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For a while I visited my possible life

For a while I visited my possible life: *A collection of 10 prose poems on grief and motherhood*

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Anticipatory grief

And again, the chest readies. I no longer know if it's asthma, or the weather warming, again. I tap my fingers to count the years: the thumb slides back to the index. Five years, almost. Grief measures itself in cycles, and I steady my wishing by feeding the wild, wild spirals. The curl of her hair, rounding the noose. The circle of fireflies in the Minnesotan sky, where I had escaped in June. The way I count time, a winding path to August, and then, a straight line to Boston: 3,110 miles away, away until — April, the fifth since her death. I am waiting, now, in March. The moon is waning, as it always does. The grief, becoming, again.

In observance of fire

The love, I mean. Orange, red, into the horizon. Widening like a line of paint beneath the thumb. In perfect conditions, there comes a flash: neon as the sun dips beneath sight. It's atmospheric refraction, air bending light into color. I imagine the strength of my gaze piercing into the green, and then, the white. White branding the cornea, too, reaching for green, orange, red: white slicing vision to a branch of twisting leaves, quivering at the birth of fall. Life sparkling like the spotting skin of an aging pear. And growing like the limbs of a deer. And the soft-hearted sky, tangled with blue. Blindness, I learn, is the gravity holding this all together. The love, I mean. The whiteness, the fire.

Falling asleep cross-legged on the plane

Leaning vertebrae you cannot name. Gravity bending hip, bending neck, gravity pressing glabella to tray table. Knees splitting out, like butterfly wings to a waiting bird. The airplane soars. Wind ripples beneath its aluminium wings; the engines rumble into your forehead. Mind's eye covered by the plastic tray, you see stars closer than ever. A plastic bottle crumples. For minutes it has sucked into itself like a breathless lung. Meanwhile pamphlets on how to breathe catch gum from mumbling mouths. A baby cries. Pressure builds in the temples, and you are waiting for quiet, or for turbulence to thrust your anger out the window and catch in the throat of an enemy. Meanwhile a mother curls an infant in her arms, and you tug your chin closer to your chest. You sense the budding dreams: ones where you are flailing, and wild. Grabbing pamphlets and ripping them to shreds, instructions on life falling to your feet like flickering fire. Your body is crumpling, tucking itself further into the unruly. The engine bleeds air, maintaining the cabin pressure. Meanwhile your calves fall asleep, their numbness the sturdiest thing of this flight.

Dreams as a dense breakfast

Massacres boiling under skin, like slices of lotus root floating — I bite them, the strings separating into silky cobwebs, pulling from the tongue and the crunch. I have never seen a universe inside a vegetable before. These are the things only children see: the hot sweat of sidewalks, the double-rimmed hoop, a crooked backboard. Lankier kids in Jordans wreaking fear and thrill. One day I will become a person who runs with her legs beneath her and dribbles by pounding instead of waiting for return. One day I will go swimming and come out without hunger. I will transport to a place where there is no treating cold with ginger soup, no more needing the white woman's touch, the ice-cold water, the leg-thin clothing that causes welting in the skin, the fiending, the skipping, the gripping of grass and splitting of spider legs, the fear of the brother. Of Oakland, and yellow. Of Oakland, and men. Of nighttime, and planes. There is a crumbling universe inside of sleep, wrapped in a plastic spoon. Bring it under the light, the light.

Thinning hair

Thin, silk frays fall as strands. I awake to a dense quiet. My mother's hair thins. Like basins threading through the scalp. Her hair falls. Quietly I tread the stairs. Her head hangs from the top, deep into her legs. She does not know yet how deeply I love. My grandfather had a stroke. Her hair tangles without sleep. Black wires, eyes gray. On the phone *popo* calls and whispers of wrong, of ambulances, hospitals. I see death falling beside my mother's ear. I see her cry and I am helpless. The walls shift into something lesser than gray and warmth will not come until *waigong* relearns how to walk. Meanwhile I hang on to the sweetness of youth. Look at me, mother, and I will give you the black of my hair. Her sister and brother's deaths run through our bloodline in a shared tear. I tug at the crevice between her childhood and mine. I tug at her grief, before I ever learned it. I would give you the black of my hair, thick and ready to swallow. Meanwhile my *popo's* words hang in the air like white, and my mother books the next flight to Taiwan. I am next; thin holes press deeper and deeper, daughter after daughter.

