

Glossogenesis



Cynthia White

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Pareidolia

I'm holding a cup I've owned so long I forgot
what it looks like. It looks like
an egg. Greenish gray. Speckled,
but with little black rings I never noticed.
Inside each ring, pinprick eyes
and a black spot where a mouth would be
if it were a face. And so it is, a face
opening its mouth so wide
I sense distress. When I was a kid,
our Buick had a face, and so did
the kitchen range, a happy pattern of handles
and knobs. Trees, clouds, the patchwork
moss on stones; I saw a world made up
of inanimate, friendly beings. An illusion. Like seeing
the Virgin Mary in a grilled cheese sandwich.
Those times my mother had the DTs, tiny faces
leered from the walls. She kept punching them
like they were buttons on an elevator.
Evil has a face. As does kindness
and the earth and the sea. I read
that an infant learns her mother's
within hours of being born. We are seekers
of meaning. A young Paul Klee found faces
in the marble-topped tables of his uncle's restaurant,

Dalí in the plaster ceiling of his classroom.
The word *face* is cousin to *facere*, from the Latin
to make. The way a potter fashions clay
with her hands. The way
she adorned and glazed, then fired
through the night this vessel that holds me.

Tongue

At breakfast, mine goes hunting, rouses a raspberry seed.
Parts include arches, ducts, folds, caruncles

glossus this and glossus that. When kissing—
on a park bench, with M. in his clawfoot tub—

my *muscular hydrostat* deforms itself bonelessly,
as do elephant trunks, leeches, the genius arms of an octopus.

And what if sorrow is our mother, our mutual?

From the Greek *glossa*: something barbed,
like an arrow or a thorn, like language and the noxious

leaves of houndstongue. A duck's serves
as sieve, a parrot's as finger.

Bells have them, and hardwood floors.

Eavesdrop

In the bathroom of a Denver steakhouse,
a girl was talking on her phone.

How can my mother love me if she never returns my calls?
The stall doors were solid oak, Sinatra sang “Autumn Leaves.”

I should have gone back to the bar, ordered another whiskey.
But doesn’t everybody listen? And how could I

exit without shame? She thought herself alone. Besides,
there was more. A brother close to dying, and, god help her,

it was her birthday. Eavesdrop is the ground beneath
the eaves where water drips. Thus, an eavesdropper

means she who lingers in that spot, keen to hear
what’s going on inside. By then, I was thinking about

my own mother, her unhappiness a kind of tidal wave
I rode into adulthood. I wanted to say something kind,

tell the girl she’d survive. Instead, I stayed, listened
with relief when she told her friend

she had to go to work, then if it wasn't too late,
visit her brother at the hospital.

Still Life with Flux

The sheet was a canvas: milk, blood, semen, pee—
a groaning board post feast, a Rorschach test
for marriage. We could have plotted our days
by its streaks and streams. We could have flown it
from the bedpost like a motley household flag.
There were clouds shaped like birds.
There were clotted sunsets, shifting constellations.
Flux comes to us from *fluxus*, meaning a flowing,
a rolling, an ongoing series of changes,
like the diapers set on high, like the baby
who slept and woke, afloat.

Bag

After getting the vaccine, first one, then months
later a second dose, I was invited to a party.

These aren't strangers, I told myself,
just friends from whom I feel

estranged. Oh to be loud & incandescent
in a room with humans. I went looking

for a bag, shiny & sleek, to hold the good
pinot I'd bought. But I found only plain

everyday bags, workhorses that had borne
that unbearable year, our deliveries of bread & coffee,

sushi dinners, quarts of strawberry ice cream
we'd devour in our sweats, taking shelter

in the frivolity of old movies—
laughter & champagne, people touching

unabashedly. *Bag* comes from the Norse *boggr*,
meaning burden or shame. When I pictured

my friend's kitchen, it was bright with bodies
leaning against counters & in doorways,

the air between us fizzy with talk—
whatever we'd been carrying, laid down.

Listen

A mockingbird chick weighs less than your eye,
but hark to the rising squeals
beyond the double pane. Like bagpipes,
like trains, like Tuvans hitting two pitches
together, only desperate.

I go outside with binoculars, and deep
in my abelia, spy the yellow funnels
of mouths unhinged to an impossible
angle. In the novel I just finished,
the narrator takes up the tangled roots
of the word *list*, from Old English *lystan*,
“to cause pleasure or desire, provoke longing.”
Every few minutes, a parent flies to the nest
with a beetle or a worm. I never thought I’d crave
that pleasure again. The beck, the call.
Keeping the hatched from death. My first
was born disconsolate. *Fussy*, my mother said.
I could have driven away, traveled to another city,

a far-off country. I could have left the planet.
But oh, those screams.

Boneset

Its coarse leaves are thought to help in the healing
of bones, lessen fever and bloat. White flowers froth
from the tip. I'm not sick. Not that way.
It's the perennial creep of mortality I suffer.
My father's skeleton lies in darkness. My mother's too.
My own is part honeycomb, part cheese.
I would have a child. I would have my daughter's womb
grow rosy with arm buds, glimmering clavicles.
Call it bone-rise. After her first hard fall,
the doctor explained *green-stick fracture*
while I saw again and again her sapling wrist
hit the sidewalk, giving and giving until the terrible
crack. It's risky, the making
of a human. A baby takes everything
it needs, will leach the ore from your body.
After the doctor was done,
I wrapped myself around that girl like a plaster.

