

Howling In the Distance

My dog will not obey me when the moon is full
She dances out of reach, I call to her but she is gone
Caught in the power of that pull
Late at night I might wake from strange unsettled dreams
To hear a howling in the distance, far away call
In the morning she'll be back, good dog again
Maybe bristling with burrs or favoring a paw
I'll bring her in, give her food and water, comb her coat
Pull the thorn
Make her a soft bed beside the heater
She'll take this comfort like she was born to it
Yeah, and I do too
But that howling in the distance will always be true

I sat beside your bed all night when you were sick with fever
Cool hand on your forehead, and a glass of water
You were in and out of dreams, you were on a faraway train
Moving fast
Just as the dawn broke
Your fever broke at last
I lay beside you then, and listened to you breathing
And I thought about that time last summer when we almost laid it all down
Walked away forever
It was a restless fever, burning fierce and hot
And proud
Well, maybe "love" means all I can be certain of
Is your soft breathing and the sun shining crazy through the curtain, love
We're passing through
But that howling in the distance
Will always be true

Late afternoon, sun low and red
I walk the hill behind the house, past the abandoned church
Up where the old road is cracked and overgrown with grass
The earth will inherit the earth
High on the ridge I can see across the valley
Hear the sound of hammers and the heavy machinery
Just as the sun drops below the horizon
I turn towards home and there's the full moon rising
In the morning these hills will be white with the first snow
My dog coming back across the fields, walking with a limp, moving slow
Up the path where the garden is frozen
And her footprints in the snow will be a dozen red roses
Ooh
But that howling in the distance
Will always be true

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Three Photographs

Somewhere in the world there is a photograph of me
Standing on boulder beside Moses Lake, and
Holding a tumbleweed the size of a bathtub
High above my head like a trophy, naked
Photo was taken by my friend Jane
We were just out of college and irrepressible
High on abstractions like "freedom" and "power"
And I would have said that's what I was expressing with that gesture
But later, when I sent the film out to be processed
And it came back with just that photo missing
I felt cheated and humiliated, like my freedom and power had been taken
And used against me
And I wonder if that photo survives even still
Taped inside the door of the janitor's locker
That's dense with layer of overlapping confiscated photos
That were taken for enthusiasm or abstraction
Taken, taken but not given back

Somewhere in the world there is a photograph of me
It was taken by a man I was in love with
On the morning he left for three weeks in Paris
Anything can happen in three weeks time
And I'd been sleepless and crying all night beside him
While he slept deep and untroubled, woke efficient and sharp
Packed his clean shirts in his matching Travelsmart luggage
Checked once more for passport, ticket, credit card
Then just before he walked into that blinding daylight and hailed a taxi
He turned to me and took my picture
Standing there in the hallway in his redwings t-shirt
Empty handed, red eyed, and then he was gone
Twenty three days later
At four-thirteen am
When he touched down at LaGuardia
It wasn't me he phoned
And I picture that photo in a stack of color snapshots
Here's La Tour Eiffel; here's La Place de la Concorde
Here's Le Pantheon; here's La Sorbonne
And here's an attraction he came to
Wide eyed, curious, detached
And then moved on

Somewhere in the world there is a photograph of me
It was taken by a stranger with a telephoto lens
He was about twenty feet away on a small rock ledge
I was roped in and climbing up the sheer cliff face
Two hundred feet above the valley floor on dicey toe and finger holds
And unaware that he was there

I was green enough to trust the rope
Good enough to have the hang of friction
I was fearless and focused on that subtle change of balance.
Choice...risk...reach...contact...push...center...counterbalance...
The long stretch...
Then I heard his shutter and he muttered something like "magnificent!"
And my consciousness zoomed out to take in the big picture
And there I was, a girl in lime green lycra
Spidered by her fingertips, high on a granite precipice
In a glorious and impossible pose
Letting go would be too easy
Instead I climbed on
But cautious now and studied
Self-conscious of the significance of my relationship to the ground
And hearing those words in my head that always speak my mother's voice
"Careful now"
But that moment, captured and lost in the blink of a shutter
Forever fixed and broken
And collected somewhere in the world
Might be the shining golden moment of my lifetime
When everything rose up together, all at once and perfectly
And then began a slow descent

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Don't Go Back To Sleep

You wonder why
Would they make a child's toy as fragile as that doll?
It was your sister's
You knew it wasn't yours to take
And you were not unaware of consequences
You weren't mean or spiteful
You weren't jealous
It was just you had hands
That knew how to break

Don't go back to sleep

Now there's a woman sleeping there beside you
And she's lovely, so lovely
Reach out, take her sweet soft face between your hands
And she doesn't even stir
That's how much she trusts you
And it fills you with
A complicated longing
And makes your frightened
For her

