NATIVE GUARD

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THEORIES OF TIME AND SPACE

You can get there from here, though there's no going home.

Everywhere you go will be somewhere you've never been. Try this:

head south on Mississippi 49, one-by-one mile markers ticking off

another minute of your life. Follow this to its natural conclusion — dead end

at the coast, the pier at Gulfport where riggings of shrimp boats are loose stitches

in a sky threatening rain. Cross over the man-made beach, 26 miles of sand

dumped on the mangrove swamp — buried terrain of the past. Bring only

what you must carry — tome of memory, its random blank pages. On the dock

where you board the boat for Ship Island, someone will take your picture:

the photograph — who you were — will be waiting when you return.
In 1959 my mother is boarding a train. She is barely sixteen, her one large grip bulging with homemade dresses, whispered whisper of crinoline and lace, her name stitched inside each one. She is leaving behind the dirt roads of Mississippi, the film of red dust around her ankles, the thin whistle of wind through the floorboards of the shotgun house, the very idea of home.

I'm going there to meet my mother. She said she'd meet me when I come. I'm only going over Jordan.

The year the old Crescent makes its last run, we leave Gulfport late morning, heading east. Years before, we rode together to meet another man, my father, waiting for us as our train derailed. I don't recall how
she must have held me, how her face sank as she realized, again, the uncertainty of it all — that trip, too, gone wrong. Today, she is sure we can leave home, bound only for whatever awaits us, the sun now setting behind us, the rails humming like anticipation, the train pulling us toward the end of another day. I watch each small town pass before my window until the light goes, and the reflection of my mother’s face appears, clearer now as evening comes on, dark and certain.

GENUS NARCISSUS

Faire daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon.
— ROBERT HERRICK

The road I walked home from school was dense with trees and shadow, creek-side, and lit by yellow daffodils, early blossoms bright against winter’s last gray days.
I must have known they grew wild, thought no harm in taking them. So I did —

... gathering up as many as I could hold, then presenting them, in a jar, to my mother. She put them on the sill, and I sat nearby watching light bend through the glass, day easing into evening, proud of myself for giving my mother some small thing.

Childish vanity. I must have seen in them some measure of myself — the slender stems, each blossom a head lifted up

toward praise, or bowed to meet its reflection. Walking home those years ago, I knew nothing of Narcissus or the daffodils’ short spring —

... how they’d dry like graveside flowers, rustling when the wind blew — a whisper, treacherous, from the sill. Be taken with yourself.

... they said to me; Die early, to my mother.
GRAVEYARD BLUES

It rained the whole time we were laying her down;
Rained from church to grave when we put her down.
The suck of mud at our feet was a hollow sound.

When the preacher called out I held up my hand;
When he called for a witness I raised my hand —
*Death stops the body's work, the soul's a journeyman.*

The sun came out when I turned to walk away,
Glared down on me as I turned and walked away —
My back to my mother, leaving her where she lay.

The road going home was pocked with holes,
That home-going road's always full of holes;
Though we slow down, time's wheel still rolls.

I wander now among names of the dead:
My mother's name, stone pillow for my head.

WHAT THE BODY CAN SAY

Even in stone the gesture is unmistakable —
the man upright, though on his knees, spine
arched, head flung back, and, covering his eyes,
his fingers spread across his face. I think

grief, and since he's here, in the courtyard
of the divinity school, what he might ask of God.

How easy it is to read this body's language,
or those gestures we've come to know — the raised thumb

that is both a symbol of agreement and the request
for a ride, the two fingers held up that once meant

victory, then peace. But what was my mother saying
that day not long before her death — her face tilted up

at me, her mouth falling open, wordless, just as
we open our mouths in church to take in the wafer,

meaning communion? What matters is context —
the side of the road, or that my mother wanted

something I still can't name: what, kneeling,
my face behind my hands, I might ask of God.
PHOTOGRAPH: ICE STORM, 1971

Why the rough edge of beauty? Why the tired face of a woman, suffering, made luminous by the camera's eye?

Or the storm that drives us inside for days, power lines down, food rotting in the refrigerator, while outside

the landscape glistens beneath a glaze of ice? Why remember anything but the wonder of those few days,

the iced trees, each leaf in its glassy case? The picture we took that first morning, the front yard a beautiful, strange place —

why on the back has someone made a list of our names, the date, the event: nothing of what's inside — mother, stepfather's fist?

