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Spring Elegy

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SPRING ELEGY

An Honors Thesis

presented by
Cameron Dyer-Hawes

to

The English Department

Connecticut College
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Havana

You are tired of Americans –
of watching them smile like people on T.V
and pour cream, without fat
into coffee.

Americans turned history into *Star Wars*
and *Star Wars* into CGI aliens
with Jamaican accents.

Around us are palaces
the color of Easter
that look like Paris.

We are sitting on a terrace in the City of Columns
arguing whether people are civilizations.

On the streets below
children spill out of yellow
school buses imported from Quebec
their inscriptions read:
“ECOLIERS”.

In the cracks between traffic
the children move through this day –
through the years –
like rain runoff through a dry streambed
and puddle
around relics from the dawn of the nuclear age:

Chevy Bel Airs
the color of sunrise
with chrome eyebrows over their tail lights.
Thunderbirds with tortoise shell
interiors and engines idling
sounding like sour mud.

On the bronze terrace
the dust has settled like fresh snow and the light
from a sun climbing down into the sea
looks like desert sand.

As it sinks below the horizon
the children freeze –
the chariots of industry settle
and the men in them look up
as if in prayer.

Havana was the future once –
several times –
and you say this in evening's old heat
stagnant as air over brackish waters
with your eyes unblinking
letting the sky's violence fall into them.
There is a window between night
and what it swallows
you say
where you can wait for a beginning,
but it closes
and the streetlights flicker on.

Joan Cameron Dyer

On the pier with white lamp posts
and weathered railings
I sat thinking of your absence.

The sky had turned green
as it does when a great storm
is coming at sunset.
It was as if the ruins of daylight
had been stowaways
inside the charged stomach of a tempest
and the heavy glow
that dripped between those clouds
made real your passing
like you lived now in the light itself
instead of taking it in.

It's a sky you would have painted
a sky that makes great artists whisper about light
and conclude
after every other avenue is exhausted
to be silent.

That sky made film stills out of city blocks and promised gentleness
despite the violence it signaled.
You knew how to turn a storm tender.
How to focus the sun's rays
sifting through hydrangea blossoms
into an scrap book of God's sketches.

You were mastered in an architecture of living
where love is like windows
if windows could know
because it loves to see all things
and be seen through.

You will live in that house on the beach
painting shorelines, memories, love, fishermen, God,

light, and rain
but you cannot read this.

Bruise

The window is left open
and lets the thick summer night spill
into the room
breaking the makeshift twilight
held there into fractals –
spreading it like shattered glass on a highway
taking in the glare of headlights.

I have been scorching my lands
harvesting fire
and turning bruised fruit –
inkishly purple
and rotted sweet –
to ash.

I am erasing the sound of my name in your voice
because I can't hear it without wanting to cry.
I wish I could forget your hands a finger at a time
as if grief could be measured
as an empty space
to be filled.

I've memorized the carousel of shame
by its varnished surface –
the horse shapes
are impaled
and they turn and go
nowhere. The music
is an incantation
of swamp water and static television.

I am emptying myself into drink.
I imagine sitting at the bottom of a motel pool
opening my eyes into the sting of chlorine
blurring my sight with water
that swallows whole
the aquamarine brilliance

of the painted concrete walls.
Light dances underwater
you can watch it like you would watch a stag.
When I come up
I cup the water's lukewarmth
and stare into the pond
I have made of my hands
seeing the skin that covers them.

Timbre

I've been thinking about
running away
with my father
to the California coast
waking early in motels every morning.

Ignorance is bliss, but also ignorance.
Reliving the old life we missed
I feel wasted like the mountains that birthed
rivers in Los Angeles.

Yesterday, I heard your voice bear a child of itself.
I'd never heard your voice so broken and new.
Your voice that peels off like a young orange
covering the heart of a hummingbird.

I have seen your father but never met him
I know you think about him
you should.
Let him sit in your head and speak.
I've never heard his voice either.
Yesterday I listened as your love hurt.

Your voice is in the middle of the ocean
the voice of treading water under the Moon
and stars that say nothing back but stare like mirrors.
It's nighttime here too.
I hope you can hear me.
I wanted you on dry land
where you were before I had to love the rain.
You're a light
I made a lighthouse of
over the dusk.

Love Is a Car We Sleep In

Love is like a child
born of you, of me, and never our own.

