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#37

Winter 2003



**Dreaming the
Tree**

by
Caitlin McDonnell



deadly nightshade, a cardiac and respiratory stimulant, having purplish-red flowers and black berries

“Dreaming the Tree” is a selection of poems from the author’s booklength manuscript, *Looking for Small Animals*.

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Dreaming the Tree

**by
Caitlin McDonnell**

Dreaming the Tree

Not the tree, but the lake
dreaming the tree, shimmering
this brisk meeting.

Tracing the private finger
along the alphabet of other
upstairs, alone, breathing...

Brushing off the imprint
where light didn't hit
what accidental beauty.

The trees are receptive;
We're all ears, they tell me, *start with
the father and fall from there.*

How'd I get this wild?

Oh, money, father,
sister, lover on the other side
of walls, you who brave

the tiniest selection, what
falls away, what gathers?
You have a gift,

she said from underground.
Unearthed, he had just straw,
stones, a blue comb.

Keep this, he said, turning away
in his wheeled chair, *Hold on,
listen, what else...*

In Defense of Gathering

It can happen anywhere,
that accuracy of naming;
so that the thing comes forth
and shouts itself into existence,
then is calmly allowed to
take its place at that long
table of the ordinary.

The poet is someone who listens,
who hears voices; an eavesdropper.
Orpheus was postmodern before his time;
a gatherer, not a hoarder, of the whispers
of the dead. Eurydice was the true poet;
she was talking in her sleep, didn't know
she knew until she said it,
words jetting out like blood,
up through the thin skin
of the earth, her Vesuvian face smiling
as still as a window.

When you look up and see the sign that says:

Blind Children Passing

or even: *Keep Your Valuables Close to Your Person*

or in the Hollywood movie, when the man
speaks intimately, horribly to his date:

I envy your beauty, I want it all to myself,

and at the bottom of my spine, I feel a new
guest pulling out his chair, grinning

in black jeans, it doesn't matter
that he's late, he nods politely at
the other tired truths, says:

The name's Suspicion,

I'm the reason she never trusted you.

Eurydice in Transit

All aboard and unanchored,
when you took back
your love my preciousness
failed. All that glistening.
Just another mean stone.

You've never been pretty.
All atmosphere — a spacious
forgetting room. What does

it mean, this slow and sloppy
odyssey. Do you stop to reflect,
old goat, or move forward
one eye on the road,
car shirking your agency,
wear a seat-belt, it chirps,
shut your door,
learn to commit...

Say You Were A Train

You couldn't choose the landscape
you bulleted through on intelligent tracks,
framed by windows for diners
in the bubble car.

Airstreaming through Wyoming, her
lackadaisical curves; empty barn
with overgrown sumac. Girl alone
looking at her legs. Father quietly closing
the gate. You know forward. The web
of your wheels, yanking doors open
with a toot for any soul with the fare.
And when one too many bloody marys
past your brink, you keep moving unconscious
of rhythm or form, mutter: *Heal Me.*
Press a button that says: Cherry Coke.

Fish

What's so great about joy —
Pain tingles too. Why
not rest in something
that might stick.
The world's big and
ruthless. I want to be small.
I want the time before the touch
when the air is folding
in lavender light. Before
the bed, before the knife...
Before the needle or the
string, the picture of the girl —
the moon conspiring with
the curve, the crook
the mouth, her mind, her
time ahead of time stolen
and held still. What is happy
if not the tiny red the cat
will chase and never catch.
I don't want to be smart.
I want to watch a fish
in blue water with a plastic
mermaid, a castle to swim
in and out, watch it
feel the fake pink plants
tickle the gold coins
of its belly and think
for a spell that the
clear bowl
is the whole
of the world.

The Paraclete

You need to slow down, he said
interceding his scotch, tight
lipped in its little glass

Oh new religion, holy withdrawal
from life, the body's insistent;
gasping, tied to this firm chair

A chair is what the human
form is not; he's offering
peanuts, nude in their

papery shells. I shed
my rings, finger the flesh,
each digit a scepter of light

You came with permission
whatever the rapt
procession claims, eyes

fixed on my belt, the
ludicrous mane of hair —
and I happily traded

the score, not the sister
gifted the larynx, spinning
its thin song, but the girl

on the shore is mine, corpse
washed and salted, clean
in her white dress, palms

cupped in the shape
of a question.

Sleeping with Emily Dickinson

I would sneak in through the window,
Bring her sweet meat.
We would giggle in white
nightgowns about the books
laboring over her dashes,
her intentionality,
the skepticism of unrequited love.
I would be very quiet.
I would not say
what doesn't matter.
Take her to the window,
open it tiny chimes
let down her hair,
tease her about her attitude,
night-breeze billowing the
white curtains. Angel bellies. We'd share
a cigarette. She'd like that—
the slight slip of suicide
punctuating the moment.

whisper:

Where is it I go —
When we are Here yet both Alone

Hold her ghostwhite Hand

whisper:

I hear what you Don't write down.

