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Send Us a Storm

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS
Department of English
Writing Program

Send Us a Storm

by James Scales

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VERTIGO

Each moment sharp. That mid-season
cold, surprise, the bones in the face.
Excitement, if that still meant
what was dredged from the river between us.

We went outside. Somehow the precipice
needed us, our looking over its edge.
A kind of proof, something for the view
to be. From a place behind the eyes

blood moon spreads through the grass,
soaks up the cuffs. You were what I loved
all in one place. You spun around.
Life had its way of staying sad.

The snow began to fall just as you reached
in my pocket for the pack of cigarettes.
Back inside, your breath against the glass.
Draw me. Do something. Quickly

YOUR LOVED

We cannot know
what his body knows
except by effect: sign, symptom, sigh.

The way the light bends
through the glass of water by the bed.

He pretends to sleep
whenever the nurses come
into his room with their chatter.

His doctor lingers by the door
to talk to us about insurance.

There's a chance we'll have to reapply
each week for coverage. His eyes

stay shut. I'd fight it, the doctor says,
if this were my loved one.

Estimated futures coming
to a point behind a face.

His blank weight in the bed.

We can stop this
(we cannot)
anytime we want.

SHE REMEMBERS AND IS STILL HERSELF

The hand takes leave of her lap and pulls back the thin hair, her forehead taut. “I remember the night my father flipped the Buick it was so cold I could taste the stars in my head.” At 28 she ran off to L.A. to meet the man she thought she’d marry. “Oh the most beautiful things were possible then. But you’ve got to have some *darling* in your life.” The hands fall back, go to her lips like one accustomed to smoking. “He left me, yes. We grow up so much faster than predicted but we never really grow up. And when things got really bad he dropped me like a plow.” Her eyes grow fogged. “Yes, my father was a wonderful driver. But a stinking drunk. Both of them. We can’t help what gets passed down. That night I propped my mother in the tub with a jug of wine. Yes, there were hospitals. But after everything she just wanted to lie down—”

THE CAMERA WAITS

Just out of frame,
down the street,
at the bottom of the stairs.

Something will pass:
a mouth, a nose, your eyes,

the pair of hands
to rearrange or fall away.

Those places where the pulse might play.
Yes. Yes. Yes.

No desire in the frame, nothing
on the hot street being asked to leave.

With you I could speak easily.

Speak as a way of listening.
Look as a way of being seen.

SIGNIFYING KNOTS

The fact of glass is new at every edge.
The doctor takes my hand
under the lamp, undoes the terrycloth.

Say pain is a rhythm, okay,
or how it makes a song
as the painkillers wear down.

She studies my face. It's here
the map of the interior unfolds.

The studied face turns with embarrassment,
the eyes look down to follow the stitch.

Body, casket, jury, seed case, fruit,
mirror, mechanism, city, carriage, gate,
weapon, vessel, silver bridge, a blade—

Nothing buries it. Each metaphor
tied to a point and cut away in turn.

OUR LADY

I was asleep
chained to a plank

under the window heavy
with the sound of bells

and the white flower
smoke of dogwood

when as how all at once
a flock of thrushes are

exhaled from the branches
leaving nothing but

the empty impression
of this tree in

the open field *his voice*
awakened me

and as in the painting
I fastened my hands

to bear this listening,
how this painted

basket doesn't hold
things not fruit

but only the light
that lands on them

as if to doubt
the weight of what

was seen or could be
held I stood

up *begged to be*
taken away

TIME WAS THE PRETTY THING

Hospital visits, uncle funerals. All weekend.
Once I thought all I'd ever need was this. Your arms.
Crossed. The woodpecker flutters stage left (*exitus*).
You used to love me in the morning. Those bells for church.
You look away.
The glass pitcher of lemonade scrapes over the glass table.
Where do we start?
Paint chips under fingernails.
Rot everywhere. Notice surrender.
I never pictured a face when I pictured your face.
A stack of bills. The view from going under.
Do we need to replace each one or all of them at once?
This has been going on for so long.
My face stuck to the window.
Deer in the forest.

like some ash
on the sleeve
your coat that folded obligation
be happy with another
hanging on the outskirts
said "nobody gives you
permission you must
hands outstretched
your eyes remember
to lie still

it makes a low
sound this risk
from nowhere
so what arms
carry that secret
ballroom my suddenly
bigger discovering
owls in the pine
rough thick red

and from nowhere

everything I want

say sorry

for

the waltz

you took

by the

bit down

barely on

the wrong note

by the water

Spanish hotel

at this

looked

our hands

looked the other

nights we didn't talk
would we sober?
pain, teacher, signal
not with you but later
from a different side
on the roof's
did I tell you? everything I
faced regret
even the cemetery parrots
was about me

in the mirror

you knew first

said “no lows without

conclusions keep coming

trust with my learn

trust by

just how fucking stupid

lurked around each corner

necessary lies
like nostalgia for something you've haven't

yes, that time
through our fingers

right out the window. It was snowing you said
you wanted to catch on your tongue and the
next thing I know you'd halfway
and I had to grab your legs, feeling somehow
ashamed of you and somehow this
wilderness. And in the kitchen you gave
me that note nobody saw. Wasn't that the
game with all these secret

it's not something that gets better

take off

lying

underneath there's

nothing in the grass

all winter I don't think

there is nothing else

different country

made me want

to be I was both sides

recalled

your

your head against

showed you off

crown

take what I know

a game of chess

all day

my nerves on ice

exchanging

black and white

“don’t spend so much time

for a second

I’m not

your

bright wound

IF ACROSS ILLINOIS

It's snowing again. Or had it stopped?