Love lives in the tide.
Love is the space between the moon
and sea floor
that moves two bodies apart
and into a sunset.

Love is not the sunset
or the light of sunrise in your waking eyes
and though I may be in love with your laugh
that comes like the waves do at night
it is not love.

Love is like saltwater in your lungs
the sea that birthed every life within you
and coughing because of it.

Love is empty as everything.
Love is what's under all that sand
when the beach is warm at night
like the sun left its child near the shore.

Love is never fallen into.
Love falls on you like rain on the beach
so you run into the water.

Sunday

I can make myself witness
to the act of witnessing. I make myself tea
I smoke something at my window
and watch the leaking yellow of streetlamps
kaleidoscope into makeshift stars
amid the tepid blackness
of early morning.

I look at your photograph on the wall
you are smiling with your eyes.
Your mouth is open slightly.
It reminds me of your face
when I showed you the photographs I took –
your face then like a meteor
or the face of a child first seeing snow.
I fall asleep in your dream.

The cold is always cold
but I am naked now.
Last night I drank the whole
bottle of whiskey
I am glad this morning did not begin with me
committing to vomit.
I am sitting underneath the sky
starless, sunless, moonless
but still too bright
as if sun had diffused
evenly into the overcast curtain.

I am not awake yet
I must smell of cigarette of the sleep of drunks
the soured mouth
stale.
Last night the sunset disappeared into a memory of sunsets
and I felt myself made numb.

I listen to a poem you showed me

I smoke my cigarette
seeing your death in the withered
leaves, the collection of seeds in the dirt
the dirt a seed too.

My grief has been stretched
and bruised upon the world.
Covering
making mask
making faces.
I don't want to make any more homes
out of empty rooms –
homes that hold me too long
or cannot hold me at all.

Where did your voice come from?
The dream of an automobile?
There is no gas tank
you are the gas tank you are saying.
I'm looking out the window.
The radio is dripping out sound like a faucet left on.
I'm singing a song not the song
that is playing. I wish it were raining.
I am always wishing that
I think.
I wish I were smoking too.
I wish I had been dead before.
The outside of the window is dry.
The sky teases its opening
with gray emptiness
but the rain does not come
and the landscape falls back into another Sunday
and you return to absence.

Beaucoup Family

I want Dolce and Gabbana
to wear in my last bed.
The coroner can leave my face alone
and keep the hands untouched
as one last privacy.

I want sweating
by the casket
the suits and dresses
a wet spring morning.

I want my family
lost in conversation
with ceiling fans, humidity like an uncle
who won't shut up about the Saints.

I haven't been to confession in ages.
Living without the ground
I know a lot more about fish than living.

I remember my last deadrise shift
with the sun nodding itself
against the yacht club
who is wishing they took selfies
this morning
instead of quaaludes last night.
They sleep peacefully
while the sky is like chemo
smiling red
as Zephyr lifts the yellow anchor light.
The binoculars were from a friend.
It's all closing in quite quick.

We're going back to shore in a way
we haven't the whole time.
The kitchen lights are growing dandelions
over the counter and spring's first rainfall

practices shiatsu
on the window's skin.

This return
after every year since
exchanged desperate
street-crossing looks with each other
has my secrets like deep sea pipelines
running over mudcracks.
After the flood's wake
even the fun home will dry out.

Umbra

My father's face is older
than the photos
taken during the rot of youth
promised.

We are sitting on the porch
and silent.
From time to time, I look over
and see him staring through the purple
afterlife of dusk that turns the treeline to silhouette –
light like living things on the seafloor
or the corona around the pit of an eclipse.

The blue hour is fleeting
as the corpse of a star.
The ombré remnants of sunset
were gathered
and chewed by God into a plum
which is then picked from his mouth
and squeezed from the underside of heaven
sinking to the landscape.

I tell him that as a child I begged
to hold light.
I wanted to palm
the redder days into jars to keep at my bedside
as sun could fill like faucet.
I tell him this makes me very sad
and that I believe in loss. I know the colors are constant –
they leave us
they come back –
like loss is constant as the need to run away from home
to no home
so that one may have a home again.

I imagine him telling me to swallow grief.
To eat of suffering.

to let him fall like love
or rain –
like the spear of dawn through forest
from God's hand.

