



Sarah Ann Winn

PORTAGE

Sarah Ann Winn

Sundress Publications

For Denise

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Alma . . .

Nourished in Latin, Spanish for *soul*,
in Arabic, *on the water*.

I translated the Buckeye blossoms spelling
directions on the street, words
in a language only I knew,
a secret message between me and the trees -
their scent as I walked up Alma Avenue
everywhere. They shaped me as they blew past,

whispered the Hungarian meaning - *apple*.
I was measured against the hunchback Baldwin tree,
nourished by the rain returning to lakes, in showers, in drizzles.
Cut out, a piece of the moon jigsawed with maple branches.

Gorge of girl, shaped by erosion,
gorgeous, engorged by trees.
Pitted by tart cherries giving over to sweetness.
transformed by weeds turned into dandelion salad,
shored up by life on lakes which were named for carrying.
I was made to portage, by Portage, a girl raised by reservoirs,
lifted from one lake and carried to the next,
made to find joy in journeys.

Taught this Alma, Aramaic, my *world*
begins in in-between,
learned to read words scrawled on screen doors
as cuneiform, rain-worn. I traced
petrichor to its origin - our vestibule.
Ran down the worn desire paths,
followed creases made by ironing day,
the smell of steam and hot cotton.
I entered the square stacks
of handkerchiefs in dresser drawers,
folded, pressed, intent.

I sorted the wheat pennies from copper chaff
kept in a wooden bowl. I counted.
The number of pennies -
how far from Alma I still must go.

Baldwin Apples . . .

In October, their vinegar
drew bees or decay's sweetening
drew bees. We brought bushel baskets
and sorted. Some for the compost,
the gently bruised for pies. The best,
those half-gone with pocked, perfect skin
still a little green, for canning
and apple butter. The Baldwins
lured me to the kitchen counter.
The turn-and-scraping colander
mill when the cooked apples were poured in —
the splashed juice hot and delicious.
Space made by adding cooked apples
carefully. She tipped the ancient
dutch oven, and my idea
of plenty poured down. I didn't
dare move or some would go to waste.
Save some for later, she said. Now
we restock the canned goods cupboard.
No beauty goes to waste here. Fill
the shelf. Put up for lean winter
the sweet of slowly gathering
afternoon, that long fragrant bake,
the whole house cooked up, and browned with
cinnamon. In winter, the sound
of that seal breaking snaps me back
to sorting apples in the sun.
Their scent rolled from Atalanta's
fingers, the breath of Eve before she bit.

Earthenware . . .

Broken things fill in cracks,
my grandma's vase
long ago tipped by the cat,
the pieces of blue pottery
not thrown out.

House jigsawed apart,
the bureau drawer broken.
the button escapes to the vent.

One of the beautiful blue pieces
cut my thumb, the sharps worth saving
now in a bowl on the mantle.

The hammer and nails
are not put away –
they are never put away.
The glue on this workbench
puddles then dries.

Underground some assemblage moves,
in the calculation of seeds in firm frozen ground
already pulling the black coats from their shoulders.

Floats . . .

July fourth. Baseball's on the radio,
a steady hum from the garage
outlasts the locusts for an inning.

Tonight the fireworks will
splay and fall over the lake,
but now in the lull after picnic,

a little work sweetens the languor.
A hymn of mending to be done,
perpetual hum in work clothes

at tool benches. Hum of a.m. radio,
hum of a job well done. Grinding
a machine file, a drill and electric saw job.

A thirst for work, ground down waterless.
A quenchable need to shape for use.
Thirst to be finished, to restart, to righten.

Salt of drive. Of worn hammers
ready to drive home. The well-driven nail,
head flush with board. The carpenter's tools

love the carpenter at work. In the shade,
a yellow mug full of root beer waits,
slowly forms a ring of sweat on the workbench.

The ice cubes melt away, ebbing as tasked.
The machine needs to be tended. Runs all afternoon.
Salt added to sweet drone of memory.

When the ice cream is ready,
we may scoop it into mugs for floats,
sweetness brought to sweetness,

sip then sneak a dribble of salt
from the side of the metal churn.
Root, it speaks of origins.

