

RACHEL SLADE

SELECTED POETRY

Pillar

what letter begins your country's name
how shall we begin to make something whole again.
how shall we name the body.
its rivers and roads.
my companion folds herself into sleep.
I ask.
how shall we name the fields
where we were abandoned
like nightgowns.
and I ask.
how shall we name the beginning of the stone
used to martyr the bird
or the blue wing of solitude.
I ask.
how to beat the names black.
how to die like a column of numbers.
I ask. though she sleeps.
how to name the honey in the mouth.
the body of my body, sex of my sex.
the patron saint of empty houses.

Iris

1.

mine is the language of standing still
a snail dreaming on a pillow of eggs
small numbers, a column of fixed resin
this is the territory of shaken stars
mine is the language of matrimony, the firm agreement
of four feet in river water, my name a stone thrown at the sky
my hesitation is the outcry of wooden horses
my death is a horse laying down in the water
its ribs the archway of earth's desire
instinct and calculation made plastic and real.
an endless land of white stone. immense and strategic.
I am an island of snow and things fallen asleep in the snow.
I am a land without sorrow.

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2.

The measures of the hand create the whole body
the grasses and membranes soaking in the sun or
bits of fur abandoned in ditch water
these animal stalkings part trees in the distance
and if love waits for you there
the two black leaves on the thin tree will wave
the girl was a thin memory, waving.

dry roads led me to her and her to me
she was the envelope of a dust cloud
rising on the roadside at noon
we were boys and girls together
on the man's road. among the man's herds.

I was an iris and a hymn
I was a white crane in the burnt field
I was the empty gutted houses leaning over the water
and the land was a strong mouth, a strong hand.

3.

I am what the land brought forth in me
a waxen tongue, a solid longing
a land scraped clean by the river
animal sign left in rust colored silt

I am what the houses left behind
the smell of wet burnt timber
a folded hand, eyeglasses, blue bottles
countless dogs

I am what the light of day couldn't find there
a stethoscope, the pruned orchard
the last laugh

you must create then destroy the image
bending over a hand-built fire
among countless drowsing dogs
cold fur, hot hearts

I was what the land couldn't find in me
a water heavy book
a plastic number
the genetic code for blue sky

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4.

I am living among the densities
says the bird suspended over empty houses
I am the immense whiteness of the eye
and the pinpoint of sorrow
if you hold out your hand, I will fly to you
and cover your face with plaster dust

I am the immense hunger of boiled noodles
and two stiff rabbits waiting in the bin
a belly ache under blue stars, tremor of rusty water
a dog of terrible proportions covering myself with earth

I am the blinkering of openings and sudden animal stillness
I am your trial come too soon

5.

I was the immense structure of happiness
the solid form in the metaphysical field
that stood for one day, a year, a year and a day
I was the form your joy took
among the forms foreshortened in the sharp light of early day
how many times it all stood still
how many times a bird fixed itself to a point in midair
I was a form without mercy, time-bound, love-fixed
I was the stone-star
I was the marigold of marigolds
in your field of fields

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Night Watch

"When we awake it is the animal, the plant, that thinks in us."

Jean Cocteau

I.

Pushed through the mineral night,
on the way home through the fields.
During the night watch,
never question the animal if it is an animal.
Its movements are as wide and complex as a bee's
and its mouth a labyrinth of corridors and blind angles.

The slow hum of its machinery
is pleasing to the human ear,
its heart is a bomb that seeks you.
Play slow around it, play soft and friendly.
Offer some rainwater and see if it comes near.
It comes close on the back roads,
as if to hear you better
to take your vowels and consonants into its mouth
and breathe them back to you.
Put your mouth to its mouth, discern what is there
if it can be known and measured.
I'll tell you,
it weighs more than it costs
and it costs everything.

II.

The animal speaks as though it knows by rote
all things prior and present, without you.
It points to the clear, poignant markings between objects
the patterns buried in fur,
pigments that leave sanguine traces in fields and bones,
plasm that names every mother after itself.