The mauve ember of daylight
has thinned into darkness.
I look down the splintered bench
and he is not there.
He is barefoot at the railing
lighting a candle.
He turns to me with it cupped in his hands
and the flame squints from between his fingers.
I do not know how long he is still for,
but he stands in front of me
the candlelight dancing over his nose
and mouth
and glistening the pools of his eyes
so that he is young
then old
then young again.

Of You

I can't find you now you'll be too broken.
If I were you
I'd have hidden under towers
in Tokyo fish markets
that in 5 years will drown
and raise the dead.
You must be far off
in the desert maybe
with so much space to lose yourself
you can't get lost.
The mustangs rust-hitched in parking lots
run on nowhere.
At least the air is never paid for
not like back home.
You've lost half of yourself twice.
I would find you at a gas station
picking up coins like they traveled
this whole way to live in your pocket.

I can't find you now you'll be too broken.
You're parts of a man
being pulled to the dark corners
in church basements next to
the all used up
eyes of God
boxed
in cardboard.
Just resting
with the old age
love brings.

I can't find you now you'll be too broken.
I loved you as the young sky
bruised with light
holds the moon
gone before breakfast.
The dawn runs away in Cuba

where you've been
shipwrecked,
lounging in the ocean
waves like a yellow
solitarium—an old car in the attic.
Day breaking
lays in wait to be
picked up like pieces.

Moon, Tide and Sand

The shore is festive today
it should not be
you are ash spread upon it.

There is a gallery of seagulls
who have made homes
out of rocks
for today.
I am with them standing
they are yelling
we are loudness
except I am yelling for you.

There is the horizon
bright and full
and the light
the eyes of winter's adolescence
half hiding behind a cloud
seeming to say hello
or seeming to watch.

My mother read a poem when her father died
and you saw how she could not stop crying.
He is buried here
and you were burned and buried in the wind.
She ran to these rocks
cutting through thick greenery
as if exploring the darkness of a dense tropic
and arrived at the edge of a far
deeper, and more treacherous ocean.
We ran to those rocks today
like children at the end of summertime.

Last night I feasted on fruits of the sea with her.
I drank rum and pulled
tails from shrimp
felt fish

raw and tender separate
between my fingertips.
I cracked open mussels and
oysters divorcing meaty body
from shell.
We ate with your hands
your teeth
and your eyes all
consuming and wide
open always.

Electric Dawn

Yesterday I watched the clouds turn to beasts of smoke.
I saw the ground beneath me breathe
as the vastness of life
slipped away only to come
roaring back.

The leaves bleeding and golden
falling on the ocean's water
with a delicacy of
thinness: these ghosts of the death of autumn
were picked up
by the wind and delivered to mud or
other waters, or other leaves.

Light moved as a stream
wide as God's reach, and as
weightless and emptied
into a sunset that would give way to the moon
cutting shadows out of that density of night.

Everything was wonderfully aflame and
I watched whole forests burn
until they were embers
or stars
in the blackness of the ground's collection of dirt
made more black by a sun
that had sunken into the darkening ocean.

I had the sense that beauty
could not be beauty if I promised to keep it
or hold it in my hands too long.

That night
in the blue solemnness that is the night sky immediately after a sunset
the many cigarettes I smoked
on the cold cinder blocks left trampled and broken
in an abandoned cul-de-sac

had become the only light remaining
and though they were keeping me here
their smell clung to my hands
and their light
wasn't light
as I had known it.

Their light was fire
and not really fire
but the memory of it
and I could see how I would remember this moment of strangling passion
of heat and pain
in my throat
repeated
and I enjoyed this for a while
knowing this presence of life happening very far away
as distant as the eyes of despair
and as yearning
for closeness too.

Sun and Salt

I haven't killed enough
with shackles on
or lost enough children
to be cynical in the eyes of my mother.
I understand why a son's death
is a miracle of sorts
that can bear faith in God like a child.

I haven't tried to drown myself
or find God in a desert.
With so little water
the sand is no different from dirt
and the heat a sermon.
The sky's apathy towards color is as empty and constant
as late night religious broadcasting.
In these times, the right sunset could tell
a superstitious man that God is watching nearby.

I haven't let my hands meet my eyes
and nose
and mouth,
like they cry in television shows
that take themselves too seriously.
What do they think about to pull those tears?
I remember crying in traffic
and being grateful for the sun's glare,
which was blinding but warm
like love on vacation.

I haven't felt the quiet desperation of old love
that builds its strength
from sewing trust and hesitant anxiety into blankets
that two backs would sleep under
keeping distance as if it were a newborn.

