough to ride the adrenaline
peaks, bucking like the line of bluffs
I drove just yesterday,
string of oyster shells clinking
from the rearview, voicemails declaring,
you're going places. Brilliant.
I don't believe them, but the fall
would be worse. I use my fingers
when it gets hard. The skin,
I mean. Peel off the strip
lining the side of each nail with my incisor,
like picking the petals of a daisy.
Swallow with pearls
of ice water. Zero calories,
negative even. Better if the blood
stays in. Better if there's a push-
pin of pain to press down on.

Summer on a Wisconsin Dairy Farm

I.

Every morning, my brother and I fed
the calves bottles. One scoop of milk
powder plus a liter of hot water
in a nipples-bottle to be suckled by babies
just beginning their four-year

timer. They straightened their necks
from hutches, limbs still all gangle
and knobs. When the bottles emptied,
we replaced the nipples
with our hands, little ridges of sprouting

molars massaging our fingers. Afternoons
we spent in the farm truck bed
making pasture rounds, dumping five-gallon
pails of feed in troughs. The Holsteins
thundered to the fall, ear tags trembling

like a plucked garrote. Our aunt pointed
to each cow: Princess, Josy, Spot.
When the slaughter van comes
a month later, Princess stares back
at us from the black mouth of the van,
her death a necessity.

II.

Our favorites were the cats, peering from concealed corners in the barn, hidden in haymow holes. We coaxed them with fresh warm milk in pails and they came in clouds,

rising up on hind legs to reach the edge. Some spotted black and white like miniature cows with curled whiskers. Others, tabbies or Garfields. The friendliest of each generation, offered

a space in the farmhouse, a warm bed, a safe place to stretch. The near-feral's roamed the grounds, killing mice and birds, dragging carcasses back to the colony in the barn. Every few years,

mucus-crusted eyes would appear, a virus making the rounds. My aunt would take a towel out to wipe the eyes of those who let her get close. Then, the end,

when the cat carcasses tucked into the dark spaces where they chose to die.

III.

We chased the dog through the tractor
trails outlining the late August cornfields,

ducking around the pickup truck parked
on the corner, rust ringing each wheel well

like a whetted scythe. The dog leapt over
the bent tiller in line behind, docked tail

from a misplaced lawn mower blade
banging the tines, his panting grin

a sunflower in spring. Tired of our slowness,
he left us gasping, hand-clasped to knees, and raced

off between rows of corn, a chocolate
bullet whizzing toward our uncle

in the John Deere. He waved from his seat 6 feet
up, jeans streaked with dirt-congested

oil, dog dancing alongside. Steered
the leaning tractor into a tightening

orbit around the far hill, carving dried
corn stalks from the incline. Too steep

for planting but where else
will the feed come from, the whole thing ready

to tip and crush whoever drove in the cab.

At My Grandmother's House

At my grandmother's house, supper was always goulash. Pre-al-dente ready-cut spaghetti noodles slathered with two cans of Campbell's tomato soup (maybe with some extra sugar), heaped in with ground beef, stashed in the chest freezer from the last farm slaughter, fried up with onions in the cast iron. *Dump all that in the big pan, sweets, with some butter and milk,* she'd say to me. There was a special pan, you know the kind, the one that fits the meal just right, like the best pair of Carhart jeans you've ever owned. I would set it up on the stove, turn the knob click click to spark the gas. It'd simmer 'til it was all just starting to soak into one another, beef grease and butter slicking over noodles, soup slipping in the creases. We'd sit round the kitchen table and eat off John Deere plates, milk from the pasteurizer in our cups and wedding cake off-cuts from the catering last weekend waiting on the sideboard for dessert. Years later, when her belongings scattered like salt, the goulash pan made its way to me. Every week, I reach into the cupboard, rummage for that oil-caked saucepan. Think of her giving directions over my shoulder and every once in a while, holding my hand steady while I stir.