Every few miles the tracks buck up from the cold. In the cabin window with the lights on nothing is staged but my face. I practice keeping it still. Odd lights bounce through. Trees far off as masts on the sea. Red for diver down.

Somebody slumps against the next cabin's wall. Hallway full of tight encounters. Lights out. My skull thrums like an instrument against the glass. The forest of fields takes a made-up form in the mind. Passing through small towns, *thrum*. Lights on the streets, distant porches. We make progress.

Sunlight. I have not slept. The branches in the blue snow. The dust of other people worked into the cushion. The novel has been laid face down so long the spine has adjusted. In this chapter to explain oneself is just to be exactly what one is. The bush explains its winter self by blooming later.

OTHER AGITATIONS OF THE MIND

Night-thoughts that crackle off
the screen like static when the old
TV's plug's torn from the socket.

The loop played back and forth.
A *suffering*, because one imagines
non-stop roads, a city I've seen

only in journals, a night's
drive off, somewhere to reach
that isn't this? Any move opens to a sacrifice.

~

O little horse
dancing on my chest.

THERE'S MORE YOU NEED TO KNOW

I take phone calls for a living now. We seldom get breaks. I don't know why I'm writing you at all. I have a cigarette and sometimes think of that crumpled note you left me. I don't—won't—recall anything it said Except that “tiresome” and “you” played prominent shrieking roles. I sing to whatever comes through the radio. Imagining sometimes an audience of one. You in the front row. I catch myself like a toy taking itself apart. There is more you need to know. I'm boring. That's nothing new. Everything outside the retina of love is tired, all a game. And the manual in that other language. The face another curtain waiting to fall. Behind the mirror nothing but pills. A man comes through the radio with your voice.

PORTRAIT WITH EYES CLOSED

Start with the throat
flecked with every color.

Divide taste from want
from appetite.
Mind, body, beast.

It can take hours before
you close your teeth
on the right idea.

You'll wake startled
from the dream of swimming,

recall the naked water,
The birds over the life-sized lake.
The sheets kicked to a tangle.

In the dark the distance
between appearance and
depiction closes back to nothing.

That skin of the visible
shed away.

No difference between the animal
and you in the dark.

AMERICAN VIEW

Remember to add yourself in there. Shading your eyes.
This could mean you're looking West.

Say this neck of the woods lacks *ruin, history*.
Say this neck should wear a chain.

Over the pacified river the arch swings like a necklace,
its weight balanced somewhere between the legs.

Displays of luxury. Progress. The distortion
of perspective makes you central to the frame.

AURELIA AURITA

Slack bell, pulse,
 the budding bright
 pink mindless damp
ear, low cup (wine, oil, perfume: drink, bathe, give in), thumbless
 stinger, net-choke, the four horse-
 shoe-shaped ova, the oral arms,
 the suck, the flapping ribbons in the wind
of the tank, medusa, cold bloom, seeping, nothing
 but breeding eating breeding death
 —you point this all
out with a shudder—*you*
 whose heart can be held so
 goddam silently under the surface
of the skin

GAME OF CHESS

Death pretends for a while to be otherwise, a monk in the confession booth, a queen on that wooden horse with the circular eyes. The board a gift from Mexico, the white squares inlaid with false pearl, the pieces carved by hand, each the same face. One plays to remain on the board. The familiar openings. The hinges stiff with sand. The king's razor, the queen's sacrifice. Play long enough and someone wins. You too will have changed, will have come to view yourself as the consequence of many plans: mistakes; the quiet traps; surrender; at last the laying down of arms. That sailor on the beach with crows.

ELEGY

Soon the hand of rain. And after
that brittle quiet.

Season of the pulled-apart,
the wind a sign
only for the lack it drags it around.

There's nothing to this,
nor about
how difficultly tonight is unraveling.

That drape of pointed leaves
under the bony tree.

There must be worse months
to bury the dead.

