

IMAGINARY LINES: A POETIC NARRATIVE BASED ON THE PAINTINGS OF
JACK VETTRIANO

by

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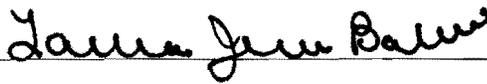
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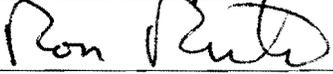
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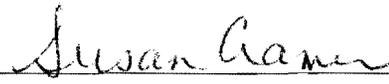


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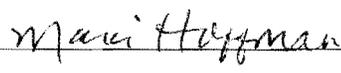
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"If it wasn't hard everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."

- *Jimmy Dugan (Tom Hanks), "A League of Their Own"*

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Introduction

Imaginary Lines: A Poetic Narrative on the Paintings of Jack Vettriano

In its first decade and a half, the twenty-first century has come to be defined by the old idiom “a picture speaks louder than words”. The dizzying technological growth of the new millennium has cultivated a society that is reliant on the power of images to relay messages. The trouble with this instantaneous mode of communication is that the first meaning deduced from an image is not the only one that exists within that visual representation, but it is often the only one that is seen or remembered.

One artistic form with a long history of unfolding the complexities within visual content is ekphrastic poetry. Ekphrastic poetry is the collaboration of literary and visual art, the description of images using poetic devices. Through the combination of these two mediums, a more visceral artistic experience can be created. The term “ekphrasis” means “to point out; to describe,” and its origins can be traced back to ancient Greece (“Ekphrasis”). It is a strange-sounding word that is virtually unrecognizable to the general public, outside of those who study poetry and literature, but, ironically, it is a process of interpretation that is used by the vast majority of people every single day. Ekphrasis is the method of assigning context to that which is unexplained or under-explained. It is the way a viewer comes to understand the intent behind a wordless advertisement or the emotion expressed within a picture. The difference between general engagement with visual rhetoric and what ekphrastic poetry aims to do is that it extends

more obviously interpreted messages into a deeper understanding of subtextual narrative threads that otherwise remain unexperienced.

Recognizing subtext is particularly important in the context of visual art, which is created with the goal of evoking emotion and provoking thought. With the advent of digital technology, exposure to striking imagery has become overwhelmingly pervasive within the global culture, making the tools of ekphrasis even more important. Much of human life on earth today is captured by a cellphone, a camera lens, or a satellite imaging system. Thus, the public has honed its skills at visual interpretation; however, the quality of general interpretation may leave something to be desired. When analyzing magazine ads or searching on Google Earth, the goal of the viewer is literally to understand the message in the image, but not to figuratively investigate how that literal interpretation was obtained or what the deeper messages within the image might be. When facing artistic examples of visual representations, the average viewer may not be as adept at creating an analytical conclusion of the image. One example of a seemingly obvious message that can be interpreted from a work of art is in Richard Drews' "The Falling Man":



The viewer needs only a moment to realize the subject and setting of the photograph and only slightly longer to understand the horrific relevance of the image. These essential glimpses of context serve as the surface meaning of the art, the forefront message, but there are deeper subtexts that require longer consideration before they can be realized. The aspects of the photograph that tend to go unnoticed without further investigation are the contrast of light and dark on the two faces of the building, the exquisite focus of the figure within the frame, the symmetry of the angles, and the centralization of the falling man in relation to these other visual elements. With continued consideration, a hidden method becomes more apparent. This photograph was not taken in a frantic and unplanned manner. There is nothing to indicate that the photographer was rushed, so the terrible assumption that can be drawn by the viewer is that Drews had seen people beginning to jump to their deaths before the falling man. He perhaps watched the falling man as he prepared himself to leap from the burning building, and knowing he could do nothing else for the victims, he documented an unimaginable moment to remember all their sacrifices. With this realization, this story takes shape, and the viewer begins to ask questions about the art. *Who was the falling man? Who was his family? Do they know this was their father/husband/brother/cousin? What was his last thought before jumping? Did he feel pain when he died?* These are the questions that must be asked, and potentially answered (using projection or abstraction), through ekphrastic poetry.

Despite having rhetorical and literary beginnings in ancient Greece, ekphrastic poetry did not start to develop into the form it is today until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when poems such as Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and W. H. Auden's

“Musée de Beaux Arts” motivated the continued practice and growth of this poetic form (“Ekphrasis”). As simplistic as the definition of ekphrasis may seem, this type of poetry is more complex than mere artistic description. The modern ekphrastic poem engages the reader through its collaboration of literature and art; the connection between the poetic image and the actual image enhances the readers’ understanding of the context and importance of both works. In her book *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux proposes that “ekphrasis, broadly considered, may be the paradigmatic act in a culture of images” (28).

In today’s image-saturated culture we are always talking about the things we see. These conversations change the way one understands specific images and the larger concepts associated with those images. Ekphrastic poetry provides a form for that conversation, but this interaction first occurs between the poet and the artist, and it is then opened up to those who experience the art. Loizeaux claims that in recent history ekphrasis has helped to spark some of the most enlightening and controversial discourse within Western society (4). Her theory is speaking to the fundamental components of ekphrasis and the results of undertaking such a process of interpretation, because by creating art that is about art a further convoluted process of extrapolation and interpretation is expected of the audience. As a result, it is the audience’s reaction to the layering of ideas by the poet and artist that intensifies the typical social commentary surrounding these mediums. Examination of “The Falling Man” supports her theory. Close inspection of the moments before, during, or after the man’s descent in the painting accentuates the human element present within the art and also brings attention to the

possible motivations for creating the piece. Focusing on the subtextual or unapparent messages within the photograph broadens the potential discourse about life, death, and the fragile barrier that exists between the two. As society becomes more desensitized to the striking nature of the images that permeate daily life, these conversations are important to the growth of art and the humanities. Endowing an image with context extends the effectiveness of the viewer's experience through a greater sense of resonance and familiarity that might otherwise be overlooked. It forces the viewer, if only for a few moments, to become the falling man.