Don't go back to sleep
Don't go back

Once you loved a woman
Who turned away from you to sleep
You could not find your way
Into her dreams
So you'd watch her bones gleaming white
Through her thin, thin skin
And her sharp little shoulder blades
Lift and fall as wings

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James

James became my lover on the day when he refused
To saw me through the middle.
"Whoever thought of that trick," he said, "had a sick mind."
So instead I chased the rabbits, caught the doves,
Like it was my heart hopping and flying away,
Like a thousand silk scarves flew out of his sleeve
And fell in love.
And James worked with a feverish intensity that day,
With a passion,
And the crowd was in his hand; you could hear the gasps and cries
Above the cymbals crashing.
And the endless paper streamers that he pulled from out his cheek,
And the fountain of confetti made my knees weak and unsteady,
But I stood there in those little shoes until intermission,
When James touched my elbow and he led me out back to the trailer,
And oh!
What I cannot tell you!
Except to say that James was a magician.

James had ambition and imagination.
He was quickly bored with the magic tricks that he bought at magic stores
And so we'd stay up late nights in the trailer learning magic
Of his own invention.
Some things turned out impossible,
And some were just too strange or dangerous to mention.
But soon it became clear
That James' talent was to make things disappear.
At first he practiced on the petty cash.
Soon he could vanish magazines and trash.
And then it was the laundry and the pictures on the wall,
And then the small appliance, then anything at all,
And soon the trailer was completely bare.

But James' reputation grew and when we came to town,
There would be crowds of people there.

They would line up around the block,
Bring their old refrigerators, broken teevee sets,
Bald tires and aging pets,
And James would make them vanish,
With a drum roll and a flourish,
And of course sometimes there would be a scene.
Often the police were summoned
In the pandemonium
And finally we were shut down.

We were left with nothing but each other,
Sleeping at the greyhound station,
And I admit, I sometimes wished I had a lover
With a gift for manifestation,
But then one day we saw a poster
Hanging in the drugstore window
For a small-time flea-bag circus
Guess James thought we might find work because
He touched my arm and we ran down.
And just as we arrived it was time for the magic show,
But the magician could not be found! There was just his tuxedo
Lying crumpled on the ground!
So James stepped into his shoes, he buttoned on his vest.
He was like a man possessed.
He snatched the doves and rabbits from their cage,
Pulled them in and out of hats and sleeves
And there were silk scarves flying all around the stage,
And the ragged crowd was on their feet,
The hollerers and screamers,
For that fountain of confetti and the endless paper streamers,
And then oh!
What I should have feared!
What took my breath and dropped my jaw!
That contraption was wheeled in,
And someone handed James a saw!
And the rest is in slow motion,
How he touched my elbow, dried my tear.
Gently he set me up on that table, raised his saw
And made me disappear.

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Steady Steady Yes

We might lose a little something but I'll get tough enough
To make it through the times I am too lonely, too scared or too sad
Where the mountain road is stretched too thin on Pine Creek Pass
I want to cry; instead I drive too fast
You know you scare yourself a little, you scar the place that's bleeding
Scare yourself enough and you won't ever be the same

You'll never sit around the kitchen, talk about that guy who had a horse named—
Oh, what the hell was that horse's name?

We might lose a little something for all the time you are wherever you are
But that's the story and never mind
I loved you sleeping while I turned in our little nest
You have a sweet, soft mouth, a tattooed chest
We spent a long night under someone else's roof
Rain came down like trouble, later like hooves
Later still like a heartbeat, steady, steady, yes
It was good, it was good, it was good
It was desperate

We might lose a little something but it won't be that restless stir
That keeps me knowing how many hours or days or weeks or months it is
Until our roads converge
Or how many miles it's been since that place
Where I fell apart and you held me kindly
Then let me slip away so far I don't know how you'll ever find me
Or all the broken pieces lost to us
From something so perfect
And so preposterous

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Stone Angel

No one knows my name here, I'm a stranger in this town
So no one talks behind my back, there's nothing they can say
I am safe as a disguise, they can't touch me
So when footsteps fall behind me I do not run away
"What's your name," he says and I say, "Sarah"
Trying out the sound
"From around here?"
I say, "No, just passing through this town"
"Well, walk with me a while then, let me show you around"

He leads me through the neighborhoods, past the perfect lawns
Past the high fences where watchdogs wait
Past the school, the courthouse, county jail
The old church, through the churchyard gate
And we walk between the stones, stop at an open grave
And I throw in all my history, throw in my old name
And the sticks of my secrets, the stones of my shame

