THE ACHE AND THE WING

Sunni Brown Wilkinson

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Contents

Rodeo	7
Don't Feed the Coyotes	8
Ghost	10
"They Call It Weeping,"	11
Long Time Coming	13
Canning Tomatoes, Late August	15
The Woman Who Became a House	18
The Difficult, Liquid Art	20
A Pocket of Air in Irish Man's Brain	22
In the Voice of My Husband's Grandfather	24
So Long	26
When It Comes	27
Monk Parakeet	29
Bird Poem with the End of the World in It	30
After Ravel's Daphnis and Chloe: Lent (Chiff re 156) Peu A Peu	31

Rodeo

Tonight is a rodeo night, the announcer blaring his bull and clown doctrine so loud it carries two miles east to our block, where just now a hummingbird hawk-moth drinks from the pink phlox with its long wand and I'm alone for a moment and the sky is bleeding itself out over the train tracks and the brick abandoned factories. The lights of the carpet store by the mall flicker carpe and I wonder just what I can seize. The homeless shelter bearing some saint's name fills up every night and spills downtown next morning. Wings of strange creatures brush our flowers while we sleep. And a hapless moose wanders a schoolyard before it's caught, tranquilized. Everyone's looking for it: a warmth, a softness in the belly, in a bed of grass. Take it when you can. Seize it.

Lately sleep is a myth and my brain is so hard-wired for worry my whole body crackles, then a deep fog rolls in and all day I'm lost. Unlike this moth, greedy in its guzzling, drinking sweetness without asking, and now the buzzer of the bull riding sounds. I think of the grace of that single man, one hand on the saddle and the other a flag waving violently above him. A wild show of surrender. Some days it's like this: one part anchored while the other begs for mercy. And some days it's the other, the posture he begins with: both hands together, holding tight. Sometimes you hold your own hand. That's all there is to take.

Don't Feed the Coyotes

A man stands next to his Harley and throws hot dogs at the mangy thing prowling the Conoco. They arc in the air and smack the concrete and roll, and the wild dog steps forward warily. We're on our way to Mexico, 10 miles past Why, Arizona where none of my questions Why were answered: did our son (apple-cheeked, blue-eyed, four days shy of due) have to die? Why did I mistake the beginning for the end? Why is my body a decrepit factory, each machine slowly breaking down? Why can't Jesus come already? We're a mess. The world is a starving coyote and my body the abandoned mine we passed in Vulture City, hardware quiet, rusting. Deep down

a stillness. My body is that old prospector's shack no one lives in anymore,

wood dry as kindling in 100 degrees.

Saguaros raise chunky arms, baby-like, Buddhist monks blessing the cracked earth. I love their assurance, the yoga poses, the way they suffer, hold the good water close, wait.

Creatures here crouch, desperate for life the way a man haunts a mine on all fours, looking down into a hole that will ruin or save him. The way we did that long night in the hospital after the news. We looked into the hole of us a long time, fur matted, heads down. Something between prayer and a baring of teeth.

We give ourselves to what comes just to stay alive. We read the signs like this one near the Conoco bathroom: Don't feed the coyotes.

Sometimes a child dies and living things are ugly. A scavenger begs and in his ugliness we see ourselves. It's tenderness that makes Harley man lift his arm, for a moment Saguaro-like but soft, and fling the last hot dog like a blessing.

Ghost

All summer my father plays evangelical AM in the garden on an old radio to keep out the deer. Neighbors have barbed wire fences, motion sensors, traps, but he uses a radio. The voices, the singing, the brave hallelujah of being born again keeps them away.

My friend says for weeks a single noisy cricket has sung outside her window every night, kept her awake. One morning she crept out, early, poured gasoline on it. Finally, sleep. But no song.

Near the end of June the baby arrives but he is dead already. We hold the husk of him in a white blanket before the mortician comes. No blood hum or cry song, just silence.

August moon and stories around the fire, and in the background, my father's radio. We lean in to hear the end of a ghost story—a haunting, a spirit returning home—and from the cornstalks a woman sings "Be Still, My Soul." Crackle of the fire and the spirits we can't see.

"All now mysterious shall be bright at last," we sang near a tiny grave on a June day.

My son is a mystery, a body we held briefly and let go.

My body is a mystery, a cave, a house, a shell.

The Bible says one day the earth will be fire and we'll all be born again—to singing or to silence. Come to me then, my little deer, my cricket. My darkest hallelujah.