Self-Portrait as an Eroding Riverbank

All I can do is watch them go.
The asters bowed

two long meltings ago, empty
caverns where roots resided now

dead as doomsday, encased
in concrete. Every so often

a pinecone clutches what's left
of me, carried from the forests

further upstream. I wish
I could nourish them with

a few bites of decayed leaf, but the river
guides them from my embrace

with firm eddy-fingers as if to say
they aren't meant for you.

They wouldn't survive here.
The river is immemorial, she knows

what comes next. So I wait. Like a late-
bloomed maple seed spinner, caught

in an early winter wind. Lost
somewhere between soil and sky.

The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

does not fly quite high enough to commune
with the clouds suspended in the sky like little islands
of hope. She dives to perch on a cypress tree, burrowing
beetles from the bark with her rigid bill. Satisfied
with her catch, she sails over top of endless
mall parking lots and green-rolled
suburbs, trumpeting in pianissimo, air molecules
alighting on her white-striped wings for a moment
before casting off in canon. She has no mate
waiting in the small bubble of mangrove, no fledglings
to feed beetles, only an accidental

predator, not interested in peeling her flesh
from her hollow bones and roasting it in stews or arranging
her skin into a forever frozen flight, no. Instead,
this predator fells trees and astroturfs mangroves,
builds concrete skyscrapers with no nooks for needling beetles.

And then, one day,
the last ivory-billed woodpecker
dies,

soundlessly and alone in the last remaining nesting
cavity in the last remaining cypress tree, not knowing

her species died right alongside her.

The Torn-Open Water Bill Envelope

is a graveyard of rickety
primroses, circle-and-spokes sun
loitering in the opposite
corner. My pencil loops on the last
petal, overlapping the first
with an uneven scriggle. Nothing
like the sprigs smiling
in the early afternoon spring
light below the boulder.
Leaves with deep wrinkles
like the face of a four-billion-
year-old woman with a history
I can never capture.

Dreamscape at the End of the World

The light creeps
through the fence
posts, each slice a sun-
flower petal, picked
and strewn through
basket-slats. The bottom
is packed with plucked flower
heads, dead brown
and empty, having given
unsatisfactory answers.
I pick another sunflower
(from beneath my feet?) and
start again. *I will live*
I won't live I will live I won't
live. A small band
of wood frogs hop
through the fence posts,
their aria of *might as*
well might as well might
as well drawing out the roaring
back there. I turn
and there I am with them,
facing the desert oil
fire licking the horizon. Black tar
drips from armed
cacti. Roadrunners and kitfoxes
dive into holes in the hopes
of escape. The last
sunflower's stem leaks juice
into my fist. The last petals.
I won't live. I will.
Won't.

II

The Polar Bear Sign at the Henry Vilas Zoo in Madison, WI

“Home is on the sea ice and where the seals are. The polar bears home range is far larger than any other species of bear. They live throughout the Arctic in Canada, Norway, Russia, Greenland, and parts of the US.” – Henry Vilas Zoo

The fiberglass has weathered every winter storm here since I was a kid, I remember, putting my hand to the glass to feel the cold

seeping from the machine-chilled water. I loved them, the way a dog loves their favorite napping tree. I loved that I could come to visit

every autumn and they’d be like a portrait: swimming, lounging, munching on their meal of fish in shade of the cement-sculpted cave.

In school, our teachers projected a picture of a polar bear on a little island of ice, in the middle of the Arctic. They said:

class, soon those little islands will be gone. People made mistakes, but everyone is helping to stop the tragedy. Now, watching the polar

bears pacing around their cooled pool, knowing that help hasn’t yet been enough, knowing the sea ice will be gone by midcentury,

I think they were trying to say,
“we’re sorry that this is the world we’re leaving you.”

The Snowless Season

“Meteorological winter was the warmest winter on record for the contiguous U.S.” – NOAA; March 8, 2024

New leaves sprout on my fiddle leaf fig
in winter, each one a firework. Like every
cell completing cytokinesis creates a bang
of barium salts. Millions of particles of chlorophyll

gasping at the scarce wavelengths of sun
skirting through the west-facing window
each afternoon to spark the bursting open of new
axillary buds. It shouldn't be happening now,

but it is. Outside, the cactus thrives, a taut balloon
of carbon and water, spikes like fists in the glint
of early sunset. Squirrels harvest still-warm
nuts for their stores – will they need them?

