

Bone dust

The marrow in my bones, dried to dust by overworking, over-sharing, lopsided caring powders the insides of my clothes, making their fibres scratching, drawing my fingernails to disrespect tender skin, scraping futilely and ruthlessly to remove an itch inflamed when what I need is renewal. I agree I'll stop. I'll lend myself to you, life. Oh wipe me clean, one weary piece of me at a time.

Wash me with warm soapy waters, soft, worn flannels that have circled elbows and surfed behind ears, under arms, between toes, and spun in the machine's merry, thoughtless carousel, then kissed by sun as they wave like small semaphores from the washing line drawn from fence to trellis across a garden that has known more seasons than I have years. Squeaking clean, delicately pat me dry with the same gentleness the dew lands on the blades of grass that need not bow or bend to receive.

With you, life, there need be no rub-a-dub, no abrasion, no haste. Crown my head, that bowed too long over pages and puzzles and predicaments, in a terry-cloth turban. Plump my flesh with tenderness. Soothe me with hope's balm. Restore me to my grounds of Being so that, clean, I may sleep unburdened from night's relabouring of day's unfinished business, and so wake without alarm, clear-eyed, tenderly ready to begin again.

A poem for the weary
10 December 2020

Jigsaw

For Tesse Apkeki

Placid straight edges
will form the border. This
is axiomatic. I'll sift for those
first. Once found I'll slot them
into place, a kinaesthetic click
assuring the rightness that sometimes
proves wrong but easily enough I correct.
Ah here's a resolution neighbouring
a determination alongside a string of
completions. Just so, all orderly, tidy, not
at all the everyday of the missing sock,
the pen plain out of ink, the tea too
dark since the poured milk amounted
to no more than a pale drizzle.
The straight edge gives semblance of
finality. At the corner, a turning but not
open-ended. Instead it marks an arc
of activity definitively abandoned
or aborted. A corner turned is an
infamy foreclosed. Sacrifices must
be made.

It's the inside pieces I
find troublesome. Scalloped gaps
cleave images: these are my
regrets, my misfires, my missteps.
There are hundreds of them. Hundreds
in each one-thousand-piece set.
Thousands and thousands across
a lifetime. The words I misspoke,
the ones I swallowed. I could drop them
singly into the waiting reservoir if I'm
in a mood to sort plain disappointments
from piercing mistakes. Sort timid hush
from the egregious hullabaloo.
Or instead, I might just as well sweep them
with the edge of my palm so they fall,
fistfuls, into the waiting box lid. There
my fingers can lace through them, overturn
their plain blue backings so they're belly
up, showing now not simply their contours
but also their faces: unique delineations of
colour, line, recrimination.

There's an umbrella blooming open on
its curved handle missing the hand
to hold it steady against the drench.
The single shoe below the cuffed
trouser, a lonely brown brogue stepping
into an abyss. The child's face that
might instead be a doll's, disembodied,
cradleless, falling, falling. No bough,
no embrace, only emptiness.
The wheelless taxi. The curtailed marquee.
The stalk of what should be a lamppost
standing headless in the dark.
Piece by piece I'll set my sorrows
into the waiting frame, and call this
my self-portrait. The calls
I've forgotten to return. The thanks
I've failed to convey. The hearts
I broke (not least my own). The overdue
library books so late they've been replaced,
I've been billed, and I've paid and still
I can't forgive.

My autobiography refuses
to finish. The missing piece
shaped like the bare
unblinking table that blares.
Clocks don't tick in this
digital world. No cat swishes
figure 8s around my ankles.
Besides me, the fat is empty,
above vacant streets.
Nearby stands a silent vacuum
with a slurping wand, all mouth,
no teeth and a belly full
of dust and crumbs suspended in a lattice
of hair strands that fell unnoticed and
unaccounted for. Life persists. I puzzle on.
Even when things don't add up.
Or amount to much;
are inconclusive, tentative
or simply suspended.
One tenet only: keep a broom
in a home with jigsaws. Only brooms

Chair

The chair sat against the far wall, its high back a hitching post for scarves, a hat, some shoulder bags. Between it and me, stood fear.

At the table where I do my work, fear leaned in, sniffing my breakfast. Swallowing painful, I lost taste.

When I wrote, fear read my words aloud, hot breath at my neck, disdain dripping onto my shoulder, mispronouncing. My thoughts garbled. When I spoke, fear rapacious picked apart my sentences, my statement a vulture's carcass.

When I stood, fear pinched me. Fingers twisting thin skin at the tender backside where my knees bend, meaning me to cave.

I caved. Pen in hand, I froze.

Folded, I'd crawl to bed. Sink into dirty sheets, ashamed.

Sleep avoided me, leaving me wide —, with only the ceiling's cracks as company. Tick — Tick.

Mornings my bones were heavy. Alarms failed. Scolding fear, most certainly it was I: late. Guilty.

One night, I only made it as far as the empty chair. Bed a distant island, my head lolled

from my barricaded chest

onto chair's woven seat. Braids of straw pressed a maze into my face. I slept, empty. Undisturbed.

Ten pleasant waking of my own accord, my eyes
meeting the table edge, its four legs
equal to my night-time height. Equity.

From below I looked anew, seeing
my table (where always I hoped to make worlds)
plain barren, surrounded by vacant space.

Room enough for this sturdy chair
to sit alongside mine. I drew it up,
this chair where I'd pressed my cheek stood
ready to receive —

Fear came when I beckoned. I told it:

Sit still beside me.
Still, I say. Heeding, it sat practicing, bettering itself
to settle silent in the rhythms of my living.

Nourished, creating, out-speaking in fear's presence overtook fear.

Two chairs. At my table, we sit. Not as equals, not as friends.
Just companions, I the wiser and more tender.

For KK
9 November 2020

Social graces

Tenacious, the sweet pea tendril
laces the wing mirror's base
encircling scratched chrome
like it is lattice intended for
its climb. Its hopefulness
wipes my face into a sneer.

The jalopy parked on breeze
blocks pressing yellowed grass
into worm-nobbled dirt,
its axles cracked by
thwarted impulse,
frustration gumming
the dry carburettor
with sticky thick
grease streaked with
dandelion debris.

It and i are unft.
After more than a
year indoors, my
social graces are
ineffectual relics,
unroadworthy.
The jalopy and I
lower property values
for the entire street.

My memories of
sheepish confessions
atrophied as whispered
snark. The sensation
of my fingertips on
already well-browsed
objects in scores of
shops have been
woven by starlings
into cosy nests on
the car dashboard.

The boot is
now a flowerbed.
Peonies bloom
fuchsia, bowing
heavy petal heads.

If ever i hear
words spoken
aloud in three
dimensions,
i'll hope my socks
do match and i
haven't forgotten
to put on
shoes.

For Anna G.
3 June 2021