WHAT IS EVIDENCE

Not the fleeting bruises she'd cover with makeup, a dark patch as if imprint of a scope she'd pressed her eye too close to, looking for a way out, nor the quiver in the voice she'd steady, leaning into a pot of bones on the stove. Not the teeth she wore in place of her own, or the official document — its seal and smeared signature — fading already, the edges wearing. Not the tiny marker with its dates, her name, abstract as history. Only the landscape of her body — splintered clavicle, pierced temporal — her thin bones settling a bit each day, the way all things do.
LETTER

At the post office, I dash a note to a friend,  
tell her I've just moved in, gotten settled, that

I'm now rushing off on an errand — except  
that I write errant, a slip between letters,  

each with an upright backbone anchoring it  
to the page. One has with it the fullness  
of possibility, a shape almost like the O  
my friend's mouth will make when she sees  

my letter in her box; the other, a mark that crosses  
like the flat line of your death, the symbol  

over the church house door, the ashes on your forehead  
some Wednesday I barely remember.

What was I saying? I had to cross the word out,  
start again, explain what I know best  

because of the way you left me: how suddenly  
a simple errand, a letter — everything — can go wrong.

AFTER YOUR DEATH

First, I emptied the closets of your clothes,  
threw out the bowl of fruit, bruised  
from your touch, left empty the jars  
you bought for preserves. The next morning,  
birds rustled the fruit trees, and later  
when I twisted a ripe fig loose from its stem,  

I found it half eaten, the other side  
already rotting, or — like another I plucked  
and split open — being taken from the inside:  

a swarm of insects hollowing it. I'm too late,  
again, another space emptied by loss.  
Tomorrow, the bowl I have yet to fill.
MYTH

I was asleep while you were dying.
It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow
I make between my slumber and my waking,

the Erebus I keep you in, still trying
not to let go. You'll be dead again tomorrow,
but in dreams you live. So I try taking

you back into morning. Sleep-heavy, turning,
my eyes open, I find you do not follow.
Again and again, this constant forsaking.

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Again and again, this constant forsaking:
my eyes open, I find you do not follow.
You back into morning, sleep-heavy, turning.

But in dreams you live. So I try taking,
not to let go. You'll be dead again tomorrow.
The Erebus I keep you in — still, trying —

I make between my slumber and my waking.
It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow.
I was asleep while you were dying.

AT DUSK

At first I think she is calling a child,
my neighbor, leaning through her doorway
at dusk, street lamps just starting to hum
the backdrop of evening. Then I hear
the high-pitched wheedling we send out
to animals who know only sound, not
the meanings of our words — here here —
nor how they sometimes fall short.
In another yard, beyond my neighbor's
sight, the cat lifts her ears, turns first
toward the voice, then back
to the constellation of fireflies flickering
near her head. It's as if she can't decide
whether to leap over the low hedge,
the neat row of flowers, and bound
onto the porch, into the steady circle
of light, or stay where she is: luminous
possibility — all that would keep her
away from home — flitting before her.
I listen as my neighbor's voice trails off.
She's given up calling for now, left me
to imagine her inside the house waiting,
perhaps in a chair in front of the TV,
or walking around, doing small tasks;
left me to wonder that I too might lift
my voice, sure of someone out there,
send it over the lines stitching here
to there, certain the sounds I make
are enough to call someone home.
NATIVE GUARD

If this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all things sacred what shall men remember?
—FREDERICK DOUGLASS

November 1862

Truth be told, I do not want to forget anything of my former life: the landscape's song of bondage — dirge in the river's throat where it churns into the Gulf, wind in trees choked with vines. I thought to carry with me want of freedom though I had been freed, remembrance not constant recollection.

Yes: I was born a slave, at harvest time, in the Parish of Ascension; I've reached thirty-three with history of one younger inscribed upon my back. I now use ink to keep record, a closed book, not the lure of memory — flawed, changeful — that dulls the lash for the master, sharpens it for the slave.

December 1862

For the slave, having a master sharpens the bend into work, the way the sergeant moves us now to perfect battalion drill, dress parade. Still, we're called supply units — not infantry — and so we dig trenches, haul burdens for the army no less heavy than before. I heard the colonel call it nigger work. Half rations make our work familiar still. We take those things we need from the Confederates' abandoned homes:
salt, sugar, even this journal, near full
with someone else's words, overlapped now,
crosshatched beneath mine. On every page,
his story intersecting with my own.