"They Call It Weeping,"

the nurse said as we dabbed the fluid from you, my boy with a birthmark on your lower forehead between your eyebrows, almost diamond-shaped, like so many horses I've seen in so many fields. More dark hair than your brothers and for one moment your eyes were opened—your dad says *blue*—then closed. Your mouth stayed agape. You were gone before you came. *I'm sorry*, the doctor said. *There's no way for us to close it.* Not even breath. Just that open-mouthed awe at your body having made it, though the rest didn't. Your lips magenta, the color of the succulent's bloom I smashed between my fingers a month later. Like old bleeding. Red to purple to black. I held you for three hours, kissed your cold head, tried to warm you with my breath but you grew colder and your tissue–paper skin began to pull away. So much fluid under there. Pink. And it seeped out like your whole body was crying.

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when, after each morning's bath, your breasts drop

milk tears one by one down your loose and ragged torso.

•

my dad said, the kind of willow that loves water like the one in the park where Logan River ran, where we played as kids. A wispiness and the way even a breath of air made it flutter.

Like a woman bent over, hair brushing the ground, riding the waves of grief up and down.

•

what I heard one afternoon as I walked across campus: behind the trees another Mary Magdalene, hidden, disembodied by longing, some heartache that couldn't wait for home. She released each guttural note the way you might hold a sparrow against you, slowly open your hands and finally, mercifully, let it go.

Long Time Coming

Sid comes to paint our kitchen because, in my husband's words, we aren't Michelangelo, able to crane our necks for those strips

on the ceiling. He wears his coveralls, brings his own brush. By noon he is wiping his brow with his forearm and knows

all my son's kindergarten jokes. His face weathered from countless hours with scouts, teaching them to make fire with flint

and stones or dig snow caves up the canyon in drifts that cover picnic tables, though the claustrophobia

always kicks in. It's been 15 years now but tight spaces still get him. He told my husband once that Prozac

saved his life. Those years as a bishop, standing before a congregation of neighbors and friends

who knew the whole story and his son's love of rocks, how the family hunted for fossils and gems

and digging tunnels was part of the job. Every Easter he spoke on the resurrection, Christ and the empty tomb,

knowing in the foothills the bones of his own son and father still touch each other in the mine

they'd explored just before it collapsed. All those hours he counseled couples, bent to listen

to their muffled cries, put his arms around other people's sons who still lived

and didn't want to, blessed babies who grunted and stretched in his arms, he thought

of bodies that break, that bear each other, that hold one another in dark places, of the God

who sees it all. Someday to hear stirring in that place of rocks, like the faint sound of a brush

running its fingers over the walls.

Canning Tomatoes, Late August

The West is burning, Yosemite in ash,

smoke choking blue sky

and all afternoon I've cleaned jars, rim and round

belly, stuffed in mounds of fleshy fires

the garden ignited under green.

They'll burn bright in soups

all winter, in sauces my boys

splatter on their mouths, ruby smack

and long stained. But now at the counter

they're museum, the freak exhibit:

one hundred hearts packed, puzzle-like,

swollen tongues of summer

severed, apothecary charms

from a century of plagues.

If I cut out the breast

of the robin, would it look

like this? Pitched

crimson of poppies, the shape and sheen

of bloody knuckles of street fighters,

tucked and quivering? Or the rooftops

of Salzburg whose castle's

torture chamber made us shiver,

all that scarlet hidden

between the floorboards and masks,

cardinal sins loud with telling.

How macabre for such lightness!

I'll confess this:

I'm sick with love for the rust

of each globe, the way I cut

and plunge them into jars the way

my mother did when I was young

and she was happy the first time

and the garden said

yes

in red red red.

The Woman Who Became a House

All the lonely came knocking the door of her mouth

locked her toes turned to bricks her arms and legs once willowy

tree–like turned to bricks, her belly became a pile of

bricks inside her day after day grew rooms that opened to other rooms:

room of dahlias blooming big as umbrellas brothers and cats

room of sheet music flute acrid smell of perms

room of red want and blue alone big room

room of *Swan Lake* and Lamb's chocolate cake room of holding his hand

room of breast milk and skin and mewling of peach fuzz hair soft room

room with an empty crib and a hole in the floor

rooms of birdsong and bright rugs silent rooms, too much room

rooms vanishing down long hallways of her some days the furnace deep in the center of her rages

and she gathers herself there like her mother and her grandmother

and all the women before her and she sits on a little stool

across from the bottled fruit and the names of all her dears

she sits for a long time watching the flame

and the noise of her weeping is like a wind in the eaves

is like thunder and waterfalls and the sweet evergreen weeping

of a thing in love with its own song

The Difficult, Liquid Art

Salzburg's sun suspended like a man trembling on a high wire over the spires and the Salzach.