The morning after

I tried to die, my mouth opens to the wild sky. I swallow the naked air: breaths of wings against wind. My head leans onto a slab, flat and cold: *October 20, 2005 - April 9, 2021*. I am breathing on a headstone, clutching at grass that splits the earth that carries a sea of rotting bodies and bodies that eat the matter to live. Here I am flesh and bones in a body of bones. Here I am heat, wiser than cold. Here I am warmer than I've ever known. There is a bee crawling on my wrist, and only I know of this. There are skin-prints on the grass, and wrinkles in the wood. There is a heaviness to the air, and I am terrible at mornings, and my cheeks are red, and I am pulsing with excitement. Or readiness. I open my breath. A slip of wind carries out of my throat.

For a while I wanted to run

Fire-breath flailing, pinching smoke fractured lungs, full of sound, consonants warmed like flesh on a grill. I wanted to spew the wild. Imagine: salt in the throat, wood-roasted fume ripping through protein, calves, ankles clicking from power. Yes — power I wanted. Readiness of inhale, inevitable gaping, groaning of life, oxygen sliding down and into the atria closing, opening, then closing for the second heart sound. Imagine: the tongue looping into the mouth's mountain range, before falling slobbering with wind, words shriveling to sound in the body's needing, or failing: pestle grinding effort to water and breath. Breath moving words into song: like embers alighting. A buzz in the calf.

Tell me we'll never get used to it

My mother installed a pacemaker. I think of her as I hunker through the metal coils of TSA, a stranger's hands rifling my precious things. Each person packs their bags differently: my friend Leah brings her parents to Boston to bring more bags home. I watch a box slide by: a computer, a jacket, a water bottle, empty. Each person's home reads differently. I take the plane to California, home of pleasure and a low night mist. My mother isn't here. She tends to her mother in Taiwan. I imagine *popo's* knees, softly bending with each step. Worn with 80 years of mysterious living. Every step is a mechanism toward death, the bone grinding unto itself.

Affect heuristics tell us that one is nearer than infinitude. My partner's death saturates my bones, particularly on misty mornings. My parents are waiting for their parents to die before they move home. To my home; our home. I told my mother, *You are choosing your parents over your child*, as she joined my father in Taiwan. She looked at me with resentment, or was it fear — *We all have our own duties*. I wonder why I do not feel my heart beating until I am flushed with nicotine, or resentment, or falling against a crowd of infinity, sonic waves powering an ocean of needing teens. I am careful to pack only what I need: a camera, a notebook, a fistful of underwear.

Tell me we'll never get used to it, reads the notebook's cover. This is the line speckled across the tender interior of my friend Nora's left arm, the line I long marinated in my darkening lungs. Last December I saw the arm reaching toward me. Burgundy nails grooved into the blue cover — into the gift, a testament of our love for words that scratch against the skin. I opened the notebook, felt the infinite cracking of its spine. I am waiting for the day I open again. Perhaps it will be quiet, in this 4-person home, or I will be dreaming of how my grandmother's sockets grow loose, and how the words always return. My dog lays on the wooden floor, his chin burrowed into absence — of family, of play. Or just, of sound.

For a while I visited my possible life

There's light trickling through the window, and my lover, rolling in striped-green sheets. Limbs unfurling to the languid sun because time, time is unending in a feather-filled bed. Her breath rolls in and out, unknowing as a newborn's fist. I think of my mother: there is pleasure in safety. There are moments her breath matches the clock, until each unfolds to syncopation: that gentle rocking of wave against shore against wild, running children. I feel my mind slipping into imagination, guessing everything she knows that I do not. No, I choose instead this white-throated sparrow singing in her morning loop. I choose instead a field where there is always a sparrow singing the juice of her song. In dreaming I seek land, bodies, wings resting on a buttonbush, a place where I can see you both. Your animal bodies, somehow uncrushed by the gravity of truth. Humming the tune of routine, of love, of my possible life, tucked behind doors, locked against memories, quivering skin. I am reaching toward the amygdala, stretching muscles to place and places of shape, remembering the square of the room, the sunlight filtering through the panes, through the shadowed bridge of your mouth, parted only for seconds. I am remembering life like lyrics, like stains rolling through film in brown vignette, memory bursting open my rickety breath. For a while I learned devotion to proximity. I wake, my panting cracking the windowpane to that room, unleashing white, wet air onto her face.

But today art has the unique ability to make the world feel good

You said, squinting at the wall. *And I want to love again, to make you feel like God. Squeeze those arms in the alleys of Haight-Ashbury, lick that chin in our summer of love. We'd get pancakes on 7th, The Sundays' "Summertime" playing. You'd look at me, your Chinese-speaking girlfriend, and I'd swallow it. Swallow all that orange film on your face as you stare at Michael Goldberg's Sardines, tilting that head to find words from a foreign place while I play with the ones in my mouth: the lines of Frank O'Hara tumbling and tumbling, image to text, text to wall, wall to face. Face me, find me. Melting in the heat of Dolores Park and dripping need into these palms. I lean back — yes, art has the capacity, yes.*