Night

I dream I am raking the father
perfectly —
Japanese sandbox of ashes;
two male friends at my side.

Beside me, my lover dreams
of sex with a man.

*Dreams are just the psyche
trying on its wardrobe, he says.*

All night blue glistening angels —
Gabriel in his silk dress —
dance over our floating bed.

The Funny Face Club

We would go through the dumpster
of the cathedral

of St. Thomas Aquinas.
Priest's trash, it smells of

holy water, rice paper
and stained blood. Church goers

throw away the best stuff.
A porcelain doll,

red and shiny as hot sin,
she was my best find.

I carried her home and kept
her on the shelf, propped

up like an inheritance.
My mom wanted me

to clean her, but I liked the
scent of disregard.

Radiant Identities

Oh, the power of a fourteen year old girl
she sees straight through salt lust bone meat
and she is free
in her horse body
free of longing
free of longing for longing.

Take, took, taken

Her face
becomes our use for her face.

Walking in Provincetown

Pull over and let your
tender one lead.

Sunset relentlessly passing,
press a stone in the palm,

Its gift at commitment.
The story of your life;

All gesture, lapsing
the shore, retreating.

Your insistence on living
tempers me like punctuation,

the tick of the clock. Even beauty
needs a place to hang her cloak.

I've never seen it all, Blues her,
reds me. A piece of sky

falls beyond the text —
it's firm horizon.

The moon has tired
of earring metaphors.

She turns in her sleep,
reveals her better side,

as the sea answers yes.
Anything you ask her:

Yes, should I stay, yes.
Should I go, yes.

Leaving you is shelling
a mollusk — its wet reminder

nude in the salt air.
Like Protestants, you want a road,

a map. *I Was Here* tracks the sand.
You were here and here

is where you lost something.
Where the beach arched

its back toward your mind
and you dropped the shell

you'd held like a child's ear;
Tenderly, like it could lead somewhere.

January Requiem

So, now, the worst has happened.
Mercy, you fell to your knees
and were heard. Your whole
being is loud with the shame
of its survival.
Trees shake off the downpour
in the reverent stillness
The music of cars —
a distant baseline.
Everything that could be taken
from you has been taken.
You are a limp, clean thing,
unable to tell the wind
from the rise and fall of
breath in its small cage.
You begin by making small decisions.
Which way to turn and when.
Before you know it, whole roads
stretch out behind you like a mirror.
You look down on your life
like a funny little town-;
practice lying, its sweet easy liquor —
how it tucks you in,
loosens the green grip.
Remember this much:
Everything you held out your palms to
was dropped in its time, like flax
in the morning sun.
Everything you knew
was opened
to a larger room,
where men in black suits
spoke quietly at tables,
filling out forms.
Endless hallway,
smoke of dust mote.

They nod at you like
they have been waiting.
You know what you must do.

Narrative

The body says:
Lie down, taste this,

Want what's easy.

The slight movement in water
that circles out...

The world heals.

Wild Thyme grows elegantly
over a grave, forgetting.

The mind says: *Fight to take me
with you.*

Sitting on this gray tray, spiced
and steaming,

in want of caress.

They meet in a white room.

Everything's real clean. A lot of waiting.

A book is lying open by the window,
which is also open.

And the book is waiting too,
doesn't know what for —

fat with its glum story.

The wind exhales in with a new mouth,

shuffling the pages

As Of Now

You must never say the same thing twice.
You must walk your longings on tip-toe
rather than tucking them in sleeping bags
with flashlights. You must learn waiting.

You must say *but if*, instead of *at least*.
You must learn listening. Not just to
small animals tucked in crevices
in cupboards and bodies.

But to strange, misguided arrows
that climb you mountains rather
than glowing lazily in still ponds.
All night genius will throw you

candy flowers. You must catch them.
You must fold each one, promising...



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2. Camille Roy, *Dream Girls*
3. Cecilia Vicuña, *Bloodskirt*, trans. Rosa Alcalá
4. Fanny Howe, parts from *Indivisible*
5. Eleni Sikelianos, from *The Book of Jon*
6. Laura Mullen, *Translation Series*
7. Beth Murray, *12 Horrors*
8. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *Audience*
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35. Lauren Gudath, *Animal & Robot*
36. Alice Notley, *IHIGENIA*

published in 2003:

37. Caitlin McDonnell, *Dreaming the Tree*
38. Eileen Myles, *We, the Poets*



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