Newscasters puzzle on the “snowless season,”
on whether garlic bulbs will send
up shoots months early. The warblers fly back
and forth, sharing branches with cardinals

for a week or two before wandering south
yet again, everyone watching, wondering—
will this be the time they stay to sing?

A Conversation on Spring Planting with My Mother

Her voice is a windchime, shimmering
through the speaker of my phone cast on the mulch
beside the sprouting radishes. *I tried planting
blueberries this year and the silly things*

wilted in a week! I roll back on my heels, knock
the dirt-caps from my knees. Ask: *did you
test the soil? Spread the roots? Water
sparingly? I did with the peppers I transplanted,*

and they did super well. Those bell peppers
had rebelled for years in their plastic pots,
dying to just a stick in the dirt, an obelisk
headstone in a field of graves, then blossoming

out in mid-winter to sprout a single eye-
sized pepper. I crack my neck and ankles, bend
over the bed again. Sprinkle seeds from the kale
packet with pinched fingers. *Popped them*

*right in my raised bed and they actually
made peppers at the right time!* I tell her
about the new pH reader I bought from Australia,
how I hand mixed my soil with a shovel, sifting in bags

upon bags of amendments. Arranged the roots
like paintstrokes and patted down. *The tomatoes, though,
are so stubborn.* She laughs. *Whatever grows in my garden,
grows. What dies, dies. I'll try again next year. Sometimes,
you just have to wait.*

Ode to the Umbrella Plant

We gave it that name because of how the leaves, mouth-size with lip seam pursed, cluster and fan out from one nexus, each held aloft on slender tea green stems. Each individual leaf sharing a centimeter of space with their neighbor, like a tiny

suburbia of ant houses, legs scurrying down the sloped center, prodding edges and peering down into space before bending over and around, flipping as if on a miniature trapeze and toeing the underside. It's not quite an umbrella though, is it?

Umbrellas, we say keep out inconvenience: the rain, snow, sun, and moderately (no, less than moderately) the wind. We cling tight to black plastic handles, bracing hard against each torrential downpour, running from one block building to the next, dodging

raindrops like bullets, nickel-size heel tips scraping chipped cement, daring us to trip. Now, watch an umbrella plant outside. Sit the pot on the porch and regard how some drops shaped as tears bead and slip into the fold, funneled away from the plant but others—

watch as others find their way into those centimeter ant side-yard gaps, sailing straight through, into the root's tight embrace.

Self-Harm Serenade

At night, I strip
the skin from each
cuticle in andante,

baring small spines
of muscle, the slow
before the solo.

With bowed head,
I breathe in
to another bite,

the tight pain an
ovation, homage
to the blood-

gowned woman,
arms outstretched
in bravura.

The Color of Greenwash

We start lobbing banana
peels out the window. The internet
said banana peels
decompose in just a couple
months now, with the planet
thermostat on high. Our neighbors
knock, ask what the deal is
with the banana stash. Giving back
to nature, we say. They nod
and the next day follow suit. Soon,
the whole street signs on
and the boulevard is a brown
stinking buffet. Walks become
obstacle courses, step over that
turkey leg bone there, bit of mayo
and tomato sandwich there. This
is our urban composting project,
we say. Landfills are out,
organic cycling is in. And while
we're at it, we trash those plastic
straws, and buy new sets of fin
pink glass straws blown an ocean
away. Organic undyed cotton
totes for every community
member, pale succulents blooming
purple flowers for each window
dug from deserts already full
of holes. All in earnest, because tell me,
where can we rest our bag
of guilt that the monarchs are dying
and it's all our fault?