I haven't felt the pain of love
that's built on a sand dune

waving in the wind like sea grass
and whispering only
when no one is listening.
It's a natural progression
I am finding,
for now I'm under what seems
like a thousand years of ocean
waiting to be washed up.

Neon

Very bright
against black space.

Men have watched themselves
year after year
become undone beneath these signs
becoming the image of men:
“KENO”, “Winston”, “Pyramid”, “Hot Dog 99 cents”
ads for addiction therapy
stuck on the lotto ticket’s glass case
cancerous lungs photographed
and affixed
to a cigarette pack.

I am in a gas station convenience store
the light pools on white linoleum
a tundra of the sun’s stepchildren
born twisted and misshapen.

The men outside were born dead
and come inside now
bringing the night in with them.
They carry the cold
in the smell of smoke and diesel
thickening the fabric of their jackets.

Their eyes are caves
and they are deep
and empty.
They are the eyes of men tired of looking
gleaming with a blackness
broken now and then
by the flicker of LED lights
or the glow from a lit Black & Mild.
They are eyes one could invent sentiments for, cheaply.

It is impossible to imagine them
as children.

Their love begins with the fear of love
and in this fluorescent room
a room that sings its language of despair with the deaf chorus of rooms like it
there is no space for tenderness
not even a casket.

Husk and Seed

I have so much to say that I cannot say
now that you are gone
I wonder
is it because
you are gone that I have
so much to say

when we talked we talked
feverishly
but with a certainty
that we would return
to that heat

for much of my life
it would be years that made the sea and clouds
between
and of
our tempests together
sometimes it would be an ocean of months
but never days
days were like tidepools
ruins to lose in the tide

I wish I could have loved you with the discipline of banality
and repetition
I wish I could have known you
by shared
silences and awkward
glances
the resentment in glimpsing
your madness or mine

I wish I could have entered with you
the threshing floor of anger
which makes the bread of forgiveness
with salt and water and wheat and fire

your death has made you as monolithic
as God is
but you have always been God to me
tender in confession and tangible
in how you made heavenly
things heaven
with your hands or whispers or photographs

I only know the woman you were to me
but I am beginning to figure out the woman you were
I think that when I am older
I could become religious
if only to hold the hope in my heart
that I would look into your eyes
and melt

After Casino Royale

Get over yourself.
 You're done spending time
 on slot machines
 hoping for the moon's hands
 to pull you from the bankrupt night
 and it's illumination inside the filled Venetian Macao.
 You're not sleeping without windows
 just walking through a dream I watch over.

*Get over yourself,
 we're done
 wearing satin
 suede
 and pearl
 necklaces on navajo carpet.
 What's love from the four hundred cameras
 seeing over and over
 other diamonds left barside?
 Misplaced as far-off tributes to Akbar Shah.
 NASA has lenses that zoom in so close
 you could almost steal every rushed whisper
 that air conditioning keeps sterile in the Luxor
 like possessions, or the love letters
 you'd save after leaving.
 You prefer loving me from the control room
 on a display where I could be half
 the size of a fingernail
 and still end up beaten underneath
 the lamp strung up to the basement ceiling.
 Bearing our ring on my face
 you took all my secrets.*

Get over yourself.
 Your promises faded from badland dunes
 into beach sand that tourists litter through the Grand Prix
 and I stopped seeing you
 like the sunrise inside Monte Carlo.

Before you broke the bank every mirror
must have looked
like somebody else was watching.
You made it as far as the valets with red vests
strewn over your Aston Martin's interior.
You knew you couldn't leave
but never looked back.
I know now,
you wanted me
to shoot you
in person.

Expecting No One

Today I lay naked on the shower floor
and try to cry.

The tiled skin of the wall is yellow
cast against a pallid glow
from ceiling lamps:
the light of hospitals and gas station bathrooms
speaking the language of withdrawal –
a song of tiny melancholies in harmony
like a clockwork of confession.

The tub is blue.
Blue but not quite blue enough to greet the sky as an acquaintance
and tinged gray
but not gray like the quiet opening
before a rainstorm's violence
it was a color that beckoned by never being adored
or held.
It knew warmth
but only from the lack of it.

Hunched over
I let the water run down my back
like they do in movies
where wet people pretend to cry
with the delicacy of eyelash
and repeatedly dry off
and resoak
until someone else is happily assured
in their imagination of a grieving mother
trying to wash away dirt and emptiness.