Nocturne . . .

Our little one runs around the sky without thought of finding a friend. Typical of only children, she does not always play well with others. We've thought of having a second, but the time never seemed right, and also, who would want another, having already our bright girl. We enroll her in the best school. For her afternoons, piano and ballet. Our house is full of pirouettes, and inside out tights curled like spent flower blossoms left on the stairs. She speaks all the languages of the earth. She knows how to roll her Rs. She knows every constellation. She thinks she might one day grow up to be a painter. We give her lakes full of rippling shadows and light, and all the walls she can cover. She begs us for a kitten. We give her a kitten. She calls me mother, and when I turn out the light, she buries her head in my neck. Her sleeplessness worries us. We have asked for tests to cover a range of childhood ailments. We could not bear to lose her.

Lunar Distances . . .

If I measure, stretching yarn,
the distance between each
family grave, marking in star trails
the relationship between my personal legends,

and if I recognize the role of the rain,
re-learn the song of the yellow finch,
recognize hymns, too, could be paths
and quilts, and tire tracks dug into a yard.

If I follow to the root
our family, the Baldwin's crooked branches,
will it end deep in Heaven, or on South Main
at the Haven of Rest Home for the Indigent?

The Museumobile . . .

of Moveable History
is missing again.

Lost traveling out to towns
too remote to hear about
the endless lost things –
cities buried while

we did laundry, washed
away while we scrubbed
floors, safe planes unsafening,
sudden mountains opening
like pop-ups in children's books,
cave paintings, found by children

in Pied Piper range, in stories
no longer legend, languages
fading or stolen away.
Last Titanic survivor,
and oldest known test patient
for the polio vaccine

are getting a divorce.
How dangerous it all is.
We know so much history,
so little about the past.
Thirty miners still buried,
as deep as they ever were.

One hundred years ago,
the mathematic equivalent of
once upon, they understood –
the way through history
is soundproof. Must be
tube threaded carefully.

The same stints used to keep my
Grandmother's arteries open
prop these lines of story,
flowing, for now, and always
down deep in the dark the fear
something new will collapse.

Delayed Exposure, Close to Home . . .

She knows, she's serious,
she's square to camera,
Tell it straight, her gram always said.

Beside her, gram curled unaware.
The camera ready,
everpoised, overexposing.

Her gram cannot tell
it straight. Her body leads
her backwards, away
from poise.

Cannot tell square from
crooked, cannot tell
it straight. Her thoughts
in one light doubled-shadowed,
white unbalanced in another.

Caught sleeping, away into dreams
of albums, sharp edges
black cornered, pasted, clean.

Awake, she unravels
like Penelope, hoping the sailor
whose name she cannot remember
will not be long. *Will he be long?*

The camera tells it,
squares the napping shell,
knows well the timer
about to collapse the scene.

Deconstructed . . .

Drop of red wine
slides down the tablecloth,
her first sip ruined,
spilled, seventy years ago.

A red sweater unravels,
pull the thread, the sleeve
uncouples into a fray.

Line of cigarette smoke
from his goodbye,
dropped and heel ground.

How precise the cut.
She remembers the pattern
of the lace curtain
on her grandmother's back door,
but cannot describe it.

Her memories skid
on a slick table,
a new deck of cards shuffled,
dropped, hard to pick up
with shaking hands.

Coventry . . .

How we drove down the highway, past the clock tower, I showed you my wave as we passed the old Firestone building, how the turnoff came so quickly.

How the owls stood in the window of the Old Portage Inn as a signal or a code. I noticed every week and wondered what they were meant to ward away, especially in winter, when the crowds came to watch ice golf. Grandma and Grandpa would not guess. How we found out the owls and the innkeepers were arrested at last, how I missed the owls, miss them even now.

How the sign crossing the bridge showed a mother duck with her head cut off, blithely (or was it bravely?) leading three little ones across. How the island grew up from the lake the year they dredged, the year Jimmy died.

