

It's Alive She Says

Cole Swensen

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“ I heard a man say a poem once,
he said ‘All that lives is holy.’”

--John Steinbeck
The Grapes of Wrath

To Christopher & Lynn

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Part I

From Your Waitress

People walk in
for coffee and leave
but it's never quite
that easy you know
something but are forbidden
to say: every moment splits
at the square-root of choice
stands a stranger at a ferry.

This Which Has No Name

To see it later underneath
the stairs. A certain eye
sheds a rip in the page.
A tune thousands of
feet taller, a decision
based on weather.
Pulse is another matter.
Check yes or no as desired.
Planes of light collide
in mid-air moment by moment:
this landscape. She is
trying to remember
exactly which year.
A room also grows if
tended properly. 5:17 a.m.
between the counter and
the customers. It's a habit
we all fall into.
Remembering the memory.
Particularly angular hands.
The crowd on the platform
that early in the morning.
Who said kissing with your eyes
open has one foot in the grave?
Saying things out loud
just makes them thinkable.

Winter in the Garden

The sky has gone, we are governed
by grey, infiltrated by trees.
The low brick walls,
leaves on them and grass below
are all somehow the same color.
I looked it up once:
this garden was planted in 1705,
nothing will change its mind now.
It receives its information
directly from the season,
it claims there has never been
a year of strange weather.

Excuses

The problem of singular identity
becomes confused with passage,
clouds outside closed windows.
the smell in the room
is wondrous. here the past
breathes its last. at last
the eyes emerge and rain
falls many times the same.

The problem of singular identity
when the throat is coated with footsteps.
the remaining question is direction.
is this plain going forward? like
dunes that recite with the ocean
a strange family tree. these lines
are parallel and will never meet again
the days that turn to numbers
on an incidental page.

The problem of singular identity
what with all these unowned memories.
a fish hook wanders the world
alone but determined. a fish hook
extracts us from the skyline.
we too, are surprised, each
snowflake is different while the
feathered edges of ash
are repeated everywhere.

Regarding Music

All July and August
our doors stand open until midnight.
Sometimes a light
across the porch,
it is my brother
who buys all the records.
I don't know where he finds them,
harmonies in the shape
of fishing lines, voices
that crawl around
inside your chest
long after the tune is gone
its gaze remains.
The turntable has stopped moving,
it is dark now
and apparent
that the sound of crickets
lies below that of traffic
or people down the hill
talking loudly, a laugh
travels like a radio wave
washing over us,
the shadow of a fan.
My brother turns the record over
and rejoins me on the porch.
It will always be
late evening, he says.

I Am the Stranger

I am the stranger
encountered on every train
anonymous, stoic,
think of all I'm told.
Middle aged men sit down beside me
and disclose everything,
even children have
secrets they never tell
but they tell them to me.

And when someone remarks
how strange that they met
one of those strangers
that draws you to tell
how it all happened,
you will know
that all those strangers
are the same one—
I've spent my whole life on trains.
People lay their confidence
down beside me with their coats,
I know all the reasons,
the complete reasons
and I've never met anyone
who was wrong.

Early February Morning

The cold is stored in shirts
falls out of sleeves
ahead of our arms and makes
small crashing sounds causing light
to crawl from silver

because the sun is still frozen

and the rooms around me
are brittle with sleep.

 No, a tree falling
in a forest makes no sound
unless there's somebody to hear it.
Again, the earth is barely real,
this morning all the birds are listening.

101 Things To Do While Driving

Since there's so much time
in an empty lane for days
coffee is only natural,
pick up a hitchhiker
to help with the crossword puzzle
overhead
a more spherical form
of Highway 80
flies along.
Those headlights
have been following us
for a long time
I would hand half the dollar
but not the other
to the man
in the toll booth,
he is always an ex-marine
and winks mischievously.
So he knows
what I've been
up to
60 mph
even knitting is possible.
Oh admit it,
you do it all the time,
if you smoke cigarettes
there's no such thing
as your undivided attention.
The man on the tightrope
is trying to understand
the fine print of the contract
without shifting his focus
from the ghost inside each tree.