VERTIGO

forgive me father for I have sinned for I have not
sinned more for I have not been forgiven for I have
not given more for I was given more than I give back
for though I have not given in my father in his giving
in his having given me is gone

bless me father for I have been less than myself for I
have been too much for me for I need forgiveness
before giving for I have less than what I need for in
forgiveness I am slow for I know less of myself than
needed for to know is to know also to forget

forget me father for I have not yet for I needed to
forget you first for in giving memory of fault away is
forgiveness that is not mine to give myself for it
means giving what you remember away again for your
memories of me are not mine

pray father for the sound I make to forget you for in
giving this I may forget for I need quiet but lack
knowing for I am not forgotten but soon will be for
though I am here I am still less than I could be for
this I mined from me this sound which takes me away

help me father for I form this for I am not me when I
am here for in forming I must put aside but cannot
lose you for you are gone and we have given you away
and farther father than can be ours are you

SUMMER ONLY

that summer I waited upstairs
for lunch in the house
in the yard they bought
that summer there were no
windows upstairs in the house
I waited for lunch no
summer in my mood for
windows to the yard went
on how could I know

there was a summer to
see upstairs they bought that
yard I waited for lunch
in the windows I saw
summer pruned how to know
the bush that braided that
summer fence fell into smoke
had hands to see if
the windowless yard went how

could it be summer on
them bringing through the yellow
yard that lunch of smoke
the summer waited silently if
my mood up there not
braids of hot light from
the summer windows going out
to know how quietly went
my telling the yard was

AT LAST THE SHIP SETS OUT

The sailors will answer no inquiries.
Barrels, baskets heaved aboard.
Hammer, tongue, canvas, rope.
Two months of the bow-bell's
incessant clapping: transit, that cavity
in the temporal bone. Hawsers
hailed up. Home is the longest way

back. *Ilovedyous* splash up from the docks,
like unrolling ribbons in the air.
Waves roughed to the side. One passenger
below deck tries to steady himself.
O labyrinth he thinks of echoes.
Sendmeastorm. Distant thunder
drowned out by the hissing steam.

IDEAL LIVING

On the table by the chair
a spiny branch is balanced
by the bowl of orchids.

The touch of a hand suggests
a unique taste. Start with the walls.
The staircase twisted as a treble clef.

Delight the eye with round design.
Under late capitalism everything
becomes a reflection of you,

vibrant veneer, warm woods.
This is the case. The self
articulates its being with every choice,

attuned to the luxuries of its time.
Emotions play a critical role too.
Birchwood, primavera, mahogany.

In the lush forest a convenient pool.
After everything one feels
the need for convenience.

OUR LADY

how the midday sun
o spear

of gold broke through
the oculus

planned so every shadow
pointed down

at her
gaze blank as a lake

to the seraphim
pulling her her cloak

up and the arrow gently
tipped with flame

held back
offstage

and that pain was
stone heavy and

your hands were stone
and the neck

stiff under stone
head as when in

a fever you'd toss
and burn all night

under the marble
sheets like

a mountain, moving
in one place

so great
I moaned

and the pillar like
a cloud *my*

entrails lifted to
the sky like a sign

of no longer
here on earth except

her foot
from the bed

and mouth half-
closed between

breaths but how
she breathed

as architecture solidly
he drew them out

APPELLATION

how the red shape flies
from the crosshatch fence
through the blur of the blue
cupola calling its tones
drawn out from the brass
throat the lace of snow
shook off the dark metal
ground I square and fold
and aim home my tracks

scar through the new snow
from the tongue of the blue
of the bell's word for
the vine's arm bracing
the wind's lattice down
twisted branch sewing the eyes
of the face of the name
strained up for the red lost
again in threading trees

SHE DID NOT SUPPOSE HERSELF TO BE

I unwrap the gift again.
Unfold the white tissue

from around the flat belly,
the squamous texture of the skin,
those black beady eyes.

I don't remember who gave me
this, how this
universe came into
such hunger.

Before we enter
the object there must be *wound*,

some crooked mouth, some winter air,
those white garden bells,
the stock metaphysics over dark coffee,
an old family photograph,

glancing over which one might happen to catch
(just past the edge)
some false glimmer of a past
inevitable, epic, whole, and without pain.

But there, in the frame,
there is nothing but the faces
of the dead or dying,

and me reflected
over the darker spaces in the glass.

The music veers away.
There must be something else to see.

Another photograph,
this time a field, in Italy.

No faces, betrayal,
nothing but the empty
presence, as if to say "I was

here, among the flower-heads,
afloat in the thwart of light.
Another stage on which I played myself."

But field and photograph
must slowly renounce the other.

As vainly I wanted
to bridle that horse.

Her running was elsewhere,
like a herd, towards different water.

Try the book of paintings.
Goya's *The Third of May*.
A painted hill outside the background
city. The man framed, always
in the same place,
lifted, just before the execution's song.

His death is not mine
but I stare, this gaping
fed by some impulse of power.

I *am* still, life the inevitable.

His white shirt. The performance
Of his white shirt.
Not the color but the air around him.

The list of tragedies
grows longer and starts to produce itself
and cannot be helped
and is another way of
shutting my eyes.

Red fish in a white box.
This plastic fish in the cardboard box.

The seam in the belly. The flatness
of the belly which mimics,

when placed on a tabletop, the fish
poking its torso from the darkness

of water. Half from the darkness
of the sea in a photograph I took

before she left: she stands. Arms akimbo.
Sky sand and sea: these strata. The wave,

its long slow swell, infinite,
delayed and crestless.

The white sand on the beach.
The pale prospect. For a moment

she did not suppose herself to be
framed here. Her back to me.

Arms pointing down
at the sea. I saw it.