January 21st

She died before I could get to her, alone in the home
she had refused to leave for months,

like a yellow photograph in an album, left open on the sun-drowned
dining table. The car, the train, nothing could have gone fast

enough for me to hold her hand when her mind forgot
to breathe. Even the starlings I admired in the space between

her last breaths, metallic down feathers raining
from the powerlines, would have taken too long to fly back

with a note, or a little vial of brandy old-fashioned sweet, or last hug
atop their wings. When we clean her house in the months after,

years of dust coats everything she loved. The cake pans, the garden
trowel, the can of cranberry sauce in the cupboard.

On the Question of Flocks

I learned to draw birds on a crayon-scribbled table
in kindergarten. We drew landscapes of beaches
—because sand is less complicated than trees—
and when we were ready for the skyscape,

our teacher told us *like this* and traced arrow
points on her own projected drawing weaving
between blue clouds. *This is a flock,*
class, and when they fly, every bird

has their place. We learned when the point
bird, the one facing the greatest strain
of wind and navigation tired, they traded places
with the bird in the back to recover. One bird alone

can't survive the migration. I believe this,
the night I make the drive north to grieve
the death of one last grandparent, gaggle
of dogs in the back, and someone to hold my hand.

Lessons in Weeding

“Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, ending right to abortion upheld for decades” – NPR, 6/24/2022

My mother and I kneel together, 5-gallon bucket
between us. A trail of violets webs the garden,
spread by the ant network impregnating the soil.
The violets have pushed small seed leaves through
mulch, dilating into blossom. My mother demonstrates:
feel for the main stem, follow it to the root line, take

a firm hold, wiggle, pull. There’s a violence to it,
the uprooting. She tries to be gentle, tells me to be too,
but the rip of roots underground reverberates
in my fingertips. She tells me we have to let
them grow so we can save them. She promises me
this tearing, this control, is love. If we didn’t love them,
we wouldn’t let them grow. Our own labor

is finding just the place for them to flourish.
In the far reaches of the yard, a clump of weeds
slumps low in the hazy afternoon sun. Left there
with some kind of hope, of prayer. My mother
hands me the bucket, brimming with broken-
stemmed plants. Shows me how to cast the violets

on the heap. To cast a prayer after them: that they’ll be one
of the lucky ones. That they’ll root. That they’ll be wanted.

The Future as in Resuscitation

They say the process is painless.

The commercial you saw the month before
you died (by hover-train gravity mishap)
promises it's just a pinch then some pressure except

the scurrying never leaves you but

you're warm and dead on the slab so of course
you can't feel what might be the worst mechanical
snake bite, releasing a horde in a fluid sack
under your skin. Tiny metal nanobots, eight legs,

spears inside you,

and counting, black holes for eyes, and dark
matter inside, consuming the excess:
blood vessels and brain lobes like yarn
sucked in and unwound. As promised,

it's painless as in the absence of pain,

you can't feel when they start their miracle
work, pulling where nature pushed; you can't
feel each leg segment jostling, terse
echoes of knitting needles ricocheting

as a pinball in the shape of a mace

around your ventricles to bind the tatters, dangling pink
bits in the anti-gravity of your body cavity, with silver
strings of steel webbing edges together like a thread
through a sweater arm pulled tight by a needle

wielded by a god or us or someone, a star,

within clouds of ash and satellites— circling. Your body, then,
they say is healed. Melded back by bits of meat glue.

They say they leave when the job is done: call to the bots
with a hypersonic shriek, count each receding, back
the way they came.

Propagation

1. Prepare your tools:
a sanitized knife,
a cup of mineralized water,
a ruler,
a steeled nerve.
2. Identify the wrists of the plant:
an axillary bud, the places where new
stems, flowers, or roots can shoot.
3. Measure a centimeter above the bud.
4. Take your knife and slice.
5. Place the cutting in your cup of water.
6. Set in the sun and hope for roots.

In August, I propagate with my love. We cut
pieces of Devil's Ivy, begonia, and geranium,
brushing ringed pinkies while slipping pieces
into thrifted glasses lining the sills,

their green, blue, and pink colored water scattering
rainbows on the floor. Each cutting sprouts new roots
within days, transparent trees webbing the water.