The Bystanders

The father says no,
it was hundreds of years ago
I had a child
who glanced back too slowly.
And those on the sidewalk
don't know if the small body
truly grows older
before their eyes, or if they
are swept along by the same horse
both forward and younger.

Death Rises Like an Ocean with Streetlights

I have noticed lately
an attraction for fish,
flying fish
in particular
dreams that arch
flash their scales.

There are corridors
through the ocean
that can be entered
through sleep and sleep
can be entered
through a little door
to the left of the sun.

Lightning alone can completely hide
the inhabitants in a room.

I have never seen you in darkness
which is almost the same thing.

Changing Line

The image:
Wind changing
which will strike you as odd

The image:
Wind blowing
perpendicular to the earth
which is definitely rare

The image:
recurs
but this time not limited
to a single face.
Thus the kingdom of heaven
regains its course.

The image:
Wind sleeping
several inches above the street,
it furthers one like memory
increases the distance
breath must flow

The lines:
Dissolving to grey at the top
means a horse will wander
into town without its rider

The image:
The water flying
deep within the river.
He is looking out the window
toward the corner in broad daylight

The lines:
Finer than a shiver,
perseverance fears us.

River

It is a rare night
down along the river,
a sheet of glass repeating
“I am water.”
The lights upon it
do not dance, but strike
and go down forever.
This river has forgotten
the way to the sea,
it will wander the earth
like a liquid sleepwalker
stopping people on the street
and asking, “have I arrived?”

The Two Old Men

The two old men
have run the flower shop for years
the one balding has been talking
to the customers while the
fragile one with perfect skin
selects roses with fingers
that are plucking thorns out of
something he loves more deeply
has settled in the hip of the rose,
the orange one he places
with a silence that wraps
itself in the paper.
All this is done so smoothly
his hands are turning white
and the package that he
hands me is weightless.

The Day They Brought the Radio Home

The subject is
the radio
from a variety
of perspectives:
its perfect vision
across a room
or from the street below
and always passing
the moment in one
direction or another,
i.e., the chatter of
the announcer at the
baseball game actually
transforms the world,
makes it blazing hot
and 1964, I am
lying on a lawn
hearing shears trim a hedge
or the theme from a certain musical
played in a public place
throws everyone around
into the land of a different memory.

Later I ask him
to play the song again
but he said he'd lost the tape
and couldn't remember who wrote it,
"The Day They Brought the Radio Home"
Alabama 1946. It was
the most symmetrical thing in the house.
Two men brought it in
and planted it
in the front room
as a boy watched from the other.
The incident stuck
in his mind,
which is to say
it didn't stop there
but has stayed on, moving
at the same speed
sound becomes the emulsion
of remembering, I was
10 years old at the time,
my sister was standing outside
in a bright red dress
clapping her hands.

How These Things Happen

Like dusk
piece after piece
covers the entire table
with a letter
one can't bear opening.
A throat
with no legs of its own.
A memory so accurate
clocks no longer run.

Sightings

There is a broom hidden in the broom.
He begins on the front rooms,
a distinctly rowing motion.
You can open a window
by passing through it.
Pt. Bonita Lighthouse. April 19;
a spot of blood out past the breakers.
Or within groves of oak
we pass on the coast road.
Each minute is a change of address.
The man in the window seat
adjusted his hat.
Only whales are as gray as the sea.
The city is gone, a blank page
in its place like fog.
And another time, head thrown back laughing,
a small thing that could have come from anywhere.

Everyday

he wrote until the ink ran
pale as the light
across a room,
a narrow room with
a desk at the far end
where he sat afraid
to look up and see
objects

for instance amethyst
citrine and smoky topaz
are all quartz distinguished
by later inclusions of chemicals,
perhaps a process that occurs to light
inflicted with tree or stone.

“a sight that slowly
I went blind”
“thicker to the touch than darkness”
or “Please bring me some water.”
Light is born in the fist of an archer
though it's a very hard thing to prove.