Here is the place, with its magic shop thrifts, and its lake skirting roads. How Susan lived just across the way, and around the point, though you could not see her house from my room, how her house was hidden even from a boat at her shore. Here are the woods we stumbled through at night. Here is the church, here is the church bell, open the doors, see all the missing people.

How small this room is, how the beds twin and face the wrong way, how the past jigsaws in. Here the leaves cast the shadow of an old woman in a rocker, here the headlights chase across the ceiling. See the chestnut mare's eye in the pine wall, and just below it, the roan's.

Mandala . . .

She rode the teal bicycle all the way from doorstep to trail, carrying a backpack crammed with bottle caps, a basketball of red yarn, and a battery powered glue gun. A box was strapped behind her, containing all the license plates she could find. It had taken years of collecting from double parked cars, and ones without handicap hang tags parked in handicap spots, but she finally had all the states. She walked until she came to the clearing by the lake, where the trail was always soggy, but the slab of rock reaching out above the lake was always dry. She tried a couple of different angles for her kickstanded bike, til the lake was framed by the parallelogram above the pedals. The white seat challenged her, so she took from her pocket a bottle of cherry nail polish, and painted over the plastic with careful paisleys. With the license plates, she fashioned a suit of armor for the bicycle, turning it into a lean samurai tank with curly red yarn bows, a look achieved by unraveling twenty red sweaters, only one made for the bull on Wall Street. In places the teal peaked through. It's one thing to knit bomb. It's another to unmake nature. Sweaters have a lot of yarn winding around inside them, all potential. She put the yarn ball, now as big as an ostrich egg beside the samurai bike, and took up her glue gun. From her knees, she dotted a mandala of glue dabs and anchored bottle caps in a mosaic of the earth, with the bicycle at the very top, parked illegally at the North Pole. It could at any moment ride south with the ice caps. It didn't seem safe since coasting and braking were achieved in the same motion of pedaling backwards. Her favorite cap read *Jolt!*. It looked like a small prayer. It looked like an imperative. She wondered if it would do any harm to place it just under the front tire.

Out . . .

Running out of gas in West Virginia at midnight is an act of God. No use to start walking now. Nothing is open. The waterfall is somewhere nearby, but unlit by the new moon, we could only get close enough to fall in, and still see nothing but the wet dark. The only light comes from the mining spotlights, which glare out of the hills, as shadowy carts on an apparatus rigged like a ferris wheel haul up from the earth. Think about those men under ground. They're as stuck as we are, and even once they're out, may never get out.

Skyless . . .

When the sky closes up shop, and hangs out the sign, all the other planets turn their heads. They wonder how we get by, without any sky. They pity us our abrupt poverty, the way the color blue no longer belongs to us. How we lose the warm night smell of honeysuckle. When the sky closes, and drapes covers over its counters, and sets the alarm, when the clouds are dim and protected, when only the passing headlights glint against the stars, we find the world without atmosphere is black or white. We blame ourselves, but there is nobody to punish us, only our own shadows.

Fire Place . . .

The old year
burnt out in
snaps of wood
sap, pop and
knot flare blue.
I left space
in the stack
so air could
flame, piled logs
unevenly so
they could fall
at odd times,
displaced. Found
small splinters
in my hands
the last still
dangerous
broken pieces.
Sudden stack
shift, logs roll.
Bright scatter
and sudden
blow forward.
Now, all around
the embers,
the ash.

Grieving the Eclipse . . .

I'll never hear from you again,
never find an envelope
always saying the same things
in different ways year after year.

I used to laugh at how you talked about the weather,
how I could have known already
by watching the forecast for Ohio what you were about to say.
Never knew I was to look in the spaces between the words

to find unwritten news about stars within stars
gone out over the water, flickering,
and more, verses, the way you said God spoke
when you held a shell up to my ear

and I didn't hear anything but I knew what I was meant to say.
How I should describe the watch's writhing gears,
the time doled out and contained. In the beginning
was the end and the end knew you and the end was you.