Some plants, like daylilies, can't be propagated
this way. You can cut and cut and cut
at every wrist and they will never root. The cutting
will callous and wither and rot and die and the parent
plant? Worst case, it also seals over the wound. Lives on.
Worser case, infection sets in. Cells will pop,
die in choreographed lysis.

While we work, I tell the story of my own wrists:

1. How I wanted to slice them, replant my hand
in a new place and grow a new me.

2. How I didn't know I am a daylily.
3. How I didn't know my hand wouldn't have grown
but instead sat askew in the earth, twitching
fingers, veins and arteries clogged and calloused
off and my body, collapsed, on rocky ground.
4. How, now, those wrists still channel
oxygen, and cells, and grief.

When I finish, my love takes them in their hands
and kisses them.

You Told Me Once I Saved Your Life

For Amanda

I think of death as an explosion. Souls, memories, now volant,
freed from their carbon base, joining the aether like an exhaled
breath. Piece by piece they settle on the backs of a polar bears,
miniscule traces drifting across the petals of passionflowers.

I want to think of you this way, except your soul is far too vast
to be confined to this planet. At this very moment, your humor
rests at the top of a mountain on Mars. Your grace, catching up
to Halley's Comet. Your memories, crammed-backseat Buick

rides downtown, arms-wide spinning amid hundreds of monarchs,
and all-out neon 80s poker: the start of a new blue star.

If you were still here, you'd say that's far too grand.
That you'd rather stay a grain of sand on the beach or float
in a ray of sun above your bearded dragon.
I would say even a star isn't nearly grand enough for you.

I wish I could gather the pieces of you in a bottle or mason jar,
just like in the movies, because even though you chose this,
even though this world overwhelmed you, even though I know
I should let you go now, at least this way I could carry you.

Something I should have done, at least once more.
But now this –
this is all I can do to save you.

The View from an Arizona Outlook: A Constellation of Moonflowers Opening at Dusk

Watching is like the taste-burst of a July
red raspberry, born of the bright
summer sun. Like the harmony of starlings
in the first peek of dawn. Like embracing
a decades-old elm without brushing

your fingertips. Like when, just last week,
I received a postcard from a far-away
friend: “hello to you from my spot on Earth!”
I send one back: “See these flowers?
Don’t you wish you were one of them?”

Walking My Dog on the Chautauqua Bottoms Trail in Southern Illinois

After James Wright's Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island Minnesota

The wind is as still as the hunted squirrel
frozen mid-trail, eyes big and black and
round, reflecting the gray bowl
sky. The dog calms when I tell her
not to kill it because she won't
eat it. The squirrel springs
up a tree's thick trunk, alive.
We walk further down the path into
prairie, popping gravel beneath her paws

and mine, startling up the red wing blackbirds,
nibbling at this pit stop on the route
north. The grasses, little bluestem and rough
blazing star, are dead and bent
still, their dried husks waiting to be consumed
by the spring fires. The dog tries
to dive in, to chase the rat
snake who popped out their head
from this terrestrial anemone, before reeling

back. The dog misses, the leash a taut hope
for us both. This world is big enough.

A Wish Granted in Nighttime Corn Fields

When the sun slumps into sleep,
I tilt as a flower to the moon,
ask if she would scatter
bits of starlight like seeds
to the field. And when they fall,
those seeds crack their shells,
tremble into the cat made constellation,
earth-walking and alive, if only
in the dark. She saunters,
like she used to, rubs my legs
with her dotted nose, circles,
wraps tail, and curls,
a crescent moon brightening my feet.