Looking Back

Far down the river, a single figure rowing. Slowly you revolve on one heel. I repeat, don't turn around. You will think you are going to a small house in her mind, the single bone controlling weather trembles.

I said don't turn around. The structure is riveted together with afternoon light. Slowly a white stone overcame her. Your eyes focus as if snagged by something in the picture. The figure in the rowboat will continue losing color.

A white stone overcame her. She said she'd be only a few moments. Light changes like slow electricity across water. The single figure can no longer be distinguished from any other. The rest is as you remember.

Part II

Glances

The hand flies
to the mouth in
surprise
all the while laced
to its destination.
We remember so little
we may as well live
in windows. People in movies
are as kind as split seconds.
Having more love than heart
has created bus stations,
crowded sidewalks.
Most people keep a box
they never look into.
Ask them about it,
they'll pretend not to know.

Please

Please.
I'm going to ask you
one thing

don't bring on
the future yet,
there is a moment
I need to return to

a moment that lives
in a valley between
our breath
and our breathing.

Each time we take in air
it sends another telegram
to memory
to remind us
that it is there
where it was not yesterday—

between us, a moment
has been inhabited by birds
whose wings are sheet lightning
coming down from countries where
we have never been,
on the other side of each other's skin
and within a storm of a different kind,
one more time, I'm going to ask you
for a moment
based on invisible birds

please.
bring them to me
lay them down
here inside
there is always one moment
we need to return to
and everything with wings
is headed there.

Resemblance

So I took to watching strangers
as if the movement of a shoulder
could account for the wonder,
the trembling glove,
the conversion of water.
I wait for a single number
unrelated to any other
and discover within each picture
the feathered fibers of paper
as if the same flight flew
within each lover.

You remind me
of someone I can't remember.
How a voice can turn a corner
blind. Lips
pressed together. An afternoon
grows lighter. There was no one
on the street, a soft mirage,
a distant matter. I never
told him either.

Sketches of Friends

Turn 90 degrees
into memory,
that small house on the corner
has never been painted.
These things exist only
where we placed them as reminders,
at times it is harder
not to take chances,
“You remind me so much of my first husband.”
The world is always becoming
less safe but kinder.
Small pieces
are placed in conversation.
An edge of apparently rope
can be seen by glancing
quickly into corners,
these things exist only
as illustrations of suppose
all animals could now grow wings,
we must be careful what we dream.
Down along the waterline
they are all arranged in profile.

Emigrants

They have left snow
or small tracks
in it.

They said follow
the line of mountains
and wait
for their motion,
for there is motion;
that of curtains
brushed aside uncover mountains.

She labels this:
the hand in mid-air.

Cafe Faces

The incidental customer,
you leave and hours later
I'm still in love.
Your face lives
wealthy, free of history
suspended in the lightbulb
in the corner of my eye
I still glimpse sometimes
the gull winging
through a white cheekbone passing
below a line of fine china
and an airborne bridge.

Evening Break

My escape route
goes up the hill
about a mile, I stop and overlook
the valley; night air
digs itself deeper
beneath the shoulder blades,
green grows toward black
with uncommon peace tonight
I am thinking when quite suddenly
a man is at my side, his breath
lays in my ear. I jump
as he passes me, goes down
the hill a ways to rock.
His silhouette sits down,
lights a smoke. O.K.,
just like me. Still
I keep an eye on him.
We've had murderers
in these hills lately
you know I am thinking
this man on the rock
slips farther away
as darkness swells
between us. Just when
I am sure he is gone forever
he asks me what time it is
in a voice so quiet that
it slams him up against me
and the earth constricts
to the size I remember it
or closer I could have
reached out and touched
him the whole time.

Now

Perhaps you are with her now
and the equations have quieted down.
Outside the house the horses
are moving darkness
out from their bones
and through their braided manes.

This is what dawn will be unraveling
as you hear it from a half-sleep
this dim ancestor of light
is chasing her back
to the body lying beside you.