Muff Ode

When my hands weren't inside you,
I'd stroke your whorled
white fur. Rabbit, my mother let slip,
but I didn't picture you as dead. You
were my pet. My little loaf. How delicious
to stand and chat, idle as a Russian princess,
while the boys toiled at their snow fort
in ice-caked mittens. My husband tells me
he always envied the girls. Their sweetly
pampered palms. As if he could intuit
the soft plunge, the final full
ensnarement. I can't resist
describing you like this. It's no surprise
you share a name with humanity's own burrow—
so comforting, so perfectly designed
to keep out the cold.

Spell

Each morning, before misery could take me
in its glamorous arms, before the first bell and long
before home room, that cauldron of boredom,
all of us spoiling for devilry, before I got close
enough to smell some other kid's anguish,
pungent and complex as my own, I'd pass
into the nicotine funk of the Girls
to ready my reflection. Then bidding
my mother's voice *bush*, I'd call on Revlon
Normal Beige, Avon Fuzz Peach lip gloss, blush,
and the wand I'd draw from its golden tube,
heavy with *mascara*—from the Spanish,
meaning a mask or a stain.

Song of Ira

It was years ago I learned the job
of caring for him, Ira of the deep
brown eyes and impish curls,
whose name means *mighty* or *watchful*,
whose body, at twelve, couldn't walk,
speak, return
my look. I changed
his diaper, fed him lunch from a bottle.
His mother could be bitter
about the birth. The shunt. His father cracked
jokes to draw blood. Ira the impeccable,
dressed in the latest surf shirts and sweats.
Some mornings, I'd get to the house to find him
overspilling his mother's lap. I was young,
unversed in life. But it seemed right
that she should hold him and sing
old folk tunes, lullabies
in other tongues. He would know
her vibration, her smell if nothing else,
and maybe something more,
an else, a grace I can hardly conceive of.
Ira the adored, Ira the mourned.

Wonder

Three hummingbirds dipped in and out of a city stream,
a whirl of wings limned in gold.

I filched an apple from my neighbor's tree, ate it clean
to the core while the sky bled

pink, then orange, then red as fire, a scrap of moon
caught in the blaze.

The root word of wonder means to desire,
and who doesn't want

to want the world? I like to think of wonder
as a well, or maybe an organ like the liver,

that when damaged can repair itself. Maybe you, too,
have days you desire nothing

beyond the bleakest nothing. Days when the tiny,
iridescent spider on the lip

of your sink is only a bug. When love itself
won't cut it. Maybe, like me, you turn

to Rilke to Merwin, or Dickinson. And even then,
feel scarcely a trickle. But listen,

it's like when you prick your finger—
bring it to your mouth, taste the iron and salt.

Ward

From her private room in detox,
my mother's view is solid
philodendron. Fronds like green shields.
In the submarine light, we speak selectively—
Philip Roth, the sweet final films of Truffaut.
Today, I watch a beetle trundle up a fleshy stalk,
armored and unswerving. He's straight out of her
delirium with wicked little horns. My mother
wears a silver shamrock to ward off evil, swallows
whatever she's given. I never could protect her.
She eyes the beetle, raps twice on the glass.

Batterie de Cuisine

Keep your sorrow brief and your anger long.

—Yoon-Kim Ji-Young

Some mothers get that like a tasty stew,
anger takes patience. Before mine flambéed

the mattress, the sheets, the plump pillow
where my father lay his lying head each night,

she packed our lunches—
homemade cupcakes rigid with frosting,

sandwiches sliced just so—
then kissed us out the door. To achieve good

depth and complexity, you must sweat
the vegetables, dredge the meat. Baste

liberally with gin. Did I say she was a lady?
Imagine the training. The fires

banked, barely alive. I smell it still, that afternoon—
onions, bay, her blistering broth.

Footpad

As a girl, I pictured death the way
I pictured sex, transporting but light

on details. Except he should be
mounted. Mustachioed and dashing.

Now, I hear about a woman—
an acquaintance, my age—

on a shaded path I also walk, whose heart
quit just before the lime-kiln turnoff,

dying in a place that's known
for its beauty, its wildlife and singular

views. Open to foot traffic only,
it's peaceful. Not a bad spot

for pondering final
possibilities. Like the absence

of all that pomp and apocalyptic fuss—
just a brigand and his dust.

Mechanophilia

—a sexual attraction to machines such as bicycles, motor vehicles, ships, and airplanes.

It's summer, and I am not in love with horses
Like my best friend, her bedroom a temple,
Storybooks and figurines, days pledged
To the stables. I ride a Huffy, royal blue.
If she's any kind of animal, she's kept it secret,
The way I don't tell my mother where
I'm going. I pedal toward the river,
Hoping for minnows, my small mound
Snug in the saddle. How can I convey
That quicksilver throb—molten
Unheralded bliss? *Bicycle*,
Victorians dubbed their quivering beast,
And feared for female purity.
Once found, I press the instrument
Again. Over and over, as much as I wanted.

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About the Author



Cynthia White's poems have appeared in *Adroit*, *Massachusetts Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *New Letters*, *Poet Lore*, and *Plume*, among others. Her work can be found in numerous anthologies, including *leaning toward light: Poems for gardens and the hands that tend them* from Storey Press. She was a finalist for Nimrod's Pablo Neruda Prize and the winner of the Julia Darling Memorial Prize from Kallisto Gaia Press. Her poem "She Said Stop Here" was recently included in the preface to "Alma Mater" by London playwright Kendall Feaver. She lives in Santa Cruz, California.

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