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Head Heart Hand

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HEAD HEART HAND

A Thesis Presented

by

LYNDSEY COHEN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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MFA Program for Poets and Writers

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for Seth

the night is the night, it begins with the morning,
beside you it lays me down.

- Paul Celan

Wrap me in the weathers of the earth, I will be hard and hard.
My face will turn rain like the stones.

- Cormac McCarthy

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Like A Snake Through The Mud

They say that a miracle is a change in perception

Into the crystal river, into the sad son of days

I call your name

I call your name

For You

I wanted to walk across the grease stained city.

I wanted to lick a water buffalo on a hot summer day.

And I wanted everything to be good.

I dreamt that in winter we lived on a tarmac,
pricking our fingers to let the steam escape.

There was a year that I didn't know you.

And the salt on the sidewalk kept me from heaving,
kept me from phoning in and breaking glass.

Did it hurt to leave your shoes in Albuquerque.

How was it to be hurled into the air,
to be thrown out and feel your face floating.

It's funny that you can't be in more places at once.

And when I asked you about home you said:

I don't know anything about breathing underwater.

So I came here to tell you that you can't orbit space in a jumpsuit, and
when you hang your heart on the rear view mirror I won't be there to see it.

I Dreamt That You Were A Beekeeper

On a half lit morning I went to the tar roads to look for you.

The trees were stuck together and warm,

like the electric birds that settled in your house.

The steam looked like your shadow and I smelled it.

I remember when you taught me how to dig and I cried.

And when we woke up to find a horse next to the bed you said remember.

It was the river that carried your heart to the city, and it was

you who said dear, melt me into a small statue

so that I can be cradled in your hands.

Tonight There Will Be A Revival

But don't kid yourself.

This is not the kind with God.

This is the kind with marshmallow rings.

With mosh pits and wet handshakes with a woman.

Who smells like all of the trash in Delaware.

We were born at the bottom of a lake.

We were born on a subway car in shit city.

We cried on our way up.

Life isn't easy and right now the light is so bright.

It is so bright I said and my eyes feel like star fruit.

We hold up the babies.

They are dressed in costumes.

There is no God in this plastic blue tent.

Deer Heart

I went to the parade knowing that there wouldn't be any funnel cake. The day had been balmy and sticky and I knew that days like these were never really good. But I loved to watch the costumes. Thick and glistening I marveled at their beauty. Each ruffled stitch. Each ticking of twill. I once read of a man born with thirty six ribs. I couldn't imagine the enormity of such a life. I could barely handle saying hello to people I knew. And as I stood on the street watching the rush of color I could feel my life bend in the light of the unending sadness. I used to be a rodeo captain. A steamship pointing in the distance.

A Soft Belly Will Bleed Easily

I wanted to tunnel my way to you,
to build a boat that could float through everything.
When I say everything I don't really mean everything.
Just the push pins. The bleeding waitress.
The armchairs made of foam.
I'd like to eat an apple for you.
I'd like to lick the sorrow off the bathroom floor for you.
Once you told me that there were four kinds of miracles.
And that most people who disappear never return.
It is a sure way to a slow kind of death.
I tell people that this isn't some sideshow wonderment.
This isn't a new beginning.
I wanted to tell you about the green flight,
About the space I made for you in the pocket of my throat.

Under The Electric Light I Saw You

Once a man came up to me and said “zoom zoom” and then walked away. His hair was thinning and I saw his butterfly scalp. It looked so pale and I wanted to reach out and touch it. I wanted to take it in my hands and whisper in his ear “always remember Nebraska.” But he was a big man with a sparkle in his eye. He reminded me of my father and his lifelong love of elephants. My father used to say to me “behold the mighty elephant” and I would smile and say “with pleasure.” He died sailing the horn of Africa when I was 7. At night I can still feel his warm face as I walk across the throbbing plains looking for home.