Down the path to the river, there he pulls me to him
And there we kiss
And I trust he will not ask about the bruise on my shoulder
Or the scars on my wrist

Or the chances I've taken
The chances I've missed

How long will you run? How far will you go?
How fast does your heart beat when you're frightened by your need?
I turn away, but he holds my sleeve so tight it tears
But it does not bleed
And I run from him then, I run feverish and hard
Up the hill from the river, through the gate to the churchyard
Just as a small stone angel lifts her little white arms

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If I Loved You

If I loved you
It would make no sense
You are slouching in the doorway like cartoon coyote
Sidelong, studied indifference
If I trusted you
No, only a fool would trust you
I want fingerprints
I want the mark of your poet's hands
Pressed against my skin

If I loved you
If I took you home
If I gave you soup with heart of palm and Chinese noodles
Would you write me poems?
Or would familiarity make you flat
Discernible and banal
Would you thwack my knee with a rolled up magazine
Say "hey, old gal"

If I loved you I would buy you things
I'd dress you up in black on black
I'd take you out then take you home
Walk barefoot across your back
If I loved you I would wrap myself around the mystery
I'd wind you up and watch you going down in history

If I loved you
Like a mother would
If I sheltered you underneath my wings
Would you still need to be misunderstood?
Would you ramble in abstraction
Quote Rabelais for hours
Would you answer a question with a question
To hold me in your power

If I loved you
It would make no sense

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Tiger

I want to call you Tiger
But you fight me tooth and claw
"Grandma," I say, "Grandma, Grandma
Tiger, I don't think I'm wrong"
Old man hat on your head
And a shotgun, don't shoot
The rabbit in your garden
Shoot the garden hose instead

Tiger, dealing cards
One for me and one for you
Then lean across my shoulder
Telling me which cards to
Slap down on the table
The colors of war, the empty faces
Smell of power in a copper penny
You raise me

Tiger in the kitchen
With a cleaver and a chicken
Pouring red wine in a coffee mug
And a little glass, "Here, Kitten,
Taste" a transfusion
Instinct, memory so ancient
Tiger...
Chris Almighty!

Tiger with the lights up bright
Hair gone wild and your eyes gone narrow
"Not a word of this to Harry, do you hear me?
Not a word to Harry"

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Jack McGraw

The very first time I saw Jack McGraw
I said to myself, "I know how
This man is going to look if he lives to grow old"
Thought didn't scare me then, but it scares me now
I drive all night to see him down the long dark highways
Through the small dark towns up the hill to his place
And I find him asleep, stretched across the bed
Like a man in the habit of taking up space

"I love you, Jack," I say, "you are my favorite shirt
Fine linen, finely tailored, from the second hand store
But sometimes I wonder when you're next to my skin
About the night you might have spent damp and crumpled on the floor
And maybe that's beside the point, a little bleach, a hot dryer
And what about the tragedy of unpaired socks?"
Jack says, "Say that again in waltz time, without the metaphor"
"Jack," I say, "I love you like a rock"
And then we fight about geology, fight about apology, fight about astrology
About the solar plexus
We fight about the knowledge he invited out Paula Jean
In spite of protocol hedging
We fight about Texas
And I go to New York City, Jack goes to New Orleans
He calls me from Atlanta but I'm up in Montreal
So I leave a note in Memphis but he's on to Little Rock
I take a room in Saskatoon, I throw the phone against the wall
I buy the morning paper, read the weather and the horoscopes
And that's my only news of him, I'm searching for clues
And then Jack sends a letter that he wrote on a napkin after one drink too many
And I take that to be the truth
And I drive all night to find him past the cornfields in the moonlight
Past the deer in the headlights to the Tally-Ho-Tel
And I find him asleep, stretched across the bed
"I love you Jack," I say, and he says, "What the hell?"
And then I cry before the telephone, I cry before the magic fingers bed
I cry before the orange and green decor
And while Good Morning America charms the nation out of its dreams
I cry before the man who doesn't want me anymore

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Hero

My childhood hero was a radio personality
I met him years later when he came through my town
On a book signing tour
He's written the inevitable anecdotal account
Of his years rubbing elbows and climbing rungs
And the humorous things he said spontaneously once
And then read from the page a thousand times into an open microphone
While a thousand times I sat by the radio and laughed out loud
All alone

My childhood hero had a limp handshake
And eyes that glanced around the room at nothing in particular
While I made my confession. I just had to tell him
"I know every episode by heart!"
And then I laughed out loud right there in the aisle
Then I laughed again, louder still
I was cueing him to smile

Or to say something spontaneous and humorous to me
Instead he signed
My copy with a smiley face and a shapeless scrawl
And gave his limp handshake to the next in line
My childhood hero had a weak chin
And his mouth was small