Now the Eye

Now the eye is a curious thing, information
ponders along its nerves until years later
it's suddenly years later and while you're
shaking your head the many faces continue
forming the man you married. The pieces came
in telegrams. I lay eyes on you to touch you
with gentler fingers. Visual images are an
entirely different process. She was shocked
by how much more there was to his face each
evening. Years later they were sitting in
the kitchen, he turned a certain way and she
saw it once completely.

Predictions

No one here believes in the future.
We have heard through reliable sources
that the enemy is
at the edge of town.
Just as quickly the messenger
gets lost in the crowd.
Music fills the windows with wine
leaves tide lines on
the sides of a glass.
You see—we can't move fast enough
and seem to linger
almost casually over
a joke at a table with friends.
I'll see you sooner than,
a weatherman necessarily lies,
we have erased
the approaching numbers from the sky.
We will never leave this country.
This message will repeat itself
at regular intervals
the level of liquid
in our glasses will rise,
footsteps form an army and travel
in trails from body to body.
Many will seem to leave this building
but everywhere it's being said:
Go on without me,
I'm staying here
within each moment I remain
forever while another
who looks exactly like me
continues on.

Stop

And I do what I have done
every day now for so long.
The purest streets of peace
remain as color. The rain
laying down a wash
and the features run
like on paper.
December by the ocean,
the sky migrating slowly west.
As if this world were so big
we could find it. On any map
you can see this highway
a quarter mile to the left,
cars crawling like in wonder;
headlights against the oncoming hills.
Time moves slower than the rain.

Funeral

Under your tongue we placed the seed
and the polished stone,
now I wake up at night afraid
that you are choking.

The Present Moment Seen as a White Flash in the Distance

The carnation leaves
no trace of the planet
that spun within the earth.
Similarly while dancing
one tends to forget the time of day.
Lightbulbs live in slow motion
so as not to blast
fragments of glass
around the room.
He wakes to something
in the earth beneath him turning,
perhaps a person at a window
cutting light and shadow
into inseparable pieces.
It all happens so slowly,
the skater exploding
into the trees with her arms
closing in around her.

We, the Audience

picture the birds that are
filling this outline so compactly
as to make it appear
a bull in a single line of muscle
charging. They are
trapped in a rag.
And a bull is waiting
for the tide to reach his throat
where the toreador suddenly
stores his sword.
You may ask
but when do the birds escape?
If we are not ready
they too will die.

It's Like You Never Left

Close your eyes and think you see things,
17 steps from the garden to the wall.
Something
out there on the sea.

Fingers photograph white
against terra cotta brick,
you were young, I think 9,

the taller man came out of the room
closing the door behind him.

Close your eyes and think you see things,
a hand held up to the light
turning
in its glove of flesh and bone.

On three sides there was water.

Chartography

There is a telephone ringing in another room,
a train that must be miles away.
All we see is living,
the present has no inherent direction.
By rearranging the leaves
she can tell what really happened
at the bottom of a heart,
taillights disappearing around a corner.
Time is the result of too much space and sound,
a train in another room,
a telephone ringing miles away.
All we touch is seeing
signs on the freeway
forgetting their lines,
reflection can make it
hard to know which way to age.
Other miles within the room,
a train a telephone call away.
All that lives is touching
a man who walks by here daily
looks up and asks
for directions out loud
which places towns
one after another along a road.

Watching Progress

Stars fly down
one by one and weightless,
or steer slowly determined
into the mountain.
Across the placid inlet
comes light from town,
the only thing that can walk
on water like music
comes without trouble or change.
A new house everyday.
Tourists buzz with a strange
electricity. Tomorrow a city
will arrive in boxes
and the town will follow
the main road out of itself.

Worksong

A back room of the page
stares the sky into dawn
arrives in an unmarked envelope.
There is no date attached.
I have never met anyone
who wasn't a carpenter;
with the aid of a calculator
I have mastered the perfect angle
at which to butter toast.
It is the same one
formed by the fixed point
where two tracks meet
is a mechanism made
of a hammer and an endless nail
commonly called a clock
was placed so exactly
on the center of the station
a single eye watched everywhere
I turn this same hammer
has business in my heart,
how carefully placed
are the wandering tools.

