

Book of Blanks

She is a plastic bag of thoughts floating in water, with nothing but the thinnest meniscus differentiating her from her environment, stopping her from spilling her mind all over the car's faded interior. She couldn't move even if she wanted to and she didn't want to. She wanted to stay like this. Savoring the warm feeling of her small existence. She is so physically weak and yet it feels wonderful. She tries not to think to avoid the labyrinth of memory opening. She just stares, focusing on her vision. It is immovably quiet. Her head is nestled in the awkward gap between the door and the seat, and the broad blue sky is open like an infinite page above the windshield. Blank, featureless blue. She sees it winking through the trees between half-shut eyes, that blue friend. It had been raining, hadn't it? Shadows of overhead trees dance holographically on the windshield, waving at her to wake up. She inhales the long waking breath of morning, wanting this moment of being nothing to last. Wanting to savor it. Wanting never to return through that dark passage. The dark passage of forested fear. She must have been clutching the edge of the seat the entire night, her hand aches. Her legs ache. She had run a marathon in her sleep. She had run, chased.

It comes to her now and she cannot stop it. A smoldering dream of pearl colored light and bathroom mirrors, razor blades and corporeal maps stretched across the gray carpet. She remembers pain and wanting that pain to go away at whatever cost. A penetrating force that filled up her rigid body and couldn't be washed away, not with three, four, five showers and the whole bottle of liquid soap lathered from head to toe, soap scratched into her skin with her nails. She remembers brushing her teeth eight times. She remembers trying to get out of the bed, ripping the blanket from her huddled body six times before she sat up and took the first steps of the day. She remembers a conversation and a car and jeweled traffic lights, windshield wipers smashing the lights into rainbow molecules as the car hammered through wind and rain. Then there was something nightmarish; a hot white hole tunneling through the forest, trees jeering either side of her, too exhausted to say turn back, too afraid to say anything, her body lurching inside its skin whenever she ducked beneath the wall of sleep, something inside her grabbing panicked at consciousness. Would she have done it? Was she about to do it when Johnathan came home? Had this nightmare been the nightmare of finally acting upon that deathly state she sometimes found herself in? Always the same ossified being, the same heaviness, the same mirror, seeing something that was not hers staring back

at her, that did not wave when she waved, or turned when she turned, or spat toothpaste when she spat toothpaste, so that it was difficult to ascertain whether she even really did exist. No, she wouldn't have done it. She would have agonized in that very physical state of too-much-presence like every other time until Johnathan came home, and she would have told him about it, told him about how she felt and they would have discussed it through tears and she would have went to bed, feeling safe with him there. Safe from herself. From her own body. And in the morning, she'd have a fractured hangover from whatever neuro-chemical warfare had been waged inside her cerebellum and she would have gone to work and within a couple of days it would have been as if it hadn't occurred at all. Until next time that is. But now, they had done something about it. Now they had done as close to the thing, as doing the thing could get. Together. Had he really meant what he'd said when he'd said that they weren't going back? Did she really mean it when she'd agreed to never go back? What about their apartment? What about their friends? Jobs? *Family*? She recalls laying on her bed. Turning, toward, within, away. Four years she turned in that bed. Turning inside a blanket in a shoe-box. Showering, washing. Hoping to wake refreshed. Hoping her hands reach for the curtain, for the door, for Johnathan. She wanted more than anything to grope for something that would hold her in return, but nothing did. She would pull herself toward whatever it was and it would fall away to reveal something else, and another and another, clawing her way through the interminable debris of life. This was not a new thing, this turning, the waking and washing, the dressing, redressing, trying desperately to emerge from the shell. She's been doing it for years, for decades, for as long as she remembers. She remembers thinking about him. Her father that is. Thinking about the decisions she'd made up until that moment, her career, her apartment, her friends and Johnathan, how many of these choices have truly been hers? How much of her life has not had the invisible hand of her father hovering above her, guiding her by subtle threats or caution, or by contradiction? She remembers lying there, turning in that four-year-old bed and thinking: she hates him. No, more than hate, even. Hate with no voice. Hate boiling black. All knotted up, unable to put it anywhere. Escaping it. That's what she's been doing. There was no escape now she's trapped in the sheets, alone, blanketed by these cyclical thoughts. If she were to tell... But how? An example, one she recalls... from when? When she was a teenager, that's when it started. What started? The hate. The more than hate. The voiceless hate. She was in her bathroom, downstairs, near to where the garage was. She had the downstairs to herself. Meaning: nobody else slept downstairs. She never had anything to herself, not even herself to herself. She was in the bathroom using the toilet. She gets up, off of the toilet, having finished and the toilet seat lid comes down.