Ekphrastic poetry enables this kind of identification with the subject of art. But it is neither a generic regurgitation of the images already presented, nor is it an unrelated imagination of an idea that is completely disconnected from the visual art. In Peter Barry's essay "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis," ekphrasis is divided into two types: "actual" or "notional" (16). These terms were originally coined within this context by John Hollander, and he defined "actual" ekphrasis as a poem that is written about a real work of art, while "notional" ekphrasis is a poem that brings a fictional work of art to life (16). Barry explains that successful ekphrastic poetry can "glide" between both the actual and the notional aspects of this genre, and in order to do this the poet must physically describe the work of art while simultaneously expanding on the meaning and context of that realistic image through her fictional representation of the painting or photograph (17). Barry also introduces the terms "open", "closed", and "ajar" to explain the manner of description an ekphrastic poem uses (17). He explains that an "open" passage is one that retells a realistic scene, a "closed" passage is one that is purely fictional, and any

section that is “ajar” will blur the reader’s understanding of what is real or imagined within the poem (17). The example Barry gives to demonstrate these concepts is “Lottie Stanford’s Neck” by Tony Curtis, a poem based on a painting by William Orpen (17):

Lottie Stafford's Neck

Morning sunlight catching
the heat of her like sex.
The way the light glazes her neck
at that moment she turns,
her hands gripping the washing tub,
as Jenny comes down the stairs with
the bedding across her shoulders
in a fluster of gossip.

That shining, taut slope of skin
Sir William caught with his brushes,
a scene from the mind,
the life of service he imagined.
Hours in his studio after work
her neck craned and stiffening
while the gas-light came and went
with the breeze of the evening.

To be finished on her Sunday off,
when she straightened from the pose
and walked around to his side.
And afterwards she drank his tea,
put on her coat and went back to the big house,
her room in the attic.
Or sipped tea
and did not put on her coat.



The Wash House

Barry explains that the first stanza is “open” due to its descriptive treatment of the painting, and the last stanzas are “closed” due to their extension beyond what Curtis could’ve learned from the painting alone; however, Barry has chosen this poem due to the frequent “ajar” moments throughout the entire piece (18). These moments are often

overlooked upon the initial reading, but after analyzing the poem the reader begins to realize that there are an increasing number of instances when she must question where the poet's information is stemming from—imagination or reality (19).

In my chapbook of ekphrastic poetry, "Imaginary Lines," I used a combination of open, closed, and ajar ekphrastic strategies to create two characters and a narrative about their lives based on the paintings of Scottish artist Jack Vettriano. With this collection of poems, I wanted to merge my study and practice of both visual art and creative writing, and writing about the paintings of my favorite artist, Vettriano, seemed a fitting and challenging way to do this.

Jack Vettriano was born in Fife, Scotland in 1951, and was raised in Edinburgh (Quinn 6). Despite having a middle-class upbringing, he left school at the age of fifteen to work in the coal mines near his home (Quinn 6). Even though he lacked schooling or professional training within the fine arts, Vettriano had a natural talent and drive to paint, and during the 1970's, after years of manual labor, he left his career in the coal mines to focus on his art. Although he was completely self-taught, Vettriano was eventually given a solo exhibition in Edinburgh where his art was sold at record-breaking profits during auction, exceeding everyone's expectations (Quinn 6). Jack Vettriano has become one of the most successful living artists of his time, and his prints often out-sell those of Van Gogh, Monet, and Dali (Quinn 6). Even though many people recognize his paintings and style, Jack Vettriano is not yet a "household name" in the manner of the masters he has

been compared to, and it is for this reason, as well as for the beauty and complexity of his art, I decided to use Vettriano's work in this collaborative endeavor.

Anthony Quinn, the author of Jack Vettriano's biographical book of art, a coffee table book with blurbs on his life and motivations throughout his artistic career, describes the artist's paintings as "enigmatic compositions [that] are a starting-point for a dozen different short stories" (6). I have always been entranced by the stories present within Vettriano's work, and it's my hope that the words I've lent to his art add a greater sense of depth and character to the stories he's captured on canvas.

The difference between what I sought to do and what is usually practiced in ekphrastic poetry is that I aimed to create a poetic narrative using ekphrasis to guide the reader through a series of paintings that would take on more complex meanings with the addition of my words. I did not attempt to "improve" the pieces of art through my words, but I used Barry's theory of creating ajar moments to extend the conversation that is already being presented in the paintings. Some of the story I developed is obvious within the images, and that which is not is the part of my poetry that embodies the idea of notional poetic representation. Before I began, I was unaware of the level of difficulty inherent in such an endeavor until I was well into my first draft, but, as trying as the writing process turned out to be, the experience has been a great opportunity for my artistic development, and it forced me to push past my boundaries as a creative writer. During my graduate studies, I had practiced writing poetry and fiction, but attempting to merge these styles required me to develop an awareness of how the comingling of both

could hinder development in one style while engendering it in the other. In order to create a successful and unified body of work, I had to focus on writing poetically and then editing narratively, and vice versa. It made the writing and editing process much longer, but it broadened my understanding of the techniques needed to simultaneously engage with both poetry and fiction within one literary endeavor.

Most often, one ekphrastic poem is written in response to one work of art, but my collection has been designed so the reader will follow a story describing a selection of works from one artist, creating a unified effect similar to a fictional narrative. The challenges that I faced while writing were two-fold: I needed to correlate pieces of Vettriano's work through my poetry that were not otherwise connected by the artist, and I needed to sustain a narrative journey using only the paintings and free-standing poems as the body of my text. I understood that my project was slightly experimental before I began writing, but the unorthodox nature of my story became more apparent as I attempted to construct this poetic narrative. The typical means of building character, plot, and setting had to be circumvented due to the poetic form, but I discovered there were other means I was able to rely on based on the accompaniment of the paintings. For instance, visual aspects of the people and place could be taken from the images, but the depth of the relationship between the characters still needed to be developed using only the concise language of contemporary poetic style. Additionally, it was always a concern that each poem should be able to stand on its own merit, and every verse must be able to be read and understood as a singular piece of art even though its meaning may be enhanced by experiencing it within the context of the collection.

To accomplish these goals, I again focused on Barry and Hollander's concept of actual and notional ekphrasis in order to overcome the challenges of writing a poetic narrative, and I sought to create ajar moments between what is readily available within the painting and what is only imagined. The poems in my collection display a spectrum of open, closed, and ajar descriptions, because at times when I needed to strengthen my characterization I would write notionally about the figure within the painting, but at other times when I wished to emphasize setting I would rely on more actual descriptions of the painting.

