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April 10, 2020

Knee Deep in the Earth

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Sara Cunningham

This is a collection of poems written by the author throughout her time at Emory University.

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KNEE DEEP IN THE EARTH

Poems by Sara Cunningham

I.

I.U.I

The dark smothers
My mother's room as we lay
In her bed. She wants to talk
About my day, her weight,
My father's inability
To hear her. I want
To sleep. So I place
My hand on her forehead,
Drag my fingers along
Her hairline. She is
Like a child,
Her skin warm, alive.
She's older than most
Mothers. She had trouble
Getting pregnant. Once,
We were driving home from
The hairdresser, and she told me
I wasn't made from sex. All those babies
Died. She's fallen
Asleep, now. Her breathing
Delicate as a ribbon
My father would place
Softly to the side
When opening a gift.

Negative Space

I've fired a gun only once:
With my father in Maine.
The instructor was a hairy, uncle-man,
One hand on his holster, the other thumbing
His jawline. Safety was important to him,
He said. So, when I hit the target and swiveled
To see my father's eyes, I felt
The instructor's hands, fierce
As a wild bear, throwing me to the ground.

I've pictured that gunshot many times—
In my father's abdomen. His thigh. His head.
I've kayaked through it in my dreams, put my hands
Outside the boat, no life jacket.
His body's negative space has a distinct odor:
Diesel fumes, fermented strawberries, something
Like crawling along a dirt path.

Labyrinth

On the porch of my childhood home, my mother and I speak
about death. She lost two men, two fathers, before she lost
all her baby teeth. My father is inside. Even now, he tries to protect me.
He told me about Icarus before someone else could.
In his version, Daedalus catches his son.

My mother tells a different story. She watched a freight train
plunder a group of men working on the tracks. She called
the police at a payphone, then ran to an overgrown parking lot behind a convenience store
and emptied herself, lurching against the air beneath her face
as if she could purge her body of this moment—
this moment, slowly becoming myth.

Milk

The cockroach twitches across the table and I use my hand
To brush away its armored body, fallen from the cereal box
Into the egg-shell bowl half-filled with Cheerios.
Dana looks at me and closes the box. She turns her head
To the fridge, pours me, instead, a glass of milk.

Outside, the world is winter. Blackened
Spruce & shuddering pine. In the yard, we
Snip the heads off wilting flowers to fashion crowns,
Make queens of ourselves. We rule with our eyes wide
Under the face of the muted sun.

Bean Sprouts

I don't remember when boys became more than pulling
Legs off cellar spiders, or looking away
When my bathing suit top came undone in the water. But I remember
After. Pretending I didn't know why they wanted me
To press my elbows together
Below my breasts. I've grown
Through myself—like the bean sprouts our class planted in sixth grade,
The dirt clumped together until a scratch of green
Moved through the surface. After that first sighting, we forgot them.
Until the pods began to reach out from between the leaves.

Farmers' Market

My parents have wandered off
in search of peaches.
I wait for them, leaning against a pole
across from the harbor.
Around me, people surge
in rhythm with one another.
A mother in the crowd offers her young son
a piece of pear. She holds it between her
fingers, close to his face. The boy takes
the fruit and the skin collapses
into his small mouth, as if
its blossomed body
has been waiting for someone.

Reticence

Like two children in a field
With one hemp-woven net between us & hundreds
Of blue swallowtails above, mid-migration, you and I
Can't capture the words that fill the air—they beat
Their wings, as eager to inspect our tongues as they are
To sit between the budding lilac bushes,
Waiting for us to be called away, for our shadows
To undarken the grass.

Stray

I found the dog on the side of the highway
and tied a bathing suit you'd left in the trunk
around his neck so he couldn't run.

Each time I touched his fur, my fingers came away
smudged with grease and mud. Still, I thought, for a moment
I would keep him. We stayed there until the sun
blurred and the on-ramp blinked with headlights.
I named him Swampscott, after my hometown

where the sun always woke you first.
Where, now, you wake alone.