January 1863
O how history intersects — my own
berth upon a ship called the Northern Star
and I'm delivered into a new life,
Fort Massachusetts: a great irony —
both path and destination of freedom
I'd not dared to travel. Here, now, I walk
ankle-deep in sand, fly-bitten, nearly
smothered by heat, and yet I can look out
upon the Gulf and see the surf breaking,
tossing the ships, the great gunboats bobbing
on the water. And are we not the same,
slaves in the hands of the master, destiny?
— night sky red with the promise of fortune,
dawn pink as new flesh: healing, unfettered.

February 1863
We know it is our duty now to keep
white men as prisoners — rebel soldiers,
would-be masters. We're all bondsmen here, each
to the other. Freedom has gotten them
captivity. For us, a conscription
we have chosen — jailors to those who still
would have us slaves. They are cautious, dreading
the sight of us. Some neither read nor write,
are laid too low and have few words to send
but those I give them. Still, they are wary
of a negro writing, taking down letters.
X binds them to the page — a mute symbol
like the cross on a grave. I suspect they fear
I'll listen, put something else down in ink.

March 1863
I listen, put down in ink what I know
they labor to say between silences
too big for words: worry for beloveds —
My Dearest, how are you getting along —
what has become of their small plots of land —
did you harvest enough food to put by?
They long for the comfort of former lives —
I see you as you were, waving goodbye.
Some send photographs — a likeness in case
the body can’t return. Others dictate
harsh facts of this war: *The hot air carries
the stench of limbs, rotten in the bone pit.
Flies swarm — a black cloud. We hunger, grow weak.
When men die, we eat their share of hardtack.

*April 1863*

When men die, we eat their share of hardtack
trying not to recall their hollow sockets,
the worm-stitch of their cheeks. Today we buried
the last of our dead from Pascagoula,
and those who died retreating to our ship —
white sailors in blue firing upon us
as if we were the enemy. I’d thought
the fighting over, then watched a man fall
beside me, knees-first as in prayer, then
another, his arms outstretched as if borne
upon the cross. Smoke that rose from each gun
seemed a soul departing. The Colonel said:
*an unfortunate incident; said:
their names shall deck the page of history.*

*June 1863*

Some names shall deck the page of history
as it is written on stone. Some will not.
Yesterday, word came of colored troops, dead
on the battlefield at Port Hudson; how
General Banks was heard to say *I have
no dead there*, and left them, unclaimed. Last night,
I dreamt their eyes still open — dim, clouded
as the eyes of fish washed ashore, yet fixed —
staring back at me. Still, more come today
eager to enlist. Their bodies — haggard
faces, gaunt limbs — bring news of the mainland.
Starved, they suffer like our prisoners. Dying,
they plead for what we do not have to give.
Death makes equals of us all: a fair master.

*August 1864*

Dumas was a fair master to us all.
He taught me to read and write: I was a man-
servant, if not a man. At my work,
I studied natural things — all manner
of plants, birds I draw now in my book: wren,
willet, egret, loon. Tending the gardens,
I thought only to study live things, thought
never to know so much about the dead.
Now I tend Ship Island graves, mounds like dunes
that shift and disappear. I record names,
send home simple notes, not much more than how
and when — an official duty. I’m told
it’s best to spare most detail, but I know
there are things which must be accounted for.

*1865*

These are things which must be accounted for:
slaughter under the white flag of surrender —
black massacre at Fort Pillow; our new name,
the Corps d’Afrique — words that take the native
from our claim; moshbacks and freedmen — exiles
in their own homeland; the diseased, the maimed,
every lost limb, and what remains: phantom ache, memory haunting an empty sleeve; the hog-eaten at Gettysburg, unmarked in their graves; all the dead letters, unanswered; untold stories of those that time will render mute. Beneath battlefields, green again, the dead molder — a scaffolding of bone we tread upon, forgetting. Truth be told.

AGAIN, THE FIELDS

AFTER WINSLOW HOMER

the dead they lay long the lines like sheaves of Wheat I could have walked on the boddes all most from one end too the other

No more muskets, the bone-drag weariness of marching, the trampled grass, soaked earth red as the wine of sacrament. Now, the veteran turns toward a new field, bright as domes of the republic. Here, he has shrugged off the past — his jacket and canteen flung down in the corner. At the center of the painting, he anchors the trinity, joining earth and sky. The wheat falls beneath his scythe — a language of bounty — the swaths like scripture on the field's open page. Boundless, the wheat stretches beyond the frame, as if toward a distant field — the white canvas where sky and cotton meet, where another veteran toils, his hands the color of dark soil.