Thanksgiving Evening

When I got there
you were sleeping,
curled on the floor
beneath the huge window
while outside, rain,
like a nation of nomads,
walked on toward new lands.
I stood in the room while the light
would barely support color,
slow to move and
break one of these fine girders.
I stood over you watching
because within each moment
you slept forever
and never have I wanted
so badly to go with you.

Spoke

He spoke of her as being
in the room,
the revolutions of a ceiling
spiraling upward.
“Come in with your hands folded.”
Certain sounds have never left.
She had thousands of shadows
but then everyone becomes a
series of snapshots don't they.
I work in a telegraph office
and find it amazing what people
will say to each other.
“Turn around slowly,
keep your arms at your sides.”
He spoke of her as being
thousands of miles long.
There were matches right there
on the table the whole time
she was smiling.

The Match

The match lights up
only the face
of the person holding it,
and moulds that face
out of amber,
mouth, nose, ears and beyond.
He lights his pipe
with a woman's hands
and you wonder at first
from whom he stole them.
No, they came
a long way to be here.

And the peculiar grace
of that woman
just getting off the subway,
it is unconsciously acquired
by the next one
and then the next
until they all look
the same upon leaving
and you decide that either
the door is very graceful
or that a ghost
left in the spot by one
has entered each as she passed
but in the end has remained
emblazoned in the doorway.

Outside a match
lights up only the face
of the person holding it
which becomes less particular
by the moment and closer
to resembling the hands themselves.
Beyond him, smoke
can be seen rising
in reflection on the water
or else a ghost
is diving slowly into the river.
And what does the river bury
as it rolls the water over?
And how do the stars stay afloat?

I am poor in a way
that makes it hard to breathe.

I curse the world
and yet say please
and like the moon, which,
being made of amnesia
must constantly question,
who did I kill for this silk?

Part III

Love in the Early Morning

Already the hard beat music,
neon and rain.
“We are speaking here
of component parts.”
“Any mechanism can be
broken down to a given number
of non-moving objects.”
Like drinking coffee quietly
counting the cars that go by,
like a picture window
when there’s no one on the street.
If it repeats itself we assume
it is a message,
storm, tide and the bus
at the corner but I mean
more the particular texture
or how you could just happen
to breathe the same air
again years later.

The Rain That Sews the Sea to the Sky

You lift my body
from within the veins
a light
thinks calmly
on the afternoon.

A streak
across a sheet of paper,
the brush a half-inch wide.
Boats will glide in
and out of view.

It's something in the weather
that maintains these fine lines.

A streak across a sheet
of paper, grey condensing
the verigations of light
into a single past.

Do something violent
so that this glass can land.

I am reaching out myself to you.
This is strictly an observation.

Shift Work

The match edges closer
and without touching lights
the cigarette. All these
things I have written of
before: "Now you
in the house again"
or "are we the only
two who live here."
I sense the approach
of a repeating comma,
a purple-blue bruise
past a bend in the air
and at this very moment I go
through life without thinking,
there is a painting of us all
in which the sky isn't moving.

Distance

Distance falters on these pages
time and sound are
both repealed
and distance falters in these faces
which never move
from what they feel.
Or if you saw your heart
where I see its sail
and the space between,
beyond belief,
there are watermarks upon the ocean
you must hold against
the light to see.

Heredity

Steam rising off coffee,
he held the cup in his hand
as it burned him
he watched the steam mix
with the rising mist,
keeping track of it until
the two were inseparable.
The early light in a cabin window,
the dim radio and a woman
is probably in there,
turning bacon, he thought
as his father walked up rubbing
his hands from the blue cold
and watching the one bright light
in the window of a room
where a woman stood turning bacon.
He looked at the boy, then rubbed
his hands in his own to warm them.
The radio sung a tune you've never heard before.
The smudge pots strong in the simple air.
Something skirting along the orchard edge.
The boy under the tree still standing there.