The shower is turned off now.
I think about roads that never end
and running away to nowhere.
Would I feel happy expecting no one?
Just because something is black
does not mean you can reach your hand into it

and keep reaching.
I press the pink skin of my back
wrinkled with heat
against the cold linoleum basin
and think about breaking down into pieces.
I stare at the walls
with their water droplets clinging
and imagine
how I could be scattered into the wind.

Spring Elegy

You painted light I wanted to stay in
but cannot stay in.

If I could stay

I would not want to.

I miss it when it is still there.

Its period is delicate as eyelash
or the lifespan of mayflies
which are born without mouths.

You've become gone.

Your handwriting on each letter
has twisted from whisper
into evidence.

I've built an afterlife for you
the way God builds the crown of a tree,
that stretches skyward like child hands
grasping at sunlight,
from its root.

In one of your paintings
light splinters down from above,
the sun falling like strands of hair over God's
forehead onto open ocean.

I'll find out later
that these, falling from the yawning tears in clouds,
are called crepuscular rays.

I'll remember you called them blossom
like sunflower
like sun could be flower
and wither
breathing petals to the wind
at the end of bloom.

Washitaw

United Nations Charter 215/93

I imagine Empress Verdiacee always cooks her eggs in rendered pig fat
except when she has guests for breakfast.
She was arrested once in Monroe, Oklahoma
for shooting two sows
but the charges were dropped
and redirected against the owner for keeping them within city limits.

Today she is pouring canola oil in the pan.
She moves to the window.
She is not wearing her glasses,
which sit on the sill
collecting the last of the dawn
and projecting it in minuscule waves,
like the dancing crest of a flame
across chipped, white wood.

It is March in northern Louisiana.
The air is balmy in the threshold
between parking lot and baggage claim
at Louis Armstrong International Airport
where humidity muddles with air conditioning
between two automatic doors
and a stretch of carpet the color of gunmetal
smells of cigarettos.

I wonder where the FBI agents
that she cannot see
but soon will
slept as children.
I wonder if they enjoy the taste of Splenda
or have ever mourned.
If they use hand sanitizer
they use it consistently. The sparkless marrow of their eyes
and the violence of their mouths
seem as if they could not come
from the same body.

They look like men who do not have mothers.
I know they did not notice the small baptism
that takes place when stepping through the brittle air
and antiseptic gleam
of government buildings – even post offices –
into the haze of New Orleans at springtime.

The light of the city is catholic:
turning the cast iron balconies bronze
and the puddles of rainwater
adorned with bits of vomit
into gossamer.

The air is always thick –
condensation torpid and eternal –
like an elegy to rainfall.
When sunset comes
it spins the remnants of storm
into pools of glitter
the color of apricot
as if the men
spray painted gold
and working on the corner as statues
could disintegrate into liquid.

The FBI is at the front door.
First they knock
then the door is to be broken down.
They come with warrants for Income Tax evasion
and bark about drugs and gold coins
buried in the backyard.
They dissect carelessly
the drawers and closets and desks:
stripping the armoire of sundresses
gutting the pantry
and painting the linoleum with yolk
and shell.

In the attic they find passports

and driver's licences
 available for purchase
 for induction into the Washitaw Nation
 and stuff them into black plastic bags.
 It is necessary to them
 that her jewelry be repossessed
 into vacuum sealed
 biohazard-safe containers.

Days before the raid,
 Mormons offer her refuge in a granite-mountain compound
 but she declines.
 She is arrested.
 The charges are dropped.
 Her jewelry is unreturned
 due to a processing error
 at the Monroe branch.

Under the oil black sky
 "LIVING DEAD IN LAW"
 is inscribed in yellow on a purple flyer
 scotch-taped to the shutter of a grocery on Burgundy Street.
 "IN RECOGNITION
 FOR BEING THE OLDEST INDIGENOUS CIVILIZATION ON EARTH"
 On the paper, faded
 her face is ancient and wondrous as childhood.
 I turn to the street
 where the Mardi Gras Indians
 march their glowing floats
 tossing candy and plastic doubloons:
 Wild Magnolias,
 Congo Nation,
 9th Ward Hunters
 Creole Wild West,
 and Black Cherokee.

In the brightness of a ceremonial night
 they shimmer like extraterrestrials
 in their neon armor of sequin, bead,

and feather, which weighs
much more than a man.