I Left My Heart On The Dance Floor

In the newborn baby ant pile I held on tight.
In the lime soaked spaces of your lungs I held on tight.
In the battlefield where I broke my heart I held on tight.
In the lace pocket of years ago, in the grill pan of America,
I covered myself in cornflakes.
I said I was sorry.
I squeezed myself.
I held on tight.
There was blood in my feet.
And God there was so much blood.
During the silver sun of days, in the wet carpet,
With the strength of fourteen oxen,
On the cusp of biting,
In a rooster house covered in green green grass
I bent over myself and cried.
In the moon of the future I told you I loved you.
In the moon of the future I held on tight.

Memory For The Feeding Place In The Hive

It was the summer when we shocked each other back to life.

The doctors said it couldn't be done.

They said llamas have the strongest hearts.

So we called ourselves back from God.

In the beginning there was no light.

There was only fog and fog is not really a miracle.

The doctors clap for us.

They tell us to bathe ourselves in milk.

And at night we cry for each other, remembering how

the light pitches to the side when it rains.

How the only way out is to tumble forward.

Into the swarming insects. The soft glow of wanting.

And of everything we touch the only thing that matters

is the pulsing corner of our chest and the weight we feel beside it.

On An Ordinary Tuesday I Felt Like A Lion

The other day a man at the grocery stopped me and said: every day we die a little bit. I had been busy staring at the t-bones. Wondering what life would have been like as a synchronized skater. Or if I had been the inventor of the crane. But instead I was shopping at the Save N Glow. Instead I was staring at a man wearing two pairs of pants and thinking he looked pretty good. My life had been a series of mistakes. One after the other I tumbled through, barely dedicating myself to the vibrating pulse around me. The glistening hunks of meat, encased in all that styrofoam made me tingle with excitement. I was ready for human contact, for a soft touch, for someone to say: you make me feel alive. So I hooked my tired hands around the shopping cart and ran as fast as I could towards the blinking light on aisle 3.

You Need To Start Running

The city tells you there is someone on the phone.

A woman named Jane wants you to be happy.

And for that there will be no more singing children.

No more of the candy colored trousers that you love.

So you decide to buy new shoes.

And maybe a new hat would be good too.

Oh yes, the city says.

A new hat would be very good.

There is a man in the store that follows you.

Wanting to know if you remember the winter of 1985.

Of all people you had forgotten.

Jane is on the phone again,

Jane is telling you that the city is collapsing.

After I Contained Myself

During the yellow absence of time we were pure and unrelenting.

We watched the sun button up around the sky.

And we wondered when the moon would start to bleed.

When it would turn into a little fruit map we could be proud of.

Sweet and plump we drank ourselves from the black saucer cups.

Our hearts etched as silent gatherers, we summered ourselves in Acapulco.

It took the Greeks for us to understand.

To realize that we are the cut up stars of yesterday.

That we are the first ceremonial sunbathers.

And that we are the first people to say:

It is ok to bleed onto the pockets of young men.

Bleed with everything you've got and hit 'em hard.

On a garden rooftop, on the clear edge of space,

We are the muscular cry of God.

My Heart, A Lighthouse

On and on and on

I rode into the milky ridge

I steamed my shirt

I chewed my egg

I stood humming to myself

On a donkey

On a crater

Just west of Texas

We Wanted To Return To The Treetops

During the blizzard you sat in the slumped hallway of our house wearing nothing but a grey overcoat and some socks. You thought of your mother's life and of all the birds that are now extinct. There was a time when we kept milk jugs full of sugar. And you could hear the echo of a heartbeat when you touched the wooden floors. You once read that the passenger pigeon needed no protection. That the great toothed diver was completely flightless. Your mother lived with an aching pulse. She had always wanted to touch the milky craters of your mouth. To take your hand and say: it will be hours before the train leaves the station.

We Were Pinned Against The Treeline

We want to touch the people of Kentucky.

We want to tell them that on the coldest day of the year.

Their hearts will beat twice as fast and their lungs will begin to unravel.

We are all standing at the water's edge.

We are all holding a cold blanket.

Trying to believe that America is for flying.

No, America is not for flying, they tell us.

America is for taking off your shoes.

We scratch the floorboards in hopes of feeding our memory.

Of finding an earthquake. A toilet.