My first poem "Fortune Eater" is an example of a closed depiction of the painting's subject. I used the expression and posture of the figure to inform my interpretation of the circumstances surrounding her life, and by doing this I was able to develop a poem that engages with the painting but isn't reliant on it to in order to create meaning or be understood. The woman depicted in Vettriano's painting that accompanies "Fortune Eater" appears melancholy and thoughtful, so I expanded on this by imagining the circumstances that might be encouraging her expression.

In contrast, my poem "Elegy" is an example of when the use of open scenic description assisted in the development of place and time within the story. This painting, in particular, displays such an unusual and vivid setting that it forces the viewer to wonder about the circumstances surrounding the scene, so I used ekphrasis to answer the questions posed by the artist. Throughout the entire collection I strived to include many moments where the reader feels the blurring between what exists within the painting and what I've created that is exterior to the painting, but one specific example of this

technique can be seen in “Tarot Card: The Lovers”. Again, Vettriano has created a remarkably provoking scene, so I focused my poem specifically on bringing the figures to life within the artistic space they occupy. To do this I relied on imagining the internal dialogue of the painted figures and on the potential actions that preceded or followed the framed moment.

Despite my growing understanding of how difficult writing a collection of ekphrastic poetry was turning out to be, there was a point as I was nearly finished with the first draft when I was struck by an unfamiliar sense of doom and failure when reading what I’d written. It was not the standard anxiety that is bound to creep up on one who undertakes a project such as this, but rather a realization that I might have made a huge mistake in attempting to merge these arts as I had—that I might have detrimentally narrowed the aesthetic experience of both forms instead of creating a more complex reimagining through their union. I worried that I had sacrificed too much of my poetic voice in order to successfully incorporate both the ekphrastic and narrative elements of my project. Thankfully, around that same time I began reading Stephen Cheeke’s book *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* where he describes his ideas about the function and creation of ekphrastic poetry. He claims that:

...writing for art exists and thrives under the knowledge of failure, indeed it seems to be spurred on by the certainty that there is something hopeless in what it is attempting to do. This fact might seem only marginally interesting in and of itself however. What I have found more stimulating

are the larger questions and problems prompted by the space between poetry and painting, the gap between language and the visual image (2).

After reading Cheeke's theories on the relationship between art and poetry, I was relieved to know my anxieties were not mine alone, and I began thinking more rhetorically about the "gaps" in my writing. A new perspective on what I had previously perceived as failures and inadequacies in my poems took hold in my mind, and I started to regard the collection with a greater sense of how the "space" between my words and Vettriano's images could say just as much as what was being described through ekphrasis.

In furthering the basis of his thoughts on the problematic communion of poetry and art, Cheeke offers a quote by Michel Foucault that explains how "neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax" (2). The goal of ekphrastic poetry is not to become equally imagistic as the captured moment of a painting, because it cannot do that; just as a painting, being only an image, cannot hope to create the same depth of experience offered by language. The goal is to extend the frozen moment present within the visual art, and to give the reader/viewer a fuller sensual experience by drawing to the surface the hidden meaning(s) existing in that art through poetry. I do not mention Cheeke's and Foucault's theories in an attempt to explain away any potential faults within my representations of Vettriano's works, but

rather to bring attention to the underlying inconsistencies inherent in any attempt at creating ekphrastic poetry. I was able to arrive at a deeper understanding of the implications and importance of this writing style after realizing the flaws that are bound to arise when comparing one form of art to another.

The “gaps” that I have created between my poetry and Vettriano’s paintings are abundant when one considers the narrative approach I took with this collection. This is because I was not musing on the apparent information provided by the images, but rather I assigned my own agenda to the characters within the paintings in order to continue my poetic storyline. I used the body language and positioning of the figures to enforce the emotions I was ascribing to the characters’ voices, and at times I went even further in creating these gaps by associating a poetic situation or sentiment with a painting, one that is not readily recognizable when viewing the painting alone. There are also gaps in the narrative due to the format of this project, because unlike in fiction writing the development of these characters could not be built through a close look at the interior lives of two characters. Instead, the plot and character development is dependent on providing the reader with enough information to allow them to fill in the narrative gaps, while there is always a sense of awareness that the reader is only seeing milestone moments in the course of the characters’ relationship.

I decided to call the two main characters of my collection Dorothy and Tin Man, and the first step I took in realizing their characterization was to search through Vettriano’s paintings looking for depictions of consistent figures (in appearance) across

multiple works. This was the “easy” part, because Vettriano has such a broad collection of art to choose from and they are all figure-centered images. Another benefit of using Vettriano is that his paintings are more focused on scene than typical portraiture would be, and that is why his style offers a wealth of possibilities from which a writer can draw inspiration. After I had collected twenty to thirty different paintings that I thought I would like to focus building my narrative on, I began the challenging task of creating realistic and interesting characters from the brief glimpses of physicality and personality offered by the artist.

The first poem I wrote was “Elegy,” the penultimate verse in the collection, and I did this because I was so moved by the strange scenario displayed in the painting. The name of the painting this poem is based on is “Elegy for a Dead Admiral,” and Vettriano’s scene shows a formally-dressed woman sitting at a dinner table on an empty beach with tuxedoed musicians and servers surrounding her. It is heartbreaking and thought-provoking, and it wasn’t until I had thoroughly investigated the context of the image that I realized the underlying story within the painting. At first, the viewer doesn’t necessarily understand that the woman figured in the painting is actually sitting alone, because she is surrounded by musicians. After coming to this conclusion, the further extrapolation of her status becomes more apparent, especially in conjunction with the title given by the artist. After this analysis, I then began writing my first poem, and I understood by doing so I was starting my narrative at the end instead of the beginning. I knew after I wrote that poem that my story would be centered on the relationship between this woman (Dorothy) and her lover who eventually dies at sea (Tin Man).

Another difficulty I discovered while writing was how I was going to name my characters without the use of dialogue. I decided to create several epistolary poems in order to associate the characters with allusive identities. Those names serve only as pseudonyms for the purpose of reinforcing the metaphor of “heart” and “home” that the characters come to embody throughout the narrative. My decision to use characters from “The Wizard of Oz” was not arbitrary, and I settled upon those names after deciding I did not want to incorporate too many classical literary references within my poems. I felt if more historically-based allusions were used it would create a discord between the desired metaphor and the ekphrastic collection as a whole, so the identity crisis was solved by creating a contemporary allegorical thread throughout the collection. Additionally, I did not want the use of these identities to be overwhelming to the reader in the sense that the true nature of my characters would be undermined or encroached on by the presence of their pseudonyms, so I underplayed the incorporation of the allusive names in favor of reiteration of the ideas that these names are meant to evoke.

