

Still

Poems by Rachel A Elmer



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Howl

I stopped speaking out loud,
now it sounds like a shout
when I try to say, how I feel
it's a howl — a waterfall
in my seashell ears
and I can't hear — can't breathe.
I've said something half thought
and half deaf - from the depths
of my throat, and I'm not sure
if I meant it now or a year ago.

I'm no worse than I was
but it's so slow being better
I cut this phrase from an article
mailed it off as a love letter:
"The sun, our star, will die a quiet death."
What will I do with the time I have left?

It's a body of work
It's an urge in the gut
It's a jump in the throat
It's the smoke in the shot

With my mouth at rest
my tongue is pressed between my teeth.
The guilt in my chest heaves,
tries to shake loose the vice
like I'm paralyzed by sleep
and I can't move, can't speak.

Birth

I try to remember the face my mother had when I was young
like a photograph, my memory shaped by the images
taken from another person's memory and framed. Who held
the camera then? My father? An old friend I don't remember?

She smiles a whole room as if the sun just came in a window
and I am there in these images, a tourist in her life. And then
my face was my father's face - a round, squinting grin - until
I became a woman and saw my mother in myself. I am her,

in a way, a reflection living a parallel life twenty-eight years
behind her, with her bones, her blood, her DNA, her smile
and I will carry her with me to the grave alone. Twenty-eight
years ago my mother was the age I am now and she was

giving birth to me. I can't imagine what she must have felt,
but it must be very different from how I feel now - alone
in my body, wholly who I've always been. The others I carry
are my ancestors. They may stay in my breath and heartbeat,

sitting near my hearth together, my grandmother's laugh
like a windchime, but it ends with me, smiling like my mother.

Dusk

It's a raw tropical fruit
cut open on the horizon of loping
hills, spilling juicy guts, pith
and pulp, wholly over the tight
spruce scrub on the north slopes.

It's the flesh of the sun poured out
on a clean tablecloth, sticky syrup
thick and hot seeping between
the fibers of the air like fire
curls embers in the root of moss.

It's the dip of a lover's tongue
into the hollow of the throat,
the bight of the hip, the reeds
of the neck, and glowing joy
right in the tender places

tucked between shadow
and dust, must and cloud,
locked in the emptiness
of a sharp inhale held tight
against the aching chest.

Mantra 1: I Do Not Blame Myself for the Passing

Deep cold, settle in the valleys.
Solidify what once was fluid and easy -
extension of the self to the other, the other
ends - a pin drop on concrete.

Each loss framed as failure, don't speak it -
repeat a canned response as one does
when one is on holiday or being buried. Aloud -
each given my all. And yet. No,
I am cruel.

The thought like a bolete - beneath
the surface, widespread, insidious
and cyclical in rainy bloom. It decays
from inside - I am not enough.

No. I could not have done more.
All that I care for will fall apart - that
is fair. Bitter, yet, as is. He leaves me;
I leave another, for the better.

From Frozen Lakes

We are glad butchers. Cardboard on plywood
on sawhorses to support her ribcage
where we cut around the gelled bullet wound
to get closer to her choicest back steaks.
The meat is cold. I must warm my fingers
or they lose feeling and I begin to
lose touch with what is my meat or hers.

I use only sharp knives, for grace,
to slit froth webs of binding tissue
between her bone and sinew, slick
where the hide was stripped, silver lining
for trailblazing in the cold where
the machines break, the map is wrong, and the
snow makes the animals move so slow
that they become the willows in their throats.
When I cut her tongue out, the branches caught
in my glove, half chewed and saliva warm.

We hang haunches by tendons in her legs
that sink beneath the weight of her muscles.
I run a blade against the bone where
muscle meets femur, where her legs braced
her mass against the earth's pull and her blood
against the frost. I wrap each package tight,
protected from the deep freeze.

Riverbed

I thought I might find
a mica-filled stone heart,
hold it in my hot hands
to bring my warmth back to you

from the rolling riverbed,
the cool grey banks of it.
Ankle deep in the pools
I can't stop thinking about you.

No longer a haven, the pattern breaks,
An image bleached in the sun.
It's not the place I left last time,
I left that part of me behind
your name on the tip of my tongue.

Your image presses on my mind,
eyes flashing like grayling scales
at the coursing water's surface,
aurora splashed on your body alight.
I thought I wanted a break from life
but you call me back in — a siren.

Spring Cleaning

knee deep, retracing the easiest path through old snow
effortless footsteps to take me to the edge and back

weak heat, breaking the morning haze to glow low
flames overwinter beneath as a burning ache

breathe deep
how many long walks?
how many faked smiles,
rosaries, writing prompts,
diets or second tries?

I'll do my morning workout
I'll keep a clean house
make mistakes I don't regret
and stop complaining out loud

I'll meditate daily
I'll say just how I feel
be the first to say I'm sorry
show my hand and shut my mouth

Why I Am Nearsighted

a young spruce forest is dense
packed thick of pitchy kindling
broken clear at shoulder width
by moose antlers between branches
hundred foot visibility at best
below low limbs of dark needles

you can't see anything move
through willow brambles
in thin spaces where dead trees
fall or water flows downhill

most animals move on silent twigs,
you hear change in squirrel chatter
see a rush of chickadees flying
up where old trees sway apart

you always hear humans walking
crunching snow, dead branches
clattering willow sticks behind
in even steps determined to go
to a destination, not searching
not pausing to listen for threat

Aflame

in the quiet of the night
I heard the earth sigh
exhaling dust and spores
and stars into the dark sky

a high pitched whine in my ear
sings the blood flooding back to my brain,
cheeks hot, chest aflame
you took my hand and led me here

take your time — put it off — jump in now
do what you want
stay all night — say goodbye — change your mind

throw me down in frost heaves
and frozen leaves, I'm burning, burning
to tell you: this is the most alive I've ever been
this is as close to the sun as it gets

I feel

Light as aspen leaves quaking
in this sunburst of whispers
as shade ebbs to reflections
blinding from my skin. I was born
in the night and hope to die
distant from this moment as a star
is from dawn, but rising
back into that same shadow.
Now I soak sun deep
between my toes like sand,
gulping pollen and dust and spores
into the furrows of my lungs.
Pray for rain on the earth,
blend the particles into soil,
not washed but soaked
up to my ankles in microbial mud.
Welcome home — the forest unfurls
its bark banners and sings.