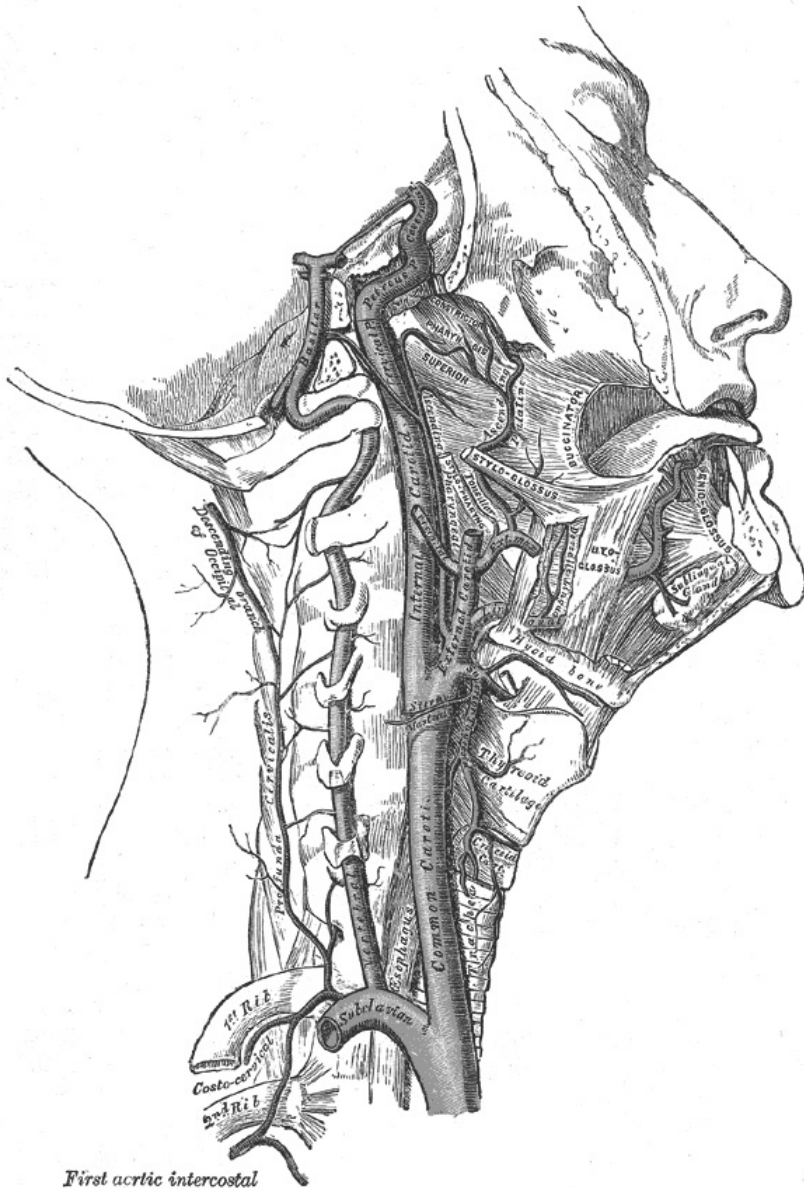


The Agonist



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First aortic intercostal

I

*One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—
One need not be a House—
The Brain has Corridors—surpassing
Material Place—*

Emily Dickinson, 670

Five

So I lay swelled, lush
with fever, my back arched, and
I learned, too late, that

I was afraid of
what lived in the space between
our bodies, our words:

even the silence,
when I listened, was iron-rich.
The blood in my mouth

like young wine, coating
the tongue. How many ruins
did you build inside

me? What monuments
did you desecrate to live
underneath my skin?

Scorched Earth

For a long time I used to dream about smoke
swirling in an empty room. The wood
stumps we set to burn in the fireplace: crumbled

into ash and embers; transformed. The body
and the space it occupies: set alight.
The body and the space it occupied: dispersed.

Exploded. Illuminated—like dust particles
in a shaft of light. The smoke still rises; the scent of scorch
lingers, trapped, despite the passing of years.

*

The more I think about your body, the more I know
it is no longer your own: your heart is a house
with the doors left open; your brain is the basement

filled with smoke. The skeleton hidden under the flesh
of floorboards. A stranger roaming the hallways, a
dappled shadow splashed on the wall, flickering in firelight.