The Heaven I Hope For

After Catherine Pierce

Has sycamore trees sprouting from clouds. Roots reaching into the mist to sip droplets into empty xylem channels and into each individual leaf. I brace on tiptoes and brush the lowest. Mushrooms sprout from each root knob and bloom spores like the burst of broken glass from a slammed door and the air above swirls in pre-tornado because this heaven has seasons and bad weather, and lightning finds its way to the cottage sometimes but it's alright. I have a lightning rod. In the cottage,

the design is cozy-chic: every surface a cushion, every ceiling a dazzling of leaves. We trade oxygen and carbon dioxide like baseball cards or maybe ice cream bowls, one with raspberry and the other rocky road. There's a cat too, of course, with too-short whiskers so she gets stuck behind the bookcase or under the bed, but I do too sometimes. At the end of my lane, is a lapis blue door, broken a bit with a dented handle and loose splinters. Every night I pass through, to your heaven, where we listen

to the holler song of frogs in old wood rockers, adding our own creaks to the chorus, like the hand-melt of a hot teacup, like the feeling a raindrop gets when they join the pond.

III

The Forest in February

When I was little, my brother and I
laid domino lines, as long
as we could manage. They curved

through doorways, curled into spirals
in the bathroom, scaled the stairs.
I remember the sound

when we tipped the first domino. The clacking
of bone and ebony echoing
through the house. Watching the line shift

as if showing their backs was an act
of dominance. Now, when I wander
the forest trails, the wind doesn't touch

the ground. Just the canopy of mulberry,
red oak, and sugar maple, the bare branches
like bones extending from the body of Earth.

Considering the Sundew

A sundew's digestive droplets refract
each color of the fen in turn: goldenrod, purple false

foxglove, spikemoss. Like globes
of glass on pedestals, ordinary leaves

metamorphosized. In full bloom, the effect
is one of stardom—each red stem a meteor trail,

each drop a supernova. On days the sunlight bounces
between veined poplar leaves, the shadows

sink deep in the sundew droplets. Each
a lagoon in ferment, stirring

then stilling, when, beneath the surface, the barest
White Bog Copper wing unfurls, as if

in a dream. Starved out from the fen, their only trace
left in the sundew's outsourced stomach. Now,

a fly buzzes from the canopy, peers
to glimpse a wingtip, extends one web-thin leg

to test the water, to taste, to sip, and—
stuck. If a fly could feel pain,

it would and maybe it does, maybe it screams
when then the dew sours to digestive. Enzymes loose

to break bonds, snap molecules
like carrots between teeth. The struggle is short,

body subsumed as a fire to twig,
pieces of leg and eye repurposed, recycled. Joining

the White Bog Copper in the museum of living things lost.

Earth Time

People say time does not exist in the woods. Reality ceases and all that surrounds you is the slow breath of stomata, the light clack of stick insect legs against lichen-lined bark, the soft steps of white-tailed deer on moss.

The first human-approved measured manifestations of time relied on two constants: gravity and light. From sundials, measuring time based on the movement of the sun, to mechanical clocks, using the immutable force of gravity to swing pendulums and spring coils, we have determined exactly when to

go to the dentist,

 buy donuts,

 eat dinner,

 attend a dance recital.

When I go to the woods, I take off my watch and watch the sun.

The understory plants turn their faces, in sync with the traveling light, slowly bending stems and shifting leaves, charting a slow semi-circle. When dusk falls, evening primroses unfurl their painted petals. Day after day, rusty patched bumble bees buzz contrail lines through a sea of sunflowers and return to the hive in intervals. Deer peer around oak tree trunks who begin to bud when the temperature changes, when the light changes.

If asked the time I will say: it is half past primrose in spring.

On the Question of Beauty

“The Sun could not harbor life as we know it because of its extreme temperatures and radiation. Yet life on Earth is only possible because of the Sun’s light and energy.” - NASA

I often remember, we are always eight minutes
away from death. When I was a kid,
I had a dream the sun disappeared. Burnt out,
portaled away, it didn’t matter. This solar system
was just a system, then not as we all poofed away,
yes poofed like a quick blow to the eraser
shavings of starstuff. Every chance I get now,
I look up. Watch the arc of the giant
gaseous entropy reaction that honestly
deserves to be a god. The same path every day,
we hope in perpetuity. Break ground
like a sapling, cross the sky, and kaleidoscope
in farewell. Only to enter again, some hours later,
on tiptoes.