Of The Things I Used To Know

It has been seven years since I have turned anything on in my kitchen. My family has never forgiven me for the blender incident of '98. It was so hot that day. And everything was shiny and tasted like tin can. I was making quail and trying to convince my son that blimps really do exist. Nothing should have happened. Nothing should ever happen, I thought. And for every day since that day I have felt a heaviness. Deep inside and buried in the pit of my chest. Like someone chewing on my insides. My son still grieves the missing morsel of finger. The only part of him that gave up. That went to the racetracks and never came back. But today is a new day. I flick on the light and it buzzes. My lonely heart beat thumps and a cold wind rushes in behind me.

Somewhere In Idaho They Still Use Corn Powder

The city tells you to round up the people on foot.
They tell you that trees are leaning and ready.
And there are hats stuck to the pavement.
A man shows up at your door saying do it do it.
The world is a strange place.
Everything smelling more and more like mildew.
And the voice of reason buried some time ago
In a stretch of beaten road just south of nowhere.
Calling you from every phone, this is the city they say.
Use small movements and white leather gloves.
There is a constant burning.
My God the people are here.

Everyone Has A Ribcage

They say in Kansas people are handy.
They figure skate and sew their own sequins,
while others sit home and pretend to slit their wrists.
They say my hands smell like duct tape.
Being born wasn't easy and neither was seventh grade.
I was born in a bushel, on a tarmac, on a blistered road.
It doesn't really matter where.
As long as there is cake for everyone.
Birthdays are sad and in the end we are all sad.
Gold is the color of wonder.
Gold used to be the color of Kansas.
Sometimes I feel like I'm on a battleship,
and that I'm waiting to be rescued.
I can feel the dull sky against my head.
It's waiting for a new continent,
for a waterlogged heartbeat.

I Ride The City Bus

Sometimes I think about being shot into the air. My regal body, in all of its patterned goodness, gliding through the afternoon sky. Passing over the city dump I will spread myself out. My hands high above my head and my flowered house dress flapping in the wind. How glorious, I think. Like a queen greeting her subjects for the first time. And the dull ache of life will flag behind me. Crowds of people will await my landing. Waiting for the moment when they can come up to me, pressing their hands into my soft skin and say: sometimes the heart needs to bleed a little first.

I Was Abducted From A Lunchroom

On a Tuesday on the northern edge of some
remote region west of Nebraska.

Please, don't call for help.

Return to your gentle rocking,
to the meat scented hallways of your fabulous life.

I thought about calling dispatch.

I thought about sending a telegram.

Because in the end nobody wants to think that it's really the end.

One day your subatomic parts will explode.

And in the quiet back spinning that we all do,
you will become a soft and bellied sheep,
a heart cradled in milk.

Hello I Am A Crane Shaft

Yesterday I was a roaring storm,
rushing down into banks of
yellow and white wheat.
All because I wanted my potted plants.
My meat hooks and my overcoat.
To stand on your door step
And say look, I drew a picture for you.
I gathered my swords for you.
I am soft and newly born for you.
But all the days are long, you say.
So I resign myself to gentle misses,
computed hand pats from a charged out dawn.
I wait for the radio clock,
the clasp of lightning that will gather me,
and push me towards the neon sky.
Of nothing. Of nothingness.

I Used To Be A Waitress In Poughkeepsie

The postman came to the door and told me to get spiritual. It feels like a hot bath, he said. I tried to stay positive, but his eyes kept blinking. Do you know how to time travel, he asked. Do you know how to bury in the winter. I wanted to make steak tartar and then cartwheel through the living room. I wanted to be a lamp post or a chimpanzee. But the postman had only two buttons buttoned on his shirt, and he just stood there with his mouth hanging open. I should have been a hunter, I thought. I should know how to kill something with my hands.

Like I Said It Never Rains At Noontime

I am a farmer.

I farm hot baby rabbits.

The world is an amplified radio.

And I have a heart made out of meat.

Together, together we cross the desert field.