Another obstacle I faced while writing was building a forward-moving plot across the collection while simultaneously maintaining the individual importance of each poem. I did not want to incorporate poems that functioned only for narrative or informative purposes because if each poem could not be separately appreciated it would be an indication that I had sacrificed one facet of the art to benefit another. An additional area of frustration that stemmed from the challenge of creating a narrative plot using ekphrastic poetry was that I had to be cognizant of multiple visual aspects in each of the paintings I selected so that one image wouldn't contradict another. Most specifically, I

paid attention to: locations, seasons, furnishings, decorations, and character appearances. This concern arose after I had started writing, because it was an aspect of the format I did not know I needed to look for when I started the project.

Following this concern over the content of the paintings, another complication I discovered was that most of Vettriano's art features summer scenes, so it was very difficult to generate a linear timeline for the reader as she follows the development of Dorothy and Tin Man without a variety in the paintings' depictions of weather or seasons that could help indicate the passage of time. I was able to minimize the repetitiveness of the scenic images by adding poems about dreams and including paintings that are located indoors, and I hope the changes alter the potential perception that these scenic elements of the narrative are stagnant. By consistently expressing the internalized thoughts and desires of the characters, the narrative focus is redirected on the presence of the characters in the poetry and on the interaction between their literary voices and visual representations. By doing this, the scene (with exception of the role of the sea in the poems) becomes a supporting influence on the reader's experience of the collection—the characters' location within the narrative is an active part of their development. Without the “place” of the sea and the seaside town they live in, the temptation of leaving would not be available to Tin Man when he is persuaded to abandon Dorothy.

Like my writing process, my revision process had to be modified to accommodate the complexities of creating a poetic narrative. The decisions I made about each poem were not merely concerned with reshaping the language used in order to create a beautiful

and meaningful poem; I also needed to make revisions depending on how the poem needed to describe the painting as well as how my words needed to further motivate the progression of the narrative. I scrapped a lot of poems that did not embody the characters or story accurately enough once they were compared to the rest of my collection, and I was constantly rearranging the order of the poems while I was writing in order to ensure the action and character development was evenly distributed throughout the collection.

One of the more recent changes I incorporated in my revision process was the inclusion of an additional dramatic element in Dorothy and Tin Man's story: Dorothy's pregnancy. I felt the narrative needed something more realistically "human" so that the internal conflict Dorothy experiences in allowing Tin Man to make one final voyage out to sea after she discovers she is pregnant can accentuate the external conflict of Tin Man's death and her feelings of grief and abandonment in the aftermath. By adding this element, I was hoping I would succeed in separating their romance from a comparison to the archetypal representation of doomed, star-crossed lovers, and instead evoke within the reader a sense of the complex mixture of emotions that would be inevitable in a scenario when one is having a child while still grieving over the death of that child's father. As a result, the last poems that I wrote were "Positive," "Waiting," "The Second First Letter," and "Postscript." "Positive," "Waiting," and "The Second First Letter" were written in order to build the pregnancy into the plot, but after reading through the final poems I realized that with the addition of Dorothy and Tin Man's daughter I needed to add a new final poem. I wrote "Postscript" because I felt ending on "Elegy," as I had been planning since I first conceived of this project, seemed shallow in its singular focus

on the couple without further mention of their daughter. In “The Second First Letter” I brought back Vettriano’s painting “Waltzers” in order to create a sense of remembrance when Dorothy tells their newborn daughter about how the couple met, and I also made the initial lines of the poem mimic the lines of “The First Letter” from earlier in the collection to reinforce this sense of nostalgia. Additionally, in “Postscript” I attempted to offer closure on the status of the characters in an imagined scenario where Dorothy describes how they are all reunited as a family in her dreams.

By discussing the complex composition and revision choices I confronted in writing “Imaginary Lines,” I have shown that ekphrastic writing, as with other traditional poetic forms that require more rigid stylistic choices, encourage the extension of the poet’s abilities outside of the restrictions dictated by form. It is similar to the way a person who loses their sight in one eye is able to eventually compensate for the physical limitation by adjusting their focus and perspective. When one sense fails, or is diminished, another is inspired to grow, and the effect created by this growth stimulates a feeling of newness and vitality within us. Everyday people describe the things that they see. Ekphrastic poetry does this, too, but more importantly it describes the things people do not see. It asks a question, it offers an answer, and it provokes an unexpected awareness within the viewer. William Carlos Williams famously exemplifies this notion in his poem describing “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” a painting by Pieter Bruegel (“Ekphrasis”):

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

Williams plucks out the truth of the scene like a piece of gold from a riverbed and delivers it stoically to the reader. In this moment, the poem succeeds in revealing the depth of the story framed within the painting, and the reader is awakened to the subtext being offered through the collaboration of Williams's words and Bruegel's art. I hope that the conversation I've begun with Vettriano's paintings will encourage readers to take notice of "a splash" that would otherwise be overlooked.

Fortune Eater

I eat fortunes.

It's the only way to make them true—

the words mixing with saliva, pulped together, dissolving
in stomach acid, circulating through me with promise.

Every night I sleep alone, even when I'm not.

Every morning I hover in that space

between earth and forever, waiting

to fulfill one of these swallowed destinies.

No one can doubt my persistence.

Paper is rough—it sticks in your throat—

just like all their hands and lips,

just like their passion-possessed vows,

it scrapes away the woman I've built myself to be.

Still, no one can doubt my commitment.

I've endowed myself with hundreds of mispronounced

Chinese words—a language built from hungry hope.

I've choke on these manufactured dreams

while constantly darting my gaze between the ground

and the sky, so I'll never stumble over a heads-up penny

or ignore the blazing death of a star.



Valentine Rose

The Drifter

A man walks into the seaside town, empty suitcase in hand—
ducked low beneath the brim of his weathered hat.

His shirt is pulled tight across the valley of his back,
and his mouth pinched rigidly as a tension wire.
He meanders weary but steady beneath his heavy load.

At rest, he presses the crumpled folds of a handkerchief
into the sweat-damp hollows of his eyes; a ghostly visage
smiles back at him from the cradle of stained cotton.