The entire body seemed an arrow, pointing west
straight into the wind that blows it
from point to point over the plains.
Go there, it says,
toward a fixed point on the horizon.
With lids closed, transparent like a bird's
over a dark round eye that searches from a distance,
from a closeness that devours breath.

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New Harbor

Mouth to the mouth of animal, fish and harbor.
Part the water with your hands, your hair, your knives
and there: a miracle in the form of gesture,
a gesture that neither draws near nor draws the line.
A kind of waving to the shore from afar, a laughter.
A gesture so full it fills the harbor,
so deep it doesn't realize
where it must be, or what it is.
You call upon it to invent for you a horse,
even a small horse, that drowns the drearies.
One that vanishes and reappears
with a sword in mouth, or flames.
Something that bursts the timber frames of houses,
that magnifies the day to unbearable proportions
then buries it deep in your hair.
It was asked and answered.
Something that pulls down the bells from the towers
and throws them through the local museums
that burn in mineral silence.
Something that tells stories and strokes the cat.
Something that marries you and drives you to some forest
or national park where they drop off the animals
once in a while and track them and measure
the curves of lostness,
the innumerable angles of hunger.

Flatlands

A land fallen on its side
like a white horse, a giant torso of gesso
keeping time, drop by drop, in deep chambers.
Don't ask if it's real or only apparent.
It's either parched or flooded
while never a water drop shall enter.

*

You roll over on your back
in the palm of a hand,
nude and red as a beetle.
Your immaculate jointed body
shining in the sun,
ink-black in the shadow.

*

It's the geology of a name,
a word too hard to be swallowed.
The mouth resists you,
nothing lays claim to you.
Let the white stone roll in the grass
while all the world's ribbons
spill from its side like an endless wound,
like a river of excellent bodies.

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Blueprints

The plaster samples are fixed to the wall
there among blistered papers
isolated deep in the blueprints.
Blue figures chart a path,
whose lines are fact and body.
They will take your name, like children
and roll over you in mute play.
You give them honey rolls
and goat's milk fresh from the torso.
Absence and distance pressed there too,
against the thigh with sighs and breaths,
all expanding in the roundest of nights.
Your fingers count them out
arriving at a huge number we cannot embody,
among all the night's children
dissolving in the sing-song of death's light.

Day

Day arrives and puts on the land's shoes
of wooden heels and brown laces
that dangle across the stone river.
Here you are owned, but why,
and why continue to trace the black line
back to what left you small,
cast forth with such poor aim,
over and under their arms,
in such a fragmented embrace,
and yet it takes hold
in the landscapes that said, companion,
in the shaken places that said, gesture.
Like your hand on the distant thigh,
when you slowed your speech to it
learned the mutable nature of it.
Like the unsought hand that takes hold
and shepards gently, surely forward
into every well-appointed danger.

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The Pass

The mountains do not move,
time is strung between them
like street lights between houses
and one passes beneath
from one triangle of light to the next.
Silence is the last turn of the land.
Its heart is white,
its heart is black,
its heart is a mound of ashes.

We fall asleep with bread in our mouths.
Sparks from the sun, yet we move
over the hard-curved edge
of another summer.

Past the heart and its towers of song,
past its genealogy murmured deep in the chest.
We bury our bread in haste on the road.
The opening between our hands
the last fixed point of departure.

We are so small they could bury us
between the blades of grass,
love's dark strand
woven between two atoms
embedded in our palms.

The Visit

At sunrise we woke, the earth was silent.
There was something at the center of it all,
a plain clapping of jaws.

The animal arrived through the kitchen door
and took bread from our hands,
its legs close to ours.
It wasn't what we asked for, not quite
and the chasm was a jaw
that opened and closed like a joke.

In the morning,
we gave our bread to the animals.
Snow is heavy, they said
snow is deep, snow is sleep.
I've held onto this spoon for so long, I said
but I will show you,
it would be easy to teach you.

Do you know the measurements of food,
do you know how much of this is enough,
do you know, and could you know,
how much of the mouth is the whole story?