How I should wrap my wrists, let the bands
wear me down, leave their mark.
When it's time to go in, you said, tell me,
but I missed it. This is what keeps me from sleep,

just in case anything else happens
while I find a scrap of peace, a shadow cast on the snow.
The darkness tells me the body is only an excuse,
something to contain the soul, now swaying on the tree,

the sky between the branches, waving in the wind.
There is nothing left but to try to keep imperfect time
and watch everything in creation, the fragments
of words reaching out, past leaves to us.

I Consider Whether Shipping Your Memory Home Would Be Too Costly . . .

I take your memory out to the garage
to weigh it. The scale for this is ageless,
brings to mind counters and bulk foods.
Its shadow has stood for years, swaying,
its red needle uncertainly bouncing when jostled.

A hidden spring reveals a drawer underneath,
a set of weights in various shapes.
One, a net of light on water cast in lead,
another, a set of miniature music box gears,
each the weight of a different song, all in bronze,

sawtoothed as if meant for toy lumber mills.
I place your memory on the cradle, light as light,
which also has weight and substance - matter.
I add twenty snowflakes, winter preserves.
I tap the meter, which trembles, add lemon

from a cold tea cup, hum as much as I can remember
from *When the Roll is Called up Yonder*. Finally,
I open your last letter, unbend the handwriting
so each word straightens into a binary barcode of blue,
dole out these sticks to the tray. If it balances, you'll go.

Braeburn Apple . . .

In the end she was little more than a bundle of worn
stakes, left in the orchard. Still, her heart worked
to keep the secret star of seeds inside shining.

The things I want to remember, I'm given the stubborn detail.
No matter how much I try to hear, in my sister's voice
exactly what she said, the knobby shape of the apple is clear.

The day we saw the deer, we shared a two fisted apple.
I don't remember whether she said anything at all
as they bounded away, or if she only laughed and ate the core.

It blocks my way into the past, sour, oversized and imperfect,
too firm, lip bruising. She might not have laughed,
but as she was always laughing, it's likely.

Homing . . .

She thinks the homing doves are pigeons, their white
more shocking than a camera flash, a spark
against the sky, reminder of the sun on lakes.

Unlikely they would roost here, on break
from rising up at weddings,
black rooftop, white rhythm.

Nearby a hedge obscures the dovecote
from the roadside view. Beside the funeral home,
up on power lines, above the dead who come and go.

Where traffic pauses at the light,
the living haunt the dead.
She thinks of home when driving to Ohio.

She thinks of her late mother's step, climbing
through childhood, her slippers flopping up the stairs.
If she is sleeping, I will wake her. Always

the pause where the stairs flatten in a mesa
beside my door. The sleeper waits to say 'Goodnight'
and doves rise past like dreams.

When she drives past, their wings call soft
her mother's name, unless the drive is dark,
and she's asleep and dreaming.

Sketching from Life . . .

First, she asks us to draw the cut tulip in the vase,
to draw it from under and above, to turn it in our minds
so that we are viewing the sun through its long veins,
so that we imagine it ascending unroped, unmanned into the sky.

Then she asks us to draw it growing in a field, among
one million bright brothers and sisters, swaying undisturbed
by the strokes of our pencils.

Next she has us offer it to a stranger on a subway, or to lightly trace
the movement of a tulip on a high wire. She asks us to introduce
the tulip to Chihuly, to remind him of the fragility of the tulip,
what it knows of waiting in the darkness.

She asks us to take the tulip from winter, to shade in
the grit and dirt, to imagine deer teeth rooting and gnawing.
To imagine a spring without tulips.

She asks us to draw the tulip in a field where it doesn't belong,
make a grid of orange cups ordering a mall parking lot,
or a lone red in a stippled yellow sea of daffodils.

She asks us to cut it for our grandmother, to place it in a juice bottle
on the kitchen counter, or in the plastic water pitcher on a hospital tray.

Now we're supposed to draw just the petals, splayed, or fallen,
first their tender vivid cups,
then the straight line bruise of a fallen stick
scraping the petals, folding them.

We're to close our eyes, and draw it without looking,
get down on the page the memory of its scent.
She asks us to view the stamen as
arms, to ask ourselves what the arms want.
To sketch the answer.

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