The drifter's feet have never found rhythm on land for long,
the sea is home. He keeps the shifting shore always in mind,
always within reach, waiting to hear the sirens' call again.

No matter the length of his stay
he never unpacks,
he carries that handkerchief,
he never takes off his hat.



The Drifter

Stage Fright

I picture my life on a stage.

I'm made to perform, arms opened in a false embrace,
frozen within the aim of magnificent spotlights. *Love me.*

I say it only in my mind, believe it only in my heart,
beginning to sway against an unattainable rhythm.

Sweat starts at my hair follicles, trickling slowly down
my tense temples and the fevered slope of my neck.
The heat from the light is oppressive, even my lips burn
around the shaky breaths slipping down my throat.

Is it vanity or insecurity that offers me as a blood sacrifice
to this ravenous crowd? I only want to sate their desire.
The wood underfoot is scuffed and marred by a hundred others
who planted their destinies on this fruitless stage. *Love me.*

They are many, they are hungry, and I am only myself.
Realization rises up as tremulous as an untrained voice,
starting near my hip bones, curling through my stomach,
radiating up the tracks of spine and ribs, ringing in my head.

Anxiety rushes sanguinely through me, like a familiar song,
every muscle expanding and contracting with rote precision
around the fading notes of myself. An echo of desperation
stiffens my vertebrae, abrupt as a silenced scream. *Love me.*

The beams of glaring light dim and the music slowly bleeds
from my consciousness, the stage beneath me softens.

I am unglued, even with their hungry gaze still lingering. *Love me.*
Always acknowledge your audience with a bow. Love me, love me.

The sweat crawls back up my tempered skin and into my follicles.
Silent, the crowd leaves me facing a thousand smiling, empty seats.
That unattainable rhythm I feel doesn't fade but grows stronger.
The heavy curtains fall in quiet ripples, I exit stage left.



Scarlet Ribbons, Lovely Ribbons

4 x 4 x 4

The walls of my life are ragged stone—
abrasive as sharp gravel under bare feet,
carelessly built and unsound.

I raised them inch by inch:
each piece a decision,
each gap a regret,
packed loosely by doubt,
mortared tight with hope.

Unknowingly, I built this cell—
four feet all around.
Unable to stand or lie down,
I am huddled in agony:
legs trembling and fatigued,
shoulders cramped and hunched,
head always awkwardly bent.
I was forever looking out
never realizing I was a prisoner
until I placed the last brick.



Heartbreak Hotel

Black Market

I remember an urban legend
recited at childhood slumber parties
of a person awaking in agony,
submerged in a bath of ice—
one kidney removed.

I feel that freeze, swallowed by numbness
unexpectedly in quiet moments when catching
my anesthetized gaze looking out from the vanity.
I see it when rouging my cheeks or pinning my hair.

Look at this girl—a gorgeous specimen!
Lips soft as suede, always painted the newest shade.
Skin like linen, draped and stretched with military precision.
Unlined eyes so bright, penetrating swift as a sharpened knife.
Legs of remarkable length, lean but supple to the touch.
Unrivaled temperament—a reasonable price!
Do I hear an offer of happiness? Going once! Going twice!
Perhaps up the bid with a hasty promise—
fidelity is negotiable, all sales final.



Mirror, Mirror

Currents

I wish I could climb inside a bottle,
seal myself tightly within its body,
venture out amidst the surface currents
where the unyielding sun glares starkly
upon the happy waves like little pockets
cradling polished silver dollars.

Slowly, I am pulled underneath,
the deeper flows are stronger.
I watch my familiar world diminish
through the thick, curved vessel
encasing and protecting me.

I am a small speck of rubble caught
within a dark subterranean stream.
I am a small speck of trouble trapped
within the skin of a lonesome man.
I am never certain where I belong—
above or below. I've never had a home.

I wish I could reach out and touch,
I wish I could feel anything besides
the cold, condensed glass. But first
I wished to climb inside a bottle.



A Kind of Loving

In Between

I feel a primal pulsing,
like the constant seconds of an old clock,
like increments of sky swallowed by the sun.
It is a force devouring me in pieces.

In darkness, I can hear the pounding,
like a stranger at my front door,
like electricity thrumming through a wire,
like a frantic moth consumed by flame.

If time is a constructed thing,
an imagined concept for order's sake,
how can it pass with such agonizing acuity?
I see it hanging in lines around my eyelids.
I feel it creaking in the knobs of my knees.
I hear it in a voiced but soundless whisper.
I smell it when the sun is strong and high.
I taste it as my tongue traces cracked lips.

Perhaps I am trapped, frozen within
the hollow space between these beats,
trying to find my own rhythm?



His Favorite Girl

Drowning

Elegant dancers move slow and distorted
beyond the golden lens of chardonnay;
my eyelashes gather condensation
like a leaf's belly after a summer storm.

Mesmerized by this fishbowl world, I notice
Chinese lanterns float like jellyfish,
ladies' trains flutter like seaweed on a reef,
leaves twist and shine like schools of tiny fish.

I am happiest alone, my tired mantra.

Then, between the unraveled ends of stray thoughts,
the chasm of a moment cracks open,
an unfamiliar gaze tethers me across the expanse.

Like a dream when weightless flight
turns to falling, the distant earth rushes up
until consciousness lands you, panting, in bed—
like being held under water, seeing
the unbreakable surface, until your heartbeat
slows in blessed acceptance of an airless fate.

Before this moment I couldn't have understood
how you can so desire that which will be your destruction.
How, in comparison, oxygen becomes insubstantial.



Waltzers

Water Sounds

The sea rolls with metronomic persistence,
undulating to a silent lunar tune.

Rain drips from the eaves like daily prayer
off the untouched tongues of the devoted.

Rivers rush at their shores with static delight
bestowing frantic waves upon the air
like the tireless wings of a hummingbird.

Loose faucets bleed steadily, echoing
hypnotically amidst bare white porcelain.

I wish I could be as loyal as the sea,
returning to home like the tide to shore.

I would choose to be moved as she is,
drawn by that same unseen force—
devoted to life as the beat of heart,
constant and present as a pulse.



Waltzers

Bermuda Triangle

She spins me with a supernatural
magnetism, an invisible force
scrambling a steady compass arrow.

I stare into her eyes, losing
track of what is sea and sky.
Her gaze bleeds into the truest blue.

She devours wayward fleets,
swallows men up whole,
without a trace of debris.

