

The Silence in an Empty House

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NY
Q Books™

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
New York, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
P. O. Box 2015
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10113

www.nyqbooks.org

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First Edition

Set in New Baskerville

Layout and Design by Raymond P. Hammond
Cover illustration by Linda Hillringhouse | www.hillringhouseart.com
Photograph of author provided by Joseph Costa | www.joecphoto.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013949224

ISBN: 978-1-935520-89-4

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What Animals Teach Us

On the Discovery Channel, I watch a documentary on elephants set in sub-Saharan Africa. The mother has given birth to a calf who is weak and unable to stand. Every time the calf tries to stand her legs bend at what I think must be her ankles, if elephants have ankles, and her legs fold under her and her body sinks. The mother keeps trying to help the calf to stand, supporting the calf with her trunk, but almost immediately the calf's ankles fold under her and her belly hits the ground. The announcer tells us another smaller elephant who joins the mother and the calf is the calf's older sister. She does not want to leave the mother and the calf alone. This is what animals teach us about family, these elephants so huge they could crush us in a minute; they teach us how to care for one another. The mother is trying repeatedly to get the calf to stand, until finally she is strong enough to drink milk from her teat, and then strong enough to stand alone. Isn't this what we want for our children, to carry them and lift them until they are ready to stand on their own? To stand by them if they ever couldn't, the way you couldn't, the way I wish I could have helped you, the way I am struggling to stand today without you, no trunk to nudge me up.

I Wish I Could Say

When I look at you slumped in your chair, your head
so heavy on your neck that it nearly touches the chair arm,
look at your legs pared down to the bone, how they can't
hold you up, look at the confusion in your eyes,

I try not to let you see the pity in mine. I wish I could say
that I don't want this to be over, the illness finally finished
with you, pennies on your eyes. I wish I were patient
and kind and I wish I could say

that I would gladly care for you for twenty or thirty more
years, but the truth is, though I love you, I need this
to be over. I want to put down the burden you have
become, want to stop worrying about you and crying

for you and myself, want to let you go, your body in heaven
restored to what it used to be—healthy, strong, athletic.
If I could imagine a heaven for you it would be that one—
you riding your bicycle down sunlit paths, you

swimming laps in the heavenly pool, you going for a run,
your legs able to carry you, and I able to sleep again
in my empty bed, able to put down the sack of worry
I have carried for so long.

Gray Clouds

This morning, I remember the gun metal clouds
that hovered over the Catskills when I drove 17 West.
I could drown in their absence. Since you died,

I am wrapped in gray wool, the world just a little muffled,
my eyes clouded over, myself not quite here. I try to wear
bright colors—the deep red of a silk blouse, the Asian
pattern of red and deep blue in the soft folds of my favorite
jacket, the red I am sure will ward off the evil eye.

So many of the people I love are gone, the ones I believed
protected me from the malevolence that swirls around us.
I am certain if I wear these clothes this grief, too, will end,
and I will go on to find new color in the world, the flare
of tulips opening their lovely mouths, the yellow flags
of forsythia waving and I in my red jacket that keeps
sprouting holes because I've worn it so much, hoping

my jacket will work its magic, that if my students
will write brilliant poems, the muffler of gray wool
will fall away, and I will gather joy in my arms and all
the colors I love—deep red, blue, gold—will swirl
around me like a long velvet cape
that moves when I move, sings when I sing.

What If

What if the world were a yellow onion and you could peel it, one parchment layer at a time, till you reached its secret core? Imagine the sharp acrid odor that would fill the air, the tears we'd all have to shed to get there, the way our eyes and hands would burn,

and what if the secret was like the secret left at Fatima, the letter that people talked about when I was a child, believing that the letter would hold some knowledge that would tell us something we really needed to know, but when it was opened, a sharp fizz like a candle going out, nothing strange or magnificent or wise, nothing magical, only a pronouncement ordinary as salt,

and what if the center is like those old train tunnels under New York City that people live in, a village totally cut off from the speeding world above, no connection to the place the rest of us inhabit,

and what if, this moment, wrapped in the gauze shawl of stillness, is the secret after all, to learn to look more closely at the varied world, the veins of a leaf, a stone, the stippled pattern of bark, and to find, even in the shape of our hands, the curve of our nails the ability to lift a cup and drink, the secret of loving the transfigured world?