Short Grocery List After Our Breakup

Tissues, my mom wrote at the top
after she heard, thinking
I was like her.
Next came potatoes,
this one mine. I like them
mashed, the way my dad makes them.
Papaya, sweet & healthy & orange
I think. I've never had one,
I'm trying something new.
Nothing is wrong
with old things.
Ava's blue, long-sleeved shirt
I stole when we were thirteen.
When we didn't know
where to put our hands.
My thighs, her lips.
It still fits. When I told her
about him, she asked
about his hair, cropped close.
Do you think that's sexy?
I don't remember my face.
But my shoulders rose
to meet her question.
I ached to peel back
her lip. Mangoes, lastly.
They're my dad's favorite.
I've eaten them my whole life.

Two Convertibles

I.

The car was canary yellow
And my father drove
Like he'd escaped from his barred cage. When we broke
Down, I felt the engine unhinge. The sky
Swaddled us with rain. The top wouldn't come
Up. On the phone
With the repairman, my father
Mentioned me, as a reason we needed
To be picked up. I felt proud to be
As young as I was.

II.

I know how to drive
Now. This night with Anna,
We take her father's car.
Sweat & music melt through
Our short-sleeve shirts. What else
Was there to do? We believe
In the clear sky
And the moon—a tired eye,
Half-watching.

II.

Cars

Sam drove a black Prius.
Whenever I see a black Prius
I think of Sam.

Michael drove a Lexus.
I don't remember the color
Because I never loved him.

Gabriel drove a car
Of which I know neither the brand
Nor the color. He entered

Me only once on a dorm room couch.
We weren't allowed cars at that school built of buildings
Low enough to hide behind lying down.

Clipped dandelions flanked the parking lot;
If you gave me a handful,
I could weave a crown.

The Body

Sitting on a bench
Near the classroom,
I search the faces of those who walk past
For a face like the man's from two
Summers ago, who placed
My body in a small box & closed the lid.
He was tender, knew
How to use his hands, as I used mine
When I shot him with my brother's handgun.
No one has found the body.
They're still searching. As am I.
Autumn now, and the faces cover themselves
In scarves and hats. There's a German
Boy who looks at me
When he laughs. Gunsmoke
Smells like cooling air.

Night Swim

No one knows we're here,
standing together, thigh-deep in the black water & far enough
apart that our lofted arms don't touch. You're the first
to be swallowed, this time. You emerge, spit
saltwater at my chest, & I fall back
as if wounded, let my legs float up. The waves
lick my sunburned shoulders and calves. I feel
your elbow kiss my collar bone, but don't turn my head
to look at you. We float on our backs, your hand
on my forehead. Desperation sounds like coming
up for air. I want you to watch me
hold my breath. Hold yours.

Trade Winds

You were like a deer—
Hair cropped close, sad
Brown eyes. Our first meal together
We ate sweet pastries and you
Licked your fingers, or was that
Me? I don't know
Who woke up first
But I remember
The sun peeling the curtains
Away. Do you remember?
I haven't seen you
Since that morning. That was
The deal. On the drive back,
I braked to let a doe cross
With her baby.
Such power—it finds you
Then blows away.

Close

It was the egg and cheese sandwich in bed. Was the yolk running down
My chin when I bit too hard. Was you sitting on the toilet seat waiting for me
To finish showering. I like to be alone
In the shower. I like to be alone. You like it too. Was you
Knee deep in snow, white as shredded coconut.
Was the lake you broke with your body on New Year's Eve.
I told you the ice was fragile, newly minted. You didn't listen.
You threw rocks & then you threw yourself. Your back straightened
Pale & smooth & cold as stones. Was the third time you came over after
You left me. It was the first time you slipped your hand
Into my jeans after you left me. The wind leaned against
The open windows. *What was that?* I told you I didn't know, but
I did—the bathroom door, blown shut.

Reflection

The weekend before the appointment, I flew home to see my lover.
In bed, he lifted my shirt to look at my stomach, asked
If I would have a scar. He was like a child, unashamed of what he did
Not know. I told him everything would be internal,
Like when his parents gutted their house to redo the kitchen.

I haven't gone inside that house in years. But when I go back,
If the lights are on, I can still see the shock white table's reflection
In the window above the stove.

They Flee From Me

I see you through the window we can't
hear each other that's better
though when it rains the leaves
in the bushes tremble & stick
against my shoulders your face blurs
the glass loud between us
I love you best when you're sleeping
& can't ignore me

Hunting

A beating heart can be felt
In the neck. Pulse aching
To be held. In gym class,
They told us to press
Our fingers, like arrow-
Heads, to the softness
Above the jugular,
Between jaw and collarbone.
Some used their hands
Like the wings
Of a still-living bird,
Though this was not
How you touched me.
You left—handprints
On my neck. You said
My fluttering was too much.