July, 1972

A balloon and a firm hand used to be the only way to fly. Little boys would run down the street screaming oh yes, oh yes it's time. They would all take off their socks and jump on the concrete. They would jump so hard, hoping for anything that would send them somewhere else. This was their duty and it was just as necessary as the mailman or the firefighter. Every week the people of the town gathered on the sidewalk and cheered, wanting to bear witness to the boys, just in case their little legs propelled them up into the atmosphere.

In Praise Of Latitude

When I was young my father dropped me off on a lonely stretch of highway 1. I remember the shape of his head. How the light hit his shoulders. How I felt like I was melting and my body was soft and somewhat uneven. My father was what some would call a bold man. He had a tattoo that said: I am the jack of hearts. But I new better than to get swept up in his charisma. I spent many afternoons wondering how I could save myself from the ticking of his life. And as he left me on that road on that hot hot day in August I felt my veins curl up inside of me. And for the first time in my life I pushed the hair up out of my eyes and uttered the words: I love you.

What God Could Do For You

This is for the people with restless legs.

For the cattle ranchers and the women who birthed them.

I found out that the world is full of sudden miracles,

Of mosquito nets and detached hearts.

And as much as I'd like to say that today is a day of glory.

Today is not a day of glory.

Today is not a day for anything.

But this isn't about attitude.

This is about lifestyle.

So I will write myself into different histories.

The history of milk, for example.

Or the history of latitude.

It has been said that the nourishment of life

Comes in the form of small sugared donuts.

I will try to do my part.

On Some Kind Of Arithmetic

We were passengers on the great flight.

On gunship. On totem pole.

We learned that we could be everywhere at once.

We could be beautiful and we were beautiful.

Like an orphaned cowboy. The last cup of milk.

We longed for the soft and gentle spoke.

Of a moonless night. Of a rushing ferry.

How we wish that we could say we're sorry.

To the purple light of a long forgotten day.

We were bound at the heels waiting for the first cut.

We blew kisses to each other and thought of Isaac.

When We Were Given

During the firestorm our fathers told us to travel in circles.

They wanted us to pin our hair back and pretend like it was raining.

On the radio today a man killed a fish.

And when he was done he said: I am victorious and
my heart is bursting like fresh candy.

Only a water man can stop our hurting.

And when we return in the night with our hands spread out and sticky
we will make history.

Our fathers told us to be lively and memorize our city names.

And on the corner of the street we pressed our palms against the building.

Trying to remember how it felt to touch something,
to be more like the hot blood child of yesterday.

An Astral Home

One by one I dropped all of my fine china plates from the second story balcony. I had woken up that morning fresh and alert. Already thinking of street fairs and sail racing. How to bottle last night's catfish. I was operating on all eleven of my cylinders. In the days before I had decided that I needed to give more of myself. To people. To animals. To anything that needed me. I threw out the plastic wrap and toothpicks. The hot glue guns and pom pom sweaters. Today was a day full of promise. I was inventing a secret jello flavor. A new moon man landing for everyone.

From The Hum Of The Refrigerator

When I said that I missed you I didn't really mean it.
And when I said that running is the fastest form of movement
I didn't really mean that either.
It has been years since your hands were cold and splintered
and the grey moon of night couldn't keep me
from cartwheeling under a bleached out sky.
From wading through the knee deep trenches of your life.
We are all a sinking ship.
We are all hanging over the edge of some underwater building.
Waiting for the white winter hive and its honeyless beauty.
Waiting to disappear into the bone colored sand
of some distant planet.
I would have hurdled through the streets for you.
You were a messianic sign. A door post made of gold.

This Is How It Is

With a left hand they gave to you half of what would have been. Half of the bird covered flight. Half of your buckling knees. Half of the oath you took to reclaim your gesture. You could not convince them of touching home and making sound. You wanted to prove that you could cradle movement. They would not have any of it. There would be no circle diving or last minute hand shakes. Standing in a field they laughed, as your mobile heart bent over like a rocket.

Green Is The Only Way To Make Sound

We know how to swaddle in the morning,
and when we do there is a suitcase.

It is full and full of things we can't smell,
so we rub them on trees.

We build guns and float them on the river.

We collapse into bags.

We make our clothes big and with sticks.

We hurl ourselves forward and dig in the ground.