Thwack! She knew then, she knew the sound of the toilet seat would travel through the house. She knew the ceramic crack of a lid against the toilet would carry up the stairs, through the walls as a dull and unmistakable toilet-seat-lid-thud. That he would hear it. She washes her hands and puts a line of toothpaste on her brush and he is there... knocking on the bathroom door, 'flush the toilet.' He says. 'You forgot to flush.' The insanity of it! He's come down the stairs, perhaps waited three or five seconds waiting for the flush, listening for the flush, descends the steps when he doesn't hear the flush, which maybe takes eight or nine seconds and all to tell her that she has forgotten to flush? She can't even have a minute of solitude in the bathroom before he comes down to tell her how to use a toilet. But that's not all. If she had the curtains open in her room, he would make a point of walking past her window. Specifically, in the morning. Perhaps, also making a point of how late she woke. He would walk past her window, his unmistakable shadow cast into her space, her private space. She doesn't believe he wanted to see her, he wasn't a pervert, but only to make the point that somebody *could* see her. That somebody might walk pass. That she was careless. Sometimes she would go into her room and find the curtains closed, he had closed them. Or sometimes open, when he had opened them. Or if she said she would feed the dog, that she wanted to feed the dog and would do it at the appropriate time when the dog needs to be fed, he would feed it without her knowing so that when she goes to feed the dog, he can tell her it's already done. The ridicule. Always telling her how things are, how things were supposed to be. "Which way is the patio sloping?" He would ask. She is laying in the sun, reading, he is sweeping leaves from the patio. Shhhh-ck, Shhhh-ck. She doesn't reply, she never replies. She learned not to bother. "You would think it is sloping that way." Shhhh-ck, Shhhh-ck, nodding in the direction that she is supposed to have thought the patio is sloping. "It's actually, sloping this way." He says and smooths his broom in the direction of the actual slope. Shhhhhh-ck. "You see, the reason you think the patio is sloping this way is because of the illusion that the pavers give off, being longitudinal pavers. But actually it doesn't. Clever, isn't it?" And simply by answering his own questions he has ridiculed her for being stupid. Endless ridicule. Even if she conceded, agreed, indulged his remarks with a 'yes, Daddy' it wouldn't cease. Always something she's done, or hasn't done, or doesn't know or is supposed to know. How to use a broom, how to peel a potato, how to tie up a bag of cheese so it doesn't become dry, what to eat and at what speed to eat it, how to get to this place or that, where the best restaurants or beaches are, at what temperature to make tea, how to chop an onion so you don't cry, what television programs are better than others and why, how to sit in a chair so to not scuff the hardwood floor, o you should have... why didn't you... you musn't... it's not

supposed to... what gave you the idea to...

Turning.

She recalls opening the curtains and liquid light pouring into the room from the icy street. Everywhere a dull yellow. No shadow exists that isn't there to frame some light. No unknowns. No mistakes made that aren't immediately eliminated, erased from possibility. No time that isn't clock time. No dreams that haven't already images. No broken things that are not fixed or on their way to be fixed. She gets up out of the bed and turns to the clock. 9pm. It is night. Laughing outside. Smashing beer bottles and staggering travelers. She didn't think she'd survive living like this anymore. You wouldn't believe it to talk to her. You wouldn't believe the sclerotic depression that renders her totally and utterly inert, inert in ways that are different to the inertia of most inhabitants, who, in the sickening yellow cold are huddled around the warm images flickering in their televisions, trying to forget, trying to forget the agitations of the day, the pressures of keeping well-mannered, forgetting the cold, the awful cold. She keeps it disguised as does the rest of the city, patching up rips in the seamless vision of the nation. You would deny it if you knew it about her. You would pathologise it. Tell her she needs medicating, a vacation, that once she moves from her job in A to a position in B the pressure will subside. It's the mortgage, the mortgage is causing it. She realizes, now, looking out through the window, it's the city. The whole fucking city. Its going to kill her if she doesn't get out. The city has the patronizing face of her father. She wished to talk to somebody about the specter of her father hovering over her life, the specter of the father that seems to also possess the entire city, and she does, she talks to Johnathan about it, who nods like he understands, and she begins to think, as she is saying it, how absurd it must sound. "He didn't rape you?" No. "He didn't beat you?" No. "He didn't neglect you?" No. "What didn't he do?" "He didn't love me. He didn't love me for who I was. He didn't believe in me. He was always trying to *improve* me. Like... like... there is something *wrong* with me..." And They would sympathize, o you poor thing, he didn't love you, oh gosh how awful your life must be... you are brave, you are special, wonderful. Yes, they'd call you brave. And these things, wonderful, special, brave, beautiful, these things even if they helped and you reminded yourself of them every day, and for a moment even if they comforted you, it would still be yourself pouring into yourself like a river, and that's what causes the disgust, the affirmation of her own self in perpetuity. Escape impossible. So, she would feed her parents little morsels of her successes – awards, grades, feedback, reviews of her work – sustaining them on a diet of carefully edited information about her progression in the university system