*

I remember peeling peaches in the gloaming,
juice sluicing down your chin. The moths
threw themselves onto the bonfire and I knew what it was

to burn: your eyes alight and gleaming,
insects swirling a crown around your skull.
The world was on fire and your fingers

popped as you pressed your palms over the whites
of my eyes, the beat of your heart like
an unlatched door: open, shut, open.

गुम; or, Lexical Gaps

सपना

/sapna/

My dreams, in colour. My skin drips
melanin and no one tells me I have a beautiful
name. I have no country of origin
and I cannot be accused
of being articulate.

याद

/yaad/

My childhood, remembered: mouths unsynced
with sound, words swollen and sworn. Throats
dismantled from the inside out. My tongue turned
plosive, poised at the tip of my teeth,
dubbing out of dialect.

सोच

/soch/

My brain humming as it searches the synapses,
the centre—the superior, the inferior, the middle
temporal gyrus, the Broca's and Wernicke's
—for the path to my flimsy pidgin,
my language of thought.

A Manual for the Prevention of Hauntings

1.

Weigh the hands down
with stones
and throw them into a river—
not a lake, nor any still water.
Let the fish fret away the fingertips.

2.

The feet should be buried
at a crossroads,
toes turned eastward,
to stop lonely ghosts
from finding their way home.

3.

Place each tooth
in an envelope filled with salt.
One for each lover to bury
in pot plants, knife drawers,
a clenched fist,
or beneath the tongue.

4.

Hide the hair
in the old upholstery.
Use it for needlework,
for sewing up the wound,
the scar. Let it dissolve:
let it seep into the skin.

5.

Be sure to separate the kneecap
from the tendon and ligament
and grind it to dust
in a mortar and pestle.
Scatter the bone fragments
in a westward breeze.
Do not let them beg.
Do not let them kneel at the door.

6.

The heart is best kept
quashed under a metal plate
in a quiet room
with a lock on the door.
Feel its pulse through the floorboards:
it can never run away from you
again.

7.

Keep the ribcage intact.
Place a stone at its centre
and flood it with light.
Soon you will hear the hum of a heartbeat.
Soon you will be ready
to start again.

Mississippi Sound

After my mother leaves, my father
teaches me how to fish, gut and fillet,
to shuck oyster shells into the ocean
past the boatyards of Biloxi.

I never find a pearl, but sea salt
coats the sand and dirt and grit
sticking to my skin, the soles of my feet
dappled bright like black drum.

Some nights my father smokes mackerel
and ground mullet, the husks of old boat motors
strewn at our feet, while I watch the flounder fight
against the freshwater of the Singing River.

My mother once told me that man was not
meant to tame the sea, but my underbelly
is encrusted with red coral, and I have
circumvented shipwrecks beneath the bayou.

I haven't been to church in seven years,
but with my fingers hooked in the gills
of a thrashing white trout,
I know that we unmake the fish
the same way God made him.

Baptism

I used to be able to hold my breath
for four minutes at a time.

My chest would stretch and burn
around the hot wound in my throat,
and when I could breathe again I couldn't
stop myself from wanting
to start over. Something in my body

thirsts to be held under the water:
a baptism in Breakfast Creek,
my pockets full of stones. They say
the air is thin at the mountaintop.
They say you should crawl
when your house is in flames.
I wonder what I should do when

the river is at work, when the water
sinks into my mouth and pits
my body against itself. I wonder
how many minnows would suffocate
in the air trapped in my lungs.

There Is a Cure

The air was never sweet
here but now there's oil

slicked across the water,
the dark of it crawling

four-footed into the house.
I tell you not to let your feet

dangle over the edge, because I
have found footprints

that stop at the foot
of our four-poster bed,

your phantom weight
crumpled in the covers.

But your ghost
has outgrown your body

and you can no longer look
me in the mouth.

There are still brook trout
in the silence of the stream.

I can hear them
sometimes, wheezing

over the heady beat
of blood flooding the hull in my chest,

entire shoals of them,
swelled around your suppurated

ankles.

Departure

I am not asking for absolution,
only what I am owed, having
stood at your altar of mixed mythologies and laid down
three cherry pits and all of my milk
teeth. I was promised a litany
of things untouched. In sleep

you recite the names of your
ancestors, insomnia masking
your anaemic mouth, my hands firm
on the wheel, and cloaked
in midnight in the back of your father's car
you cry 'mercy,

mercy.' Already it's begun.
Our homeland is ash and wreckage and history
tries to narrate our ruin. What does it know
of the burrs on your hands? What can be read in that morning?
You forced your fingers in my mouth
and trusted I would not bite down.