Cultivated

The Annual August Garden Show in Madison, Wisconsin
begins with sun shower droplets the size of irises
dinging against factory-sharpened metal trowels
housed in peaked green tents crowding
a cracked asphalt parking lot, large as human footprint.

Winding through sneakers and tent posts and sign stands,
an ant-ferried string of seeds makes landfall,
gathered in the largest scar. Above, ardent gardeners bow
their sunhats to the wares, tracing points
of tiller blades, pH testing kits, sprinkler

systems with pipes like artificial
blood vessels, all of it paired with promises:
“3X LARGER HARVEST,” “SAY GOODBYE TO WEEDS.”
Days later, tents rolled, tools tucked, vans packed,
the lot is vacated. The ants who carried violets: perished

by water by foot by car by grasshopper;
but the seedlings, tucked in and sunshower-fed,
emerge, gasping into bloom. A small colony of purple
mouths, yawning in the morning sun.

Dreamscape of a Reanimation in Extinction

Behind the polished glass, the skeleton twitches, dust trickling from suspended bones. An orange midnight moon casts a faltering light through the phantom snow, over the femur, the sternum, and into the deep deadened pools of the dodo's emptied

eye sockets. Though the feathers and skin and aqueous humor of the eyeballs are plucked and scraped and rotted away, the dodo gazes back in quiet calculation. Keen snaps of their beak send *clack clacks*

ricocheting, the sound waves scraping past disintegrated eardrums, betraying the confines of the glass.

Meant to keep violence out, not meant to keep it in.

With a creaking wrench of each wing, the dodo breaks

the cradling wires, the too-little too-late love of humanity snapping with sharp *boings* careening against the walls of the case. The first *smash* of the dodo's cranium against the glass leaves spidering cracks trailing along the outline of their shadow. The second

sends fist-sized shards scattering. An alarm wails and lights ignite, masking the moon, but the dodo roves onward toward the door,

toward freedom, toward *life*, their bones strong and gleaming.

A steam of humans erupts from the door, stampeding toward the room with the broken cage. In the fray, one man glances down at the strange *click clicks* on the tile, one hand

propping the door. He stills at the sight of the skeleton, jostling dryly, in need of cartilage, of feathers, of flesh. There is intelligence in the echoing dark discs that hold his gaze. Vengeance too.

The moment stretches, then snaps. The dodo *clacks* their beak

and stalks past, out the still open door. The whistling night wind whips through their rib cage, whirling a cyclone

where their heart used to beat, holding their flightless wings aloft. They begin to call. In the distance, dozens of responding *keck kecks*

trail delicately, caressing the city of skyscrapers.

Elon Musk vs. The Universe

“You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great - and that’s what being a spacefaring civilization is all about. It’s about believing in the future and thinking that the future will be better than the past. And I can’t think of anything more exciting than going out there and being among the stars.” - Elon Musk

“Here we came all this way to the Moon, and yet the most significant thing we’re seeing is our own home planet, the Earth.” – Bill Anders, Apollo 8 crew member

I watch his rockets fall from the sky on the news. Hit some invisible net up there, like the molecules of the atmosphere joined hands and said *no*. But he keeps digging in that stockpile and persists and persists and then, when the nets fail and the rockets escape, there’s a celebration, champagne all around because we made it. But wait

just a minute because here comes opportunity, knocking with a black hole smile. Charge those billionaires for a ride around the moon. Make like Wallace and Gromet: go up and scoop your own piece of cheese. This is for the future, to learn to terraform Mars into our second Earth, don’t worry. We can see it all, don’t worry.

But while we’re there, how about a rock or two or three for the mantelpiece? The Starship is next, and we all say thank you thank you thank you for spending what we didn’t want to. Thank you for loving outer space and Star Trek and all those wonderful planets up there. Next, the red planet, right? First to go, that pesky

atmosphere. He’ll send up balloons full of air shipped all the way from Earth and then maybe work on the ground a little bit, how about some more clay, why don’t you grow some stuff, Mars? Send up some big machines, smooth gears churning day and night, putting evolution to shame. Now for some progress, eh?