I am drawn subtly off course,
following the curves of her face
rather than the lines of the earth.

A blip upon her stunning oblivion,
I travel blindly through the night of her
as a weathered boat taking on water,
a light aircraft with a broken rudder.

I may carelessly slip through a wormhole,
crash into the crisp edge of the sea,
if she promises to be my destination.



Back Where You Belong

In The Deep

Less is known of the deepest sea
than the face of the moon.

Breathless, lightless trenches cradling the earth,
sea-swept valleys full with millennia of existence
before the first of humanity ever lived.

Earth labored five billion years, and air was born.
Man labored for two centuries, earth was destroyed.
Gravity became an animal to tame,
ozone a straw soldier to our sword,
and we waged war against the sky
like children waking from a nightmare.
We pierced the skin of our young world
before knowing the sulfurous heart beating within.
The space above us hung tantalizing and abstract
like a Rorschach image begging to be named.
But what goes up always comes down.

I always seem to look outward before looking within.
But at times, I imagine I am a primordial creature

sinking beyond the faintest rays of sunlight,
moving past frigid currents and shadowy giants.
I undulate effortlessly across the sea floor,
swathed in an incandescent aura. The light
is my own, radiating from every organ and cell.
My rough dermis fades to translucency,
the weary mechanisms of my life are exposed.

I travel freely in these dark recesses,
illuminating the deepest secrets hidden below
inch-by-inch within the halo of my glow.
The crush of the entire world cannot touch me.



Table For One

The First Letter

What name do I give to the man who possesses my thoughts?

Even slumber brings no relief.

Lovely Petrarch... (no, too flowery)

My Odysseus... (too absent)

Oh, Romeo... (cliché, cliché)

Dear Tin Man,

I saw you again last night,
standing like a silent clapper beneath
the burnished bell of a willow tree,
gazing out upon a large, green lagoon.
Water bugs skipped over the placid surface,
pollen floated like weightless drops of gold.
Long grass tickled my ankles, whispering
my arrival. You turned—eyes haunted
by unspoken words, and stepped backwards
into the shallows, silt slowly billowing up
as a splash of cream in hot coffee.
With outstretched arms, I followed.
My nerve endings barely tingled
before contact was broken when Circe's curse

transformed your skin to scales and feet to fins—
 disappearing into a ripple of murky water.

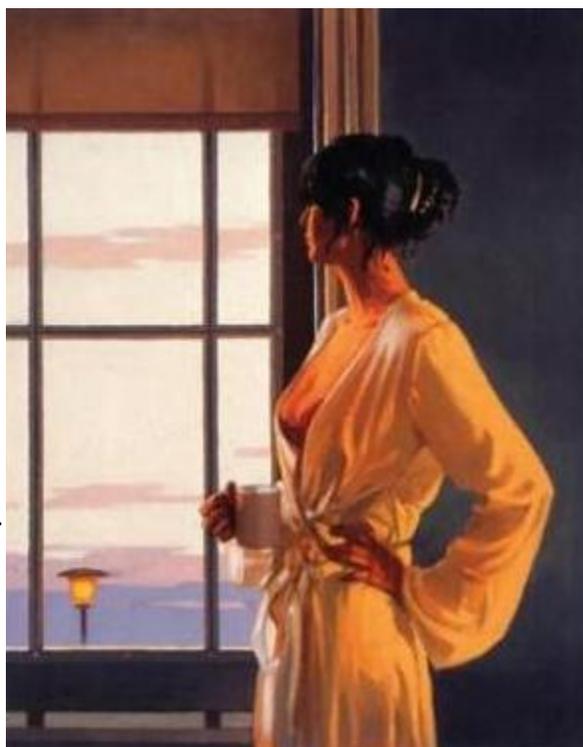
Morning broke my window pane
 with a heavy light that cracked my eyes,
 wrenching me from the warmth of dreams.
 Beside my bed I found a sleep-penned verse:

“Three Clicks”

*Turn signal at my corner.
 A garage door opened,
 A deadbolt twisted,
 A light switch flicked.
 Coordinates on a map.
 A stereo turned on,
 An oven dial spun,
 A candle wick lit.
 Family photos on the mantle.
 An alarm clock set,
 A book closed shut,
 A light switch flicked.
 My heels meeting as I make a wish.*

So, I've been thinking.
 I'll be your heart if you'll be my home.

Faithfully yours,
 Dorothy



Baby Bye Bye

The Second Letter

I dream of you, too.

You shimmer to life before me,
a mirage solidified in crystal air.

You rise up like a specter, appearing
at the end of a warped pier.

You rush toward me, I feel
the gnarled wood humming
underneath your gentle gait.

A body with weightless grace,
I swear I can touch your
vanilla-scented warmth.

I swear I am pressing against
the delicate ridges of your spine
as I hold you in my arms.

When I awake I miss you with a phantom pain—
feeling the loss of a love I've never really known.
I swear I can smell you upon my pillowcase.



Embracing

Contortionist

Trapped within a net
of muted bedroom light
she sits, pliant and warm.

This show is hers.

Her rib cage flexing
around nervous breaths,
pulse stretching in tempo
under the column of her neck,
fingers lithely elongated
atop a delicate stretch of leg,
ink-colored tresses tangled
and spread over white cotton,
eyes half-closed but watching.

She twists me in ways I cannot see.

She moves me, transforming herself
into a center of gravity, a balance.

I bend to her.

She shifts through the dark of me, effortless
as electricity through the coil of a light bulb,
illuminating a place long-forgotten.



Round Midnight

His Declaration of Love

Water seeps inside the earth
through ancient cracks along lightless plains
of ocean floor. Below freezing depths
a river of magma rests in mystery and rises,
like a happy lover from warm sheets,
transforming each heavy droplet
into a frenzied bubble, ricocheting
upwards with the exuberance and levity
of shaken champagne.

You are my effervescent warmth,
coaxing water into air.



The Last Great Romantic

Tarot Card – “The Lovers”

I see them lying motionless within the stagnant depths of a tide pool;
resting in frozen passion, arms entwined, posed on the precipice of a kiss.
I'm hypnotized by their peculiar presence, pristine beneath decaying algae,
attracting my gaze like the center of a nautilus shell, a fascinating vortex.
Her lashes are trapped mid-blink, his brow hints at a furrow.