or in her job, and they would in turn feed these stories – because that's all they were, facts turned to a narrative about her good character – and they would retell them, further de-contextualising them, to their friends who had counter stories about their own children's prospects. So and so graduated with distinction from such and such, you-know-who was offered an internship at... and while this disgusted her, she did it for no other reason than to keep them off her back, to keep them reassured that she was not about to slip over the ever present precipice into poverty, addiction and failure that haunted the landscape. What else was she supposed to tell them? There was so little she had in common with them except universal domestic banalities – something or other about a water bill that was more expensive than she imagined, a new restaurant that she has discovered and how they must try the soup, and did you see that terrible thing on the news? - she finds herself forever boasting and shit-talking into the phone's receiver and over cups of coffee or chicken dinners just to assure them their genes haven't been squandered and to tickle the organ of narcissism that seemed to keep them alive and breathing. This was the meaning of their life. Their daughter's success. Being caught in the turmoil of aspiration seemed to deprive her of it. She only wanted to escape it, to escape the scarcity of life and the abundance of success that swam around her shoe box apartment, which turned and folded and produced new life only to have it follow what was ostensibly the same trajectory as that which came before it. Aspire to what? She thought. To replicate the lives of my parents? The same structure with different variables? Insert profession and hobbies here, sign at the bottom of the contract. But what was on the other side of predetermined destiny? A maw of non-meaning, a life with no destination, no linearity, following from one whim to another, to another, to another?

“O, you're awake. Good morning.” Johnathan pierces her capsule of calm with a ka-klunk of a car door and rustle of shopping bags.

“Where are we?”

“Fuel station about an hour outside of B____. I got some water and some things for sandwiches if your hungry?”

“No not hungry. Did you drive all night?”

“Most of the night. I slept for an hour and continued driving. I figure you can drive if you're up to it and I'll have a nap. Water?”

“Thanks. Your brothers place far?” She sips the neck of the bottle, refrigerated water sliding down her coarse throat.

“A couple of hours maybe. We just follow the highway until a turnoff for Y_____. I

thought we could stop by for a night. I haven't seen him in two years.”

“Yeh, why not.”

“Hungry?”

“No, I just need the bathroom.”

“It's round the back. Careful, there were unflushed entities in the men's.”

“Ok.”

“Melanie?”

“Yeh.”

“You've got a lot of erasing to do.”

“What?”

“The maps. We've driven at least seven hundred kilometers. That's four pages of maps to erase, so we can't find our way back.”

It is affirmed, what they are doing. They aren't going back. She'll erase the maps with a razor blade until it is a book of blanks, or until they find somewhere, anywhere that isn't the place they left off.

“We're not going back are we?”

“No.”

“Good. I'm so excited, Jay. I feel great about this.”

“I love you, Em.”

“I love you too, Jay.”

And for the first time in what could be a lifetime she does not feel like those words are a half-truth, a complex lie, but a reality, simple and spectacular. She thinks of life and how much she loved to be in her bed, her reading and him tapping away at something on his computer by the window, her, making some banal senseless noise, just to hear him reply with his own gibberish. And when they were apart how she missed that domestic nonsense, gah-gah of lovers, the banal affirmations of love, each and every silly noise saying the same thing, I love you, I love you, I love you, inexhaustibly and forever. And yet she felt often enough a longing to be alone that drove her away from him, drove her inward, a restlessness to dispose of the love that kept her so painfully dependent on him, her perception of him caught up in the general agony of entrapment that was her life in the city of her father's face. The inconsistency of love; in love when apart and miserably alone when together. Love is grief, admiration, jealousy, fear, longing, lust and laziness all wrapped up in a relationship with one person so that that person can constitute the entire breadth of human emotion, and become the

only person you really need in order to live and feel. Because she felt this, whenever she said I love you, it felt like a half-truth, a lie. Today, it did not. Today, he had become a symbol of something else. A new life.

Melanie steps into blindingly yellow landscape and stumbles half asleep toward the back of the squat brown truck stop. There are grass seeds dancing together with the swirling wind, and birds nobody notices from inside their vehicles, predatory birds diving in and out of the shrubbery from huge sweeping heights, feeding on insects that take refuge in the moist shade of the bushes that encircle the building. She hears the distant twang of an acoustic guitar drifting out of the open window of nearby car. Dave Gilmour's timeless voice pouring into the lonely landscape... how I wish, how I wish you were here...we're just two lost souls... swimming in a fish bowl... year after year... running over the same old ground... And how we fou-ou-oo-ound...

the same old fears...

wish you were here...