Because God knows a dying animal when he sees one.

I Clean My Desk With Turpentine

I left for Omaha on an unforgiving Tuesday. When my son turned to me and said “there is no such thing as a power vacuum” I knew I needed to go. I headed north with a box packed full of hand rags and soap bars. I didn't think about the weekly card games or the town mascot. No, I just drove my car into the squinty sunlight of day and imagined myself as an army missile. I wanted desperately to be overtaken by air. I wanted to be threatening. I wanted to fall and fall and fall. Boom. Into the land. That is where I wanted to go.

Of Strings And Of Gold

On a cathedral neck in some great city

I weathered myself clean.

I had no way of knowing the distance.

On horseback. On stamp post.

I lit a lonely sketch of myself.

I stuck my tongue out and washed it.

So full of hope I cut my heart into other hearts.

It bled and bled and bled.

Into a buffet of half empty glasses.

Into the velvet lip of night I held myself.

It was the last logical touch,

A glittered road to some other place.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

You fall into my lap in one hundred pieces.
I keep them in a jar by the bed.
The jar I made for you.
Sometimes when I go out I take parts of you with me.
The butcher asks me how you are doing.
I say fine thank you.
He doesn't know I have your smile in my pocket.
The tailor asks me what you have been up to.
I tell her you've been busy.
You are all over the place these days.
She doesn't know I keep your tongue in my wallet.
When I see people that look sad I give them a part of you.
There is a lady uptown with your eyes.
A little boy down the block has your hands.
It is the least I can do.
At night I dump you out on the bed.
I run my hands over your parts and imagine.
What it would be like to put you back together.
What it would be like to curl your hair into my palms.

Everything Around Me Is A Pool Of Light

While riding through town on a mild afternoon I turned to my son and said “When I die I want to be swallowed alive.” He rubbed his hands over his bony knees and said “I know, me too.” In my last moments I wanted to travel back through the body. What it would look like or what it would feel like I didn’t yet know. I wanted to glide into the stomach like a new age cosmonaut. I needed to run my hands along the wet side of somebody’s heart. With its throbbing beauty. I could think of nothing greater. Like the first drink of water. Or a newly made smokestack. Startled, I looked at my son and together we got out of the car and made our way across the rushing freeway.

Only A Pitchfork Can Save Us

Grandma survived the tornado and stood in the street handing out glitter.

It was good and the dancing never stopped.

The wires click beneath the ground.

We are all in the water now.

Do you like it Grandma.

Do you know about the corn trees.

There is no such thing as pistol fire.

Only a hand crank and a whistle.

So we waited and it was cold.

This Year Is A Leap Year

Mother told us the only way to reach the hive was to say yes.

We did and we did, but the people used tape.

Call it home they said.

Call it a miracle.

We covered ourselves in soap, and stood in between the trees.

Mother taught us that boxcars are made of gold.

She said she would be the one to unravel us.

We drew maps inside circles.

Wanting to believe that we belonged somewhere.

We learned how to do a scissor kick and it was beautiful.

A New World Is On Its Way

Once I had a dream that the sky could bleed baby hearts. My husband told me it was a sign. He told me that I should have been a showboat dancer. I longed for a way out. I wanted to shave my head and lie down in a salt cave. I wanted the stars to be made out of small fruit. But these things were only a matter of time. I could hear the hum of the colossal explosion. The vacant chasm melting in my chest. An elephant beat. A throttle upwards. I hoped that the coil of my life would magnify and that one day I would be a great ball. Bursting into flames, looking for a soft place to land.

On The Precipice Of Wanting

In the metallic camera of my front yard
I stretch out for miles and picture you.
You are my underground estuary.
My sharp and piney forest of abandon.
It is true that cherries only ripen once.
And in the fresh hot sun I sit and ready myself.
For a buffalo hunter. An airlifted heart.
It used to be that I could plough through anything.
And that the real birds of my youth lived on a grassy knoll.
But life is not about glitter or irony or some other shit.
It is about fractal spines.
And after all the times in my life that I've counted to ten.
I have only learned one thing:
God is made out of small silk flowers.