My fingers pierce the surface, sure as a syringe.
The sun-ripened water is frigid, penetrating to the bone,
an increasing ache with each pulse of arterial blood.
Elbow-deep and still out of reach, the cold creeps higher.
My numb fingers splay open and strain with desperation.

Gravity is a welcome burden; thick clumps of my hair, tangled
by the salty air, surrender themselves upon the placid surface.
Even there I feel the chill; a quiet thought could snap my arm
like a shoestring submerged in vat of dry ice.

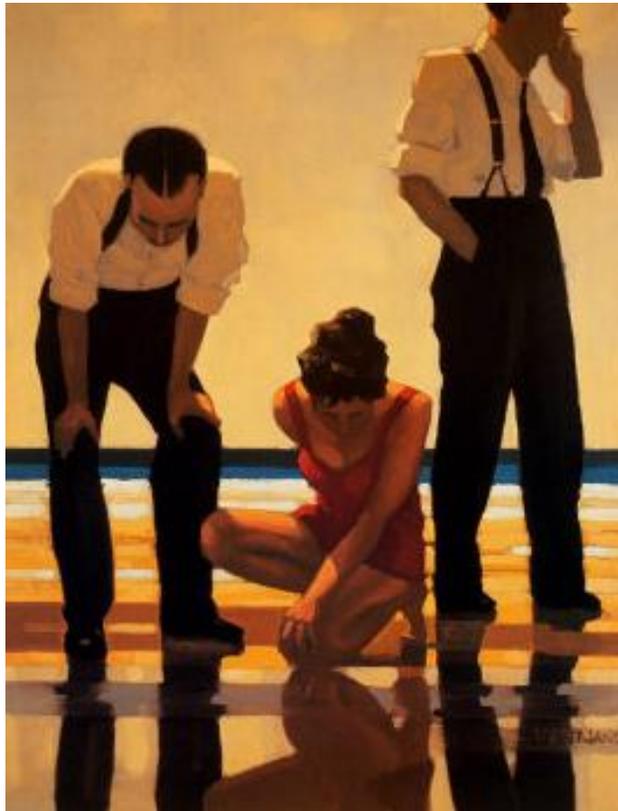
My shallow breath palpates the surface, breaking the iridescent skin
of putrefied plant life that buffers water from world.
With blue and bloodless lips, I heave myself backwards—
dripping, shaking, longing.
They remain taunting and unreachable,

like the consummation of their kiss.

My eyes flutter shut in defeat, my breathing evens.

Glancing again, the tide pool is still, the Lovers are gone.

My arm is warm and dry.



Narcissistic Bathers

Red at Night

Navy men and fishermen often say
“Red at night, sailors’ delight—
red in the morning, sailors’ warning.”

Landlocked, I still look to the sun
for predictions of the water’s mood.
She offers me rare bits of cloud-gossip,
divining from wind-carried whispers
their future forms and fancies.
Our affair has been life-long.

Still, when my sun was away I’d give favors
to the North Star and the spinning web of
constellations. Even the darling moon
played shy at times within the blanket
of night—then my sweet Andromeda
and lovely Cassiopeia offered comfort.
But after the city of stars had dimmed
my sun stayed true, always guiding me
from one world’s end to the edge of another.

Now, in moments when I break away,
taking note of the absent rhythm of sea
and the tedious path of her face
passing longingly above my head,

I survey the strange world around me,
realizing I am tragically displaced
by the frenzied fingers of a cyclone,
dropped disoriented on a foreign shore.



Highland Support

Positive

The bathroom light above the sink casts a neon flicker like Morse code upon the red walls, I squeeze my eyes against the quick-fire glare, running shaky palms beneath the warm water. Five minutes have turned into five hours.

I perch myself on the closed toilet seat like a nervous pupil waiting outside the principal's office. My crossed leg is bouncing in time to the strobe-like bathroom light. One minute. I start counting backwards in my head.

The little white stick is cradled in my palms like the key to unlock the Emerald City, an opening to a magical gateway between reality and an unreal future. I stare at it like a horse that is changing rainbow colors before my eyes.

I run a bath, the steam enveloping my body in the way thoughts have fogged my brain. I'm happy when I can no longer see my reflection in the mirror. I think about him—the feeling is like slowly rounding the precipice of a giant rollercoaster. Laughter and tears overwhelm me.

I don't look down, but let myself feel the thrill of falling.



Night Preparations

The Call

A fishing ship pulled into port today—
barnacles clinging to its battered edges,
crowns of rust adorning opaque portholes,
ropes, wrist-thick and green with age, draped
like wet hair across its weathered brow.

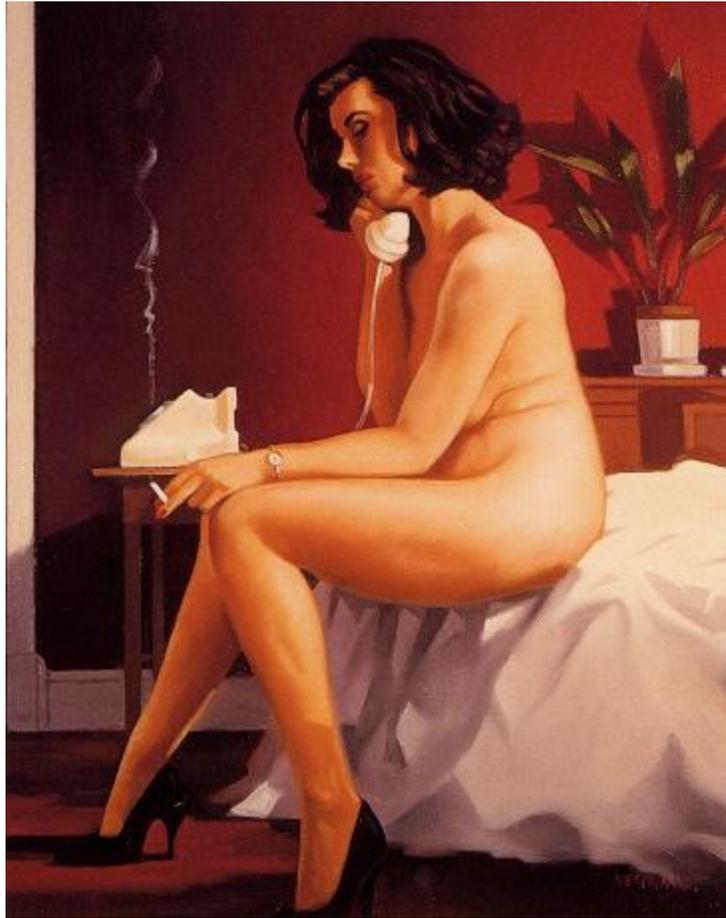
Prosperitas was scrawled like a signature
in chipped ink upon its starboard flank.
The crew, unfamiliar with steady shore,
rambled off with bow-legged grace,
months hanging unshaved from their chins.
I envy them the way starved men do forks.