Suburban Witchcraft

When performing dark magicks during daylight,
wear your nightgown as a day dress
to ensure the desired
results. Dark magicks include
philosophy (or thaumaturgy),
invocation (for self-identification),
napping (or day-dreaming),
and the feeding of familiars.

The temperament of your neighbours will
have an impact, however small, on your work.
Endeavour to ply them with bimonthly gifts:
handwritten recipes, oils, lemon biscuits.

Foxes make competent ingredient
carriers. Charm the family with offerings
of raw eggs, blueberries, a song at dusk.
When an agent comes to consort,
anoint its ankles with ground ginger and attach,
to the left forepaw, a list of up to three
required ingredients. Check—as appropriate—
your mailbox or doorstep for delivery.

Do not discount local supermarkets
as reliable sources of fresh fennel, salt,
and mandrake root.

The loyalty of corvids is hard-won, but valuable.
Each morning, remove your veil and turn your face
to the light. Sprinkle raw oats on your windowsill,
forming an unbroken line. Return at sunset to read
the auspice. Do not disturb them mid-flight, or after nightfall,
when they are called away.

Burning a wasps' nest will not always stop
the buzzing, the rage.

A compost heap, while useful, may provide
a vessel for your estranged
parent, sibling, or spouse,
who will inevitably skulk
by your bedroom window
and whisper about all the things
you cannot yet change.

Victimless Leather

I was reading an article about a coat
made of fibroblast cells: alive
and kept warm in an incubator,
feasting on serum and media.

It outgrew its skeleton—burgeoned
with limbs and sores, an arm
pulsating against the bottom of the glass
—and they had to let it die.

Just one week prior they'd cooked up little dolls
in tubes for a ritual sacrifice. The witnesses
leaned in and whispered their worries
as they watched them decompose.

I'd wanted to eat one. My belly
was surely warm enough to incubate something
so small. I was not afraid of proliferation
or metastasis.

Bad Ritual

you were lying in the bathtub, legs crossed
at the ankle. your hands held a story about the ocean bed.
your hands held the truth
of every drowning since 1992. you wanted
me to stop talking about God: your limbs
splayed, reflected in a billion rays of light.

each morning I craved a prophet yet you made light
of crucifixions, your tongue carving the cross
as a mere reconfiguration of limbs.
you did not like to think of splinters in nail beds.
you thought only of what you wanted:
the visions, the mirrors, the tongues telling truths.

I was never good at being truthful
during daylight:
my lovers left wanting
to find the seam where belief and desire crossed,
to make narratives out of my body within their beds.
my fragile geometry reduced to a tangle of interlocked limbs.

you used to see the golden ratio in the bend of my limbs,
my elbows, my knees: the truth
of the angle mathematically inspired against the flat of our bed.
I wanted to hide myself from the light,
my head held high in shadows, arms crossed
over my chest. but your fingers pushed into my palms; your wanting

opened the wounds. you wanted
clichés: you wanted to tear me limb
from limb, you wanted me cross
and bothered, you wanted the truth
of my desire to have nothing to do with light
hearts and tender thoughts, enwombed.

but you had hidden secrets in the seabed,
your legend left wanting
for lack of disciples, of scripture, of holy light.
I held the nails in my hands and a prophet
on my tongue and your limbs
grew heavy from the weight of my untruths.
I deserved the cross

purposes that led me to light, the lover who uncovered my limbs.
in the bedsheets I hymned of wants
and impossible truths, the distance you have to cross.

Road Trip

In the summer of 1995 my mother and I took
a road trip, followed the Murray River
all the way up to Echuca. Our lives were bundled up
in garbage bags, weighing down the trunk, and at the start
the tiny hatchback could barely make it up the hills. The engine
was as ragged as my mother's breathing.
Every twenty kilometres we'd stop and she'd throw
a bag into the river. We would watch it
long enough to make sure it would sink, then drive on, lighter
and lighter. I don't remember the trip back, but I imagine it
must have been
like the drive past the redgum wharf: the windows down,
the freshwater wind soaking my hair.
The engine was thrumming and I felt as though
I could outrun anything.