Who will pay to be the first colonist? Yes, the botanist and the aerospace engineer, but what about a couple of those oil CEOs, they might have the funds. Or the snowball in the Senate guy, what’s his name? So many resources up there on Mars, all untapped, and these people, they’ll figure out the best way to use them.

Starfleet isn’t finished, yet, though. You see, space is full of horizons, one for every planet so that makes 22 sextillion, more than the quarters than Elon owns or the people he’s burned through. Progress means expansion, right? And even when Earth collapses into a blackened pile of rubble ready to be imploded,

it doesn’t matter because there’s always more, isn’t there? Always more planets, more boundaries to push, more space to monetize. On his deathbed, three planets conquered and counting, I wonder if he’ll remember the moon. How, in the first grade, he learned about the phases with Oreos,

twisting the cookies, slipping slices of icing down his throat, one at a time.
Asking for more to line up on his desk as one, two, three, four. Picturing
Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune. How easy to hold. Crunch, crunch.
How easy to own. Crunch, crunch.

Four Hundred and Sixty-Two Snowmen

For Grandma Prem

We counted when packing them up
that last Christmas. Aunts wrapping

each in yellow paper towels and tucking
them in plastic totes, stuffing big ones

in black garbage bags: protection
from the summer basement floods.

There went the three-foot snowman
who sang carols when you stepped

on his foot. And the little end-tabletop
ceramic snowmen choir in top hats,

and the snowman head dining room
candle holders, and last, the ten-foot

plywood snowman spiriting
aloft the sign *The Prem's*, dismantled

from his place by the porch. Curated
over years of craft fairs where all of us:

you, me, the aunts, the cousins would
shuffle through the halls of rural

middle schools and high schools, small
town lawns and community centers,

all lined with folding tables, to find
the best. When you died that year,

buried in the barely-thawed spring ground
beside your husband and son, we emptied

the house. Extra fishing rods and meat grinders,
sewing supplies and crocheted blankets,

scattered to thrift stores and landfills.
The four hundred and sixty-two snowmen, though?

Those we untucked from their totes
and carried with us. Adorning mantelpieces,

resting on doorknobs. The next year, I visit
my brother at Christmas and spot

a small snowman with a paintbrush,
smiling from the fridge face.

Self-Portrait in the Kitchen Window

In the glass:
two blue eyes
with little froth
waves crossing
into the pupil,
a mirror
of the Pacific. If only

I weren't so afraid
of drowning. Skin like
a jellyfish mid-
sting with a jaw
coiled tight
as a mantis shrimp
punch. The window

is long enough to show
my fingers,
a net at my ribs
holding in the intestines
because they're a little
fragile. Cuticles scraped
at the edges, maybe

ketchup drops
in the corners
because those were chicken
nuggets for lunch,
right? But those trees
back there,
in the ground?

Their fingers are flush,
robins nipping dead
honeysuckle vines tangled
in the twigs,
leaves opening
in their absence.
Like the feeling

of taking your first
breath after a dive.
Like knowing you'll always
end up on a shore
somewhere,
salt-brushed skin
dried with smiles.

Ode to Canoeing the Chain of Lakes in Eagle River, Wisconsin

I didn't think it would be this beautiful.

The lake, a looking glass,
mirrors the dawning sky:
a subdued brilliance of tender
pinks and yellows. Loons slip
along the surface,

as if it were the sky.

My mother and I make our way
into the morning mist, intruding
on these sunrise rituals with our canoe,
watching water drip from the tips
of our paddles to form a confluence

with our wake. We travel without
speaking, our own restful fluency,
the air instead rippling
with the distant calls of mallards,
low honks mixed with squeaks
of young. A whisper combs

fingertips through the tops
of the windswept white pines
framing the lake, reaching
twigged fingers to one another.
I rest my paddle on my knees,
palm embracing the grip. My mother

stops too, and we listen
as the waves careen into the unknown
reaches of the river connecting
this lake to another to another
to another. A path we will never
paddle, content in the easy cradle of home.

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