



Mortar, No Pestle

Maya Bornstein

I Told Shoes to the Roads

I told shoes to the roads, and bare
feet sometimes on temperate days.

I told water to feet to erase the grime
of movement, rough and dark on thickening soles.

I told movement to the earth, who didn't notice
lost in the spirals of its own vast propulsion.

I told loss to proximal faces, but it too went unseen;
they have fruit and fallow soil of their own to till.

I told owning to the creatures who travel light,
but they turn eyes blankly on our human things.

I turned blank into solid and grasped with both hands
because these are my things on this far-flung earth.

I turned blank into earth and set bare feet to it,
to tell distance to loss, to find something to own.

Lorica

One result of reminiscence
is winding up a keeper of too many things.

Now pregnant attics are the population
of my packrat hegemony.

I've never been
though
a keeper of diaries
until

since that sundown when
your boots first slept in my entryway
while we did everything we could
to stay awake

I've been keeping a log
of your imperfections.

It sits in plain view on the desk
too far from the imprints of limbs on sheets
so I know you'll never look there.

Your perfection is the idol
of my cave-dwelling worship.

My faith in it feeds on blindness,
it's forbidden, it emaciates,
parasitic, in quick pieces
and I've never needed so badly
to be wrong.

Rome had bronze and iron
against graveward blows –

here is a new kind of chain mail
handwoven from the blemishes
of your character
which I've been silently collecting

so that
if I kill this
I can sleep protected

in the arsenal of
your distant frailty.

Mars is a Terrestrial Planet with a Thin Atmosphere

after reading Audre Lorde's "Power"

In the echo chamber of memory
someone says that anger

isn't real

isn't real

really isn't that just the echo of trying
to escape your own intestines?

And if you dig your way out of anger
where is your compass for peace?

You can cast it in fluorescent, call it
bestial, corrupt, poisonous

and Lorde they are powerful signifiers, true,
but isn't that a mighty Caucasus view?

Because thank you
but I will employ my anger 'cause it burns the fear
from out the hours of night.

There's no energy
like its choleric kilowatt-hours
making jack-o-lanterns of the human ribcage

and sometimes
even at the silent top of Desolation
even in the gales of Intimacy
there is no peace

and sometimes
I'm afraid of what a long enough war
will rob me of.

Reveille

I.

Our mouths came apart
like the tearing of old carpet
from its concrete bed
adhesive parting
in bursts of anti-coalescent revolt -

I did not go into mourning.

Adonis
my small frame
can't bear your living weight
which living can't bear witness,
misunderstands me
usually.

I wish I was sorrier.

My hands have revered your
hips, cottoned on to your
southern byways
and the sharp veneer
that stands you out
from a soft-focus world, but

that's about all.

II.

Our mouths came apart
like the castration of bugles
during Reveille -
a violence
you couldn't argue with.

I've woken and grown archaic.

In sleeping
you'll be forced to lose this.

The difference
is in your weight
pressing me closer to the core
where self is first to dissipate
and I'll baldly state

I am loathe to find it.

Heartland

Nights in early springtime I'd spend on wheels
oftentimes ago
traversing America by waning moonlight.
Early in the year, enough to season the earth with unsullied snow
Midwest air icy with a taste of rust,
you felt it coming in through teeth
pulsing down to fingertips in a wild pioneer's song.
Unknown (I in bluejeans
and all my years beheld by one warm coast or another)
but not unfriendly.

It's so long since I drove through
the golden hour of those wide plains and mountains that never
crawl any closer no matter how far the road pulls you.
Dawn to dawn
all folded into improper old white van
dragging in the powder despite its chained tires but
we aim with what bow we have.
On our way to nobody knows what.
No one watching that humble ship go by but
chilly weeds and earth and the occasional cow
by the side of some unremembered Midwest highway.
I all remember.
Every stone and hole in the trail leading us North
to discovering forgetting, to hunting escape.

Dreams I had in the front seat there in canyons
of formulaic tumbleweed danger
winds lashing at every turn and once or twice hailstorms,
their blue angry torrents.
We needn't maps, nights we'll sleep in Zion
with the ruins of civilization to protect us.
This is my Tintern Abbey,
each year the trees grow wilder and
God shrinks into their shadows.
In this thick darkness nightmares can bloom unwelcome and invade
as frost, lingering until fair dawnlight emerges to kiss the peaks awake.

We found new truths inadvertently in the new snow.
Buried waiting for an unsuspecting hand maybe.
There lay conch shells and bullet shells by some karmic
and severe displacement which pervades that country
nearly unnoticed alongside the garbage of man,
stepped over commonly and rescued finally by
we the innocents we the nonbelievers.
With fire I would chase away those nighttime visions
and return my hands to their past dexterity.
Someone speaks feverishly, the white solitude is endless.
Wearied cow eyes evade us in the fields and not a house in sight
but home is the road and the nowhere it leads to.

Mal du Suisse

Then there's the unlike anything feeling
of keeping the company of headlights instead of humans
on black roads.

This is my lot
because I am unequipped
for serenity

because the significance of loss
undercuts everything
because the stinging blue wind
undercuts everything.

I'm only waiting
to cut me loose

anticipating nostalgia
for your callouses

the tune you hum when you cook

the instrument that is my skin
when your teeth play it.

Never have I felt nostalgic
for headlights, though
which lie always ahead

in the Sierras
in the San Gabriels
at the spot where memory and nostalgia diverge

anywhere, really

so long as they
and the blue sting of open windows
can show me the serenity
of half-forgetting you.

Łask

My grandfather kept money
in apartment walls
they told me

he never owned
anything, just
hidden cash wallpaper
and the miles of
Polish mud

Which clung to his feet
when he fled war

Which clung after gangrene and
amputation
wherever lie the remains
of that foot
lies the Polish earth

Which cling still to his foot
beneath the planks of his
grave roof
and the trudging
of pale shadows
he never saw

Which cling to my father's feet
beneath the furrows
of his vexed brow, carried
through Brooklyn
boyhood
and every hidden gash

Which I can't wholly wash
from my feet
beneath open American sky

I've not seen war
nor the treeroots
in Poland

which drink deeply
beneath icy rocks
but I know
their ice
and the clinging mud

Your Tender Feelings Versus This Poem

after Richard Brautigan

I should tell you
truth now, lying
side by gentle side
inside this creaky bed
where I've
habitually
and ecstatically
laid my temple
on the razor bone
 of your shoulder.

I sometimes think
love is maybe
needless
I can get a better bargain
for my twenty months
twelvethundred caresses
thirtythousand words
of comfort
which weapons
don't work anyhow against
the chemical warfare
 of your pessimism.

Truthfully
you are a tonic light
but years from
this moment
you'll be in city traffic
or something
sorting through
memories and
what was it you liked
 about me again?

Oh yeah
pretty eyes
teasing grin
and a thirsty
aching
trumpetblaring
 restlessness

Prologue

The dawn field is replete with bliss of wanting.

Where seaspawn and seawrack have washed my feet
they glint and sink and pull again madly, run
out and into every and only.

I have conducted these waves with deliberance
and marched their swaying, I have had my way
with them when they joined body light and glad.

Distance is mindfully a settled thing, but I
myself unsettle within vastness, the better to move.

This is the rarest place, mine -
the margin childish harbors of everyland,
the inbetweens, the inlets

where heart madness takes hold again
and pounds again under primary soft gleam.