But that's not the story
Sunday evenings at seven
I'd curl up in a cotton blanket on the floor
And while my long legged family stepped over and around me
I let his familiar voice pull me forward
Through a time when whole continents were overthrown
Whole families fell apart
Major household appliance were recalled
And my own body changed its boundaries and allegiance
And his predictable one liners
Were steady through it all

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Circle

I don't mind sleeping in the straw
Or washing in the pony's trough
And I don't miss the life I left
I've no regrets for running off
There's endless work behind the scenes
It's dirty and it's hard
I spend far more time in ripped up jeans
Than in my sequined leotard

But nights when everything goes right
I stand in a circle of heat and light
And I have the power to change the dreams
Of everyone in this shabby tent
Make them believe, if not in magic,
In money well spent

I'm not the best in the business
But I earn my applause
There are risks you know, these tigers have teeth
But no claws
And right away I was so good with them
I never thought of going back
I could smell the anger in their sweat
I could coax them to attack

And nights when everything goes right
They leap through a circle of heat and light
With the power to change the dreams

Of everyone in this shabby tent
Make them believe, if not in magic,
In money well spent

We were driven out of Beaumont
When the Lazy "J" complained
And we tore her down, packed her up
In a stubborn Texas rain
And standing by the trailers
While the dogs and roosters load
I think about a dark-eyed poet
I met along the road

But nights when everything goes right
I stand in a circle of heat and light
And I have the power to change the dreams
Of everyone in this shabby tent
Make them believe
In magic

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Anything Is Possible

It was a time when anything was possible
I took it on myself to talk you out of getting that tattoo
St. Francis of Assisi and his halo of flying birds
Although we were in San Francisco, I said, "Look at you
Your perfect body. You don't even have a scar.
How could you think that this tattoo
Will make you better than you already are?
And who are you to inflict this whimsy
On the man you're going to be in twenty years?"
Ooh, yeah, anything is possible

Pull back the sheets in a motel room in Mississippi
Or someplace with a thick dark history
And a TV, a blower blowing cold air
Four white walls, I said "We could be anywhere
But last night I slept in a farmhouse in Arkansas
Windows wide open, there were crickets and barking dogs
At dawn there was a rooster and a barnyard full of sheep
I could tell exactly where I was but I didn't get much sleep"
Ooh, yeah, anything is possible

There was a night at the house where you were born
Your parents' darkened bedroom. We tiptoed up the stairs
Like thieves, like cats, like grown up children
Whispered in your boyhood room among the wary glass eyed bears
You said "I'm like a kid with too many toys
Guess I'm still waiting for that one bright and shining choice

So clear and compelling
It makes every other possibility irrelevant"
Ooh, yeah, anything is possible

It was a phone booth in the middle of the midwest
It was raining like the devil. I was depressed
I watched a pickup truck slowly float by with its hazards blinking
Windshield wipers slapping, I said "I keep thinking
If I can hold it all together just one day maybe two
It'll all make sense and I'll believe it's really true
I wish I could take comfort in steady slow improving
But I'm scared most of the time. I don't feel safe
Unless I'm moving"
Ooh, yeah, anything is possible

We stood on a bridge across Tecumseh River
Sun was going down and the moon was just a sliver
Semi flying past in a dust and diesel whirlwind
You said "When I look back at all of all my old girlfriends
The ones I really gave my heart to are the ones I couldn't hold
Just knowing they were going to slip away made me passionate and bold
There are words I'll never say and questions you can't ask
Just hold me like it was the first time
Or like it was the last"
Ooh, yeah, anything is possible

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It Was You In the Morning

It was you in the morning, soft in the pillows
With the sound of the bed frame and the weight of your arms
Now I'm flying over Iowa and nothing is certain
But the droning of engines and this patchwork of farms
I am headlong toward the sunset and you are rolling onto night
Captain said we're cleared for landing, it's all right
The words of this letter, and this slow descent
Are another way to love

When we walked through your city we were practically strangers
And I held my coat around to keep from reaching for your hand
But we walked on past that border, walked down to the river
Sifting through the gravel where the water touched the land
You said your heart's been torn apart and your life has come undone
And the kind of love you've known you wouldn't wish on anyone
But this broken blue glass bottle, this tiny heart shaped stone
Are another way to love you

I might have made you up, built you from hardwoods
Sanded smooth your perfect arms and legs
Gave you a backbone of piano keys

I built you strong enough to carry me
High above this spinning planet and these rolling midwest farms
Through the falling darkness, touch me softly down
Lights along the runway, last light in the sky
Are another way to love

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