Fences

I failed in the name
and in naming it:
black horse through blue wood
wave upon wave, I wake
up at night and hear shrinking
or hands testing dozens of gloves.
A city hardly knows itself
in the blazing sun,
the streetcars hurtle toward their mark
and it's over by the time
the name fits the body
is dead.

Subways

Shot into
the tunnels
like serum
through a vein,
the train passes
where the track branches
and another train
sits waiting,
done
for the day,
it sits waiting
in this vein.
A woman
beside me gasps,
It's alive, she says
I almost
saw the flame.
The world's on fire,
she says, the light
in another's eyes
is a torch being
carried through caves.

How

do you define
a boat you said impossible,
a vessel with no edges,
I've met one
in every wonder
is a gambler—
tonight has pushed
its main characters
flush against the horizon
a freighter is painted;
without the third dimension
we'd be on our way to China.
How often have the words been
arranged exactly in this order:
That is all.
There is nothing else.
A boat is the half-life of absence,
diminishing,
a paint brush is following
to cover the tracks.

Velocity Increases With Density

A single impression
like you rounding a corner.
Even if I hadn't been there
the image would have kept on
moving in my mind.
Now, you, in this case,
are an old friend. Built of lines and planes
like anyone, a chest, a false ceiling
of the sky. I write letters to others
in which every word is ride.
Hear the world open its coat
like a man running for a bus.
Someday all windows, by definition,
will be spherical. So as I said,
it was an unnerving moment.
I read in the paper the other day
of a woman who spontaneously combusted.
The world will never end.
This is what I fear
when I stop suddenly, almost reaching you.
You, in this case,
are not answering the phone.
It's a long white line,
a single dimension of incredible speed.

The Late News

says the lights
are still on
in the apartment
across the way
you lie facing
that light
crawls slowly back
into its shell.
Very few things
comprise the night,
it is a much looser weave
than daytime.

And now we interrupt this program
to bring you
the traffic
drifts by
in single pieces
below our window.
Headlights illustrate
your dreams as they form,
taking small things
from here with them.
Someone deep within the apartment
switches off the light.

A diver springs
from a board and arches,
I watch him straighten,
he shapes his body
into a focused feather
and never lands.

Reflections on a River

This one so slow
with its cargo of leaves
in suspended genuflection,
a traveling emulsion
which carries images
of its riverbanks out to sea.
(anything that moves so
must have memory)
On the floor of the ocean
is a perfect picture of the world.

Landscape as of Now

A bird's-eye view
enlarging the light,
a certain spot
perhaps you are drawn to

like water which finds
your inner throat
with an arm of sound

And if boats are traveling
up this river
silence can enter your blood
through your lungs
without changing form

hillsides float out
of our hands like sheets
on a windy day the sky
bleeds off the page.
What has occurred to you there
will wait in that spot,
the earth glides in
and out of us like a lover,
it is winter
and dust hangs dumbstruck
in the cold air.

Snapshot

That day the wind came up
and the boy on the raft grew smaller.
Rain shredded the heat
and stained it darker.
The sea, beside itself with weather,
broke its wave-like windows.

My friend looked out at his son
and said we don't even bother
closing the doors of the house,
we have known this storm was coming,
we have seen it crossing borders.

Sitting on the porch, invulnerable,
he watches
lightning strike the water
and frame the boy forever
standing on the raft,
his arms raised high and waving.

Dinner With You

The light slipped away
leaving in its wake
this color
I am forbidden to repeat
the angle of a wrist
caught in glancing;
the changing line of bone.
I could reconstruct the room
and take a photograph
but everything was possessed,
built of burnt umber,
1000 shades that never reach black
and still I can't
recreate the picture,
if I was a painter
I would lock myself in stone.

How to Forget

Subtract a subway train from a
fishing line. Redraw the map on
another sheet of paper. People
who live only in your mind have
no faces. I keep seeing her turning,
no, the turning alone. Water
follows a detour off time.
Check again, make sure
you haven't left anything.
Destroy all photographs, the
natives were right.