The Mountain

Sometimes I think of your death;
If that would have been easier
Than your leaving. I've never been
To a funeral, though
I dream of my father's
Every night. In one dream,
I am on the water, in a boat
Rimmed with flowers the color of raw
Skin. I see my father's reflection in the waves,
Calling my mother's name.

Years later, you and I climbed Monadnock
Together. You would work there
The following summer, clearing stray branches and gouging
Rocks from the trail beds. If there had been an accident,

If you were lost on the mountain,
You would have died loving me.

III.

Funeral

On each of the eleven seats
reserved for her children, there are two leaves:
one yellow, one red. I'm the only grandchild

who sees the body, one side of her neck
caved in, like a bruised apple.

We stand behind our parents,
who watch their mother

lowered under the grass. I don't feel
anything, until my father stands up and empties
my hands of his shoulders.

Descent

I was born not of an animal,
But of a human woman.

When my mother and I fly
To California, she takes
The middle seat.

The man beside her falls
Asleep. She turns off his monitor
And hers.

She fell two week ago,
At the butcher's shop
and broke her foot for the third time.

She called from the hospital, asked
If I could use this in a poem. I couldn't
Prop her ankle up on a pillow; I wasn't there.

I can do this for her—I can make
Her pain useful.

I am not an animal,
But a human woman.

Small Blood

Yesterday, at the playground, my niece lost her footing
On a plastic slide, its long throat. I was there—
I caught her shoulders between my hands.

But, somehow, under my fingernail, a small piece of skin, sliced
From the tip of her nose. I have heard children scream
Before, but never one I loved.

In the forest behind the open field, four birds took flight,
Fled their sheltered congregation of trees.

Birdsong

I. Lunch

The oldest says he's full.
His brothers cup the injera; they don't understand
This language, spoken for my benefit.
Stooped, glass figurines, his parents
By the stove. Door to the backyard, open.
No air conditioning. Their mother says she likes me
In Amharic. Her eldest relays the message
In an English that sticks to my skin
Like sunburn. I'm ashamed of my tongue
against my teeth, the hot weight.

II. Outside

Birdsong the only sound.

Maintenance

There's a hole in the ceiling & the driveway needs to be repaved.
On the rare days when thunder shakes us from sleep, Marjorie wakes to sit under
that scratch of sky with a bucket and pray
for the insects. God knows how many I've drowned.
After the sky is drained, petrichor fills the rooms
like a fine, aged liquor. We use the captured rainwater to fill the birdbath
and drench the Hibiscus plant. Marjorie tells me, if we'd had children,
they would have helped with the maintenance.

At the pulmonologist's office,

we wait for my father.

My mother sits beneath
a poster of a charred lung loosely
glued to the wall.

When the coughing started,
our trash bins looked like bouquets.

We used to talk of owning a farm, which vegetables we'd grow.

Now, when I water the orchids in the yard, I hold
the petals between my thumb & forefinger & crumble them
into my palm, as he would
the half-chewed shells of sunflower seeds.

Portrait

If I loved you, being this close would kill me.
-Dorianne Laux

There's your beard.
Your uncalloused hands, soft as a newborn's.
Your thin legs. My mother said, after you left
the car, *he should drink protein shakes.*

There's your tendency to wear red
in all forms.
There's your hatred of silence.
The unspoken grief, worn between your ribs.
I've scaled the rungs for years to reach
your hidden tongue. You keep your bedroom curtains drawn
when the light outside is clean and bright
as an opening.

There's me: leaving a room full
Of our friends, saying *I've heard this story before.*
There's you, ankles crossed, shoulders bowed. You say:
It's true, she has.

Creation

This meal—the first without my father.
Eating can be treacherous, my mother
Has taught me this. When she met
My father, his waist was tight as the skin on a newborn
Animal. How thin he was—so thin
He squeezed through the ribs
Of his first wife. I'm sure he felt
Like God, beginning
With one sure hand.

We rarely eat out. Tonight is different:
Utensils small as bones, I order
Both an appetizer and a main course.
I want to love someone enough
To set the table with different-sized spoons.
I want him to gorge as my father would
After a day spent in the yard,
Knee deep in the earth.