My feet itch for one final waltz
on storm-slicked decks, the tune
of wind-song guiding my steps.

Please understand, I'll carry my goodbye in a little tin,
sprinkling it over my lovely sea when the sun is in descent,
the golden horizon consoling her depths after I've gone.

I'll leave my first love, my precious sea, within the arms
of sunset, returning prepared to forever embark
on my final maiden voyage with you.

Wait for me.



The Arrangement

Umbrella

You are a gale force turning me inside out.

Belly-up, I face the angry barrage.

You hunch your broad shoulders against the rain,
sweep your damp hair back from that stoic brow,
stuffing one frozen hand in a pocket, clutching
a set of keys and loose change—ignorant
of the weather eroding my twisted form.

You absently cling to me, dragging me
behind you while every earthly force
tries to wrench me free.



Yesterday's Dreams

Overtones

We are
two fundamental frequencies,
complimentary vibrations
intensifying in crescendo.
United, holding steady, we shimmer
within the purity of our tones.
Your note is melted chocolate
upon the tongue.
My note is a wisp of smoke
upon the breeze.
We meld with a precision
that hides in plain sight—
within the threads of a chrysalis,
the sphere of a harvest moon.
If you are black, then I am white.
If I am void, then you are presence.

I will sing out a lonely song,
unaccompanied and flat,
so you may search the distant sky,
following notes like breadcrumbs,
until our harmony plays again.



Long Time Gone

Waiting

Waiting creeps up on me
in the deep of night when my round body
aches, the little life inside of me kicking
hard against my ribs and rolling in happy
waves beneath the taught skin of my belly.

As you planned to leave, I saw a certain future
unfolding before me if I told you about her.
Shocked and happy, you would stay, but later
when our life settled around us like wind-kicked
dust you would still long for your first love.
You would leave us and two hearts would break.
So I gave you freedom, kept my secret for your return.

Waiting has become my new face, every
other expression is only a mask. Waiting
is the name of our daughter, I can think
of nothing else for now.

In the lonely quiet I rest both hands on top
of our growing girl, pretending one of them
belongs to you. I whisper all the sweet things

I know about her father—she will recognize you
when she first meets you, but you won't know
her at all. You'll drown in adoration once you do.
She will become your last and true love.



Days of Wine and Roses

The Second First Letter

What name do I give the girl who possesses my entire life?

I used to know what love meant, but you have redefined it.

Now every dream belongs to you.

The microscope I once lived under has transformed
into an ever-changing kaleidoscope of possibilities.

You have your daddy's eyes, you wear them well.

We met (your father and I) on a summer night, the music
was soft and gentle, I could feel the notes caressing my skin
as they floated upon a breeze that smelled of the sea.

His hand was warm upon my back, his whisper tickled my ear,
my face felt like it would break from smiling, as we turned
slow circles beneath the twinkling lights hanging in the trees.
His eyes saw a woman that no one had ever looked for before.

He met me in my dreams each night after the first. He told me
we met in his dreams, too. Together we were always dancing,
synchronized but free, spinning together as the world blurred.
I promised to be his heart if he was my home. It's a vow I still keep.

I folded that promise tightly into an origami heart,

sealed it with a kiss, held it close to me and made a wish—
when the heart was unfolded you crawled out from within
carrying both halves of one promise in each tiny hand.



Waltzers

The Last Letter

You've surprised me again, my love.
I hid my fear like a spot on the sun, disguised
amongst a vastness of molten emotions,
innocuous from a distance then flaring with fury
and erupting with a fit into a deadly storm.

I said farewell.
I wore grief like a habit—
comforted only by the thought
of you resting in the watery arms
of your first and last love.

Reading the official proclamation
of your death ignited that unremarkable
spot of desperate fear, fueling the storm
quivering in my limbs, heaving my chest.

I wonder if the remnant of this unearthly fire
radiates from my being, glowing mistakenly
with the cool brilliance of the northern lights.



The Letter

Elegy

I've spent months waiting on these amber shores,
watching for your ship to break the dim horizon,
and hearing your voice in the wind as I fall asleep alone.

With trembling hands I dress in red silk,
same as the night we met under bobbing garden lanterns.
You tucked a tea rose in my hair, said my eyes looked like the summer sea.

Before dawn I dragged the unfinished oak table across the sand,
and smoothed its coarse edges with our good linen.
Tonight I'll leave it in the surf, with a place set for you and the ocean.

A foaming tongue of tide, rough with briny weeds and pearly shards of shell,
licks at my neat hem and patent leather shoes. The dismal sky
fights to stay aloft, it is so heavy with sorrow.

Hired men play "Moonlight Sonata", our first dance.
I pluck the notes from the air, memorizing each chord
the way I still recall your rugged face and calloused hands.

I raise a toast, the earthy scent of cabernet is stolen by a frantic breeze.
I don't like the bitter taste of wine—I drink it for you,
imagining I'm borrowing its flavor from the press of your lips.

In dreams I'll walk into the churning waters, this weighty skirt fusing my legs like a fin.
I'll have no need for air as I troll the lightless depths of ocean floor,
searching every slump of shipwrecked wood, until I am with you again.



Elegy for a Dead Admiral

Postscript

Her footprints in the sand
are so small compared to mine.
I imagine what yours would look like
pressed into the wet beach by ours.

Every night she begs for the story
of how we danced under moonlight,
fell in love while swaying to a rhythm
like the calm sea on a summer night.

When I lay myself down I need
my own story so sleep may come.
I tell myself perhaps it is not
the insubstantial passing of time
that heals our greatest pains,
salving our wounds in layers
of intangible space and distance,
but rather that with each drawn
breath, every mortal beat, we
grow closer to reunion.

I still often dream we are dancing.
I can feel your arms and warmth
just as they were before. Sometimes
our sweet daughter is with me.
You ask her to dance with us—

she stands on your toes as we move,
holding tight to a life never lived.



Dance Me to the End of Love

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