Tenth anniversary, and we kiss in the bowery. I'm a flower you can't stop smelling.

You love me the way a young man loves, a wild horse nibbling grass, hurtling down a field wet with rain.

On *The Sound of Music* tour wives turn to Spring, dance while husbands fumble with the camera,

turn away in their loud white gym shoes. Flowers jeering, *Forget-me-not*, *Wallflower*. *Pansy*.

Captain von Trapp, whistle sharp and sonorous, that glacier who slowly melts on screen,

lived here. He climbed the world singing, we saw him as the credits rolled at the end of the world, bright

as snow. At the fountain in this city he loved, horses rise from sea foam, men wrestle with each other like gods,

primal, carrying the weight of the world and the water and the woman on top who kneels,

having been created last into a world made whole by her body. Can a man say that?

Around the corner, Mozart lived as a boy in the dancing master's house, cocooned

in music and the rhythms of the body swift as water, like the man back home who dances, terrible rage of his torso, his bald head and large hands, the length of him odd

but limber too. Each time I see him I see the miracle of a man like that dancing, the difficult,

liquid art of living in a man's body, of being broken and beautiful.

A Pocket of Air in Irish Man's Brain

"British doctors have called the case of 'the man that lost (part of) his mind' one of the strangest things they have ever seen." —IrishCentral, March 13, 2018

In the news today doctors say the old man's brain is part circuitry, part air. Three and a half inches disappeared. A pocket there, empty, a hole the size of an ice cream scoop, an egg, a short-tailed shrew curled and sleeping, the head of a dinner spoon. No one knew 'til he grew dizzy, tingly, only half his body moving, like a lover reaching across the morning to cold sheets, chickadees then the absence of chickadees, party next to a quiet room. In the X-ray, his brain is half a Valentine, blank space on the left before unfolding the heart, folded wings of a moth, missing ovary, a pear and the shadow of a pear. I want to write love notes in my best cursive, fold them into butterflies and let them roost there, tiny aviary, open womb. I want to whisper my seventh grade secrets into that locker, turn the dial 'til it clicks. Like the safety deposit box my mother showed me in case she died, the hidden bonds each light as air. I want to bless the space in that Irish man's brain: mysterious cloud, house of ghosts, holy of holies, a hollow like a child's hand cupped for a caterpillar, cradle of the lost. It's quiet as the cave we explored

in high school, knees to nose, crouched at the back and the boys with their flashlights switched off, their breath shallow, close, and more than half a heart pounding.

In the Voice of My Husband's Grandfather

Goodbye world, muscular and strange. Goodbye hostas breaking through mud and the moon like an aspirin in water dissolving. Goodbye hands holding a fork over quivering poached eggs, wrapped thick around the neck of the garden shovel, holding her hand at night across the bed for sixty-five years. Goodbye hullabaloo and horseracing, a child on my knee and a slap on my leg. Goodbye farm—my life's love, you too I'd kiss full upon the lips, all those ordinary lives hung on the hinges of you like battered doors, dandelions around the shanty, bulls grazing on the sledding hill. Eighty-eight years your child. Every stick I lifted from the grass, each Spring's first mowing, each fence post mending a reaching for my parents' vanished hands. Goodbye body, a tanked out Chevy, torn vinyl and busted springs. Goodbye deer nuzzling the first crop of strawberries, munching each one slowly, knowing they will not last. Goodbye faces wild as summer trout. Goodbye crocus—you, too, swollen

this snowy March morning, waiting for the moment your body opens, for the pistil fire inside, like a lantern, to rise.

So Long

On the road that opens to mountains and snow, away from the houses cramped in their quarters like too many socks in a drawer, the eye of the eye inside of me opens.

All the years of children I loved and feared would kill me. Not their brightness or the electric thrill of their skin next to mine, not even the crying that pried me from sleep but the dormancy of a wild inner life I loved and knew well. To survive, it left me. I cared then

for other wild things. Now in silence it's returning. I turn a corner to a doe and two fawns. *I know you. I too live like this.* The body and the spirit are a bicycle you ride carefully and uphill and for how long?

When It Comes

"For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me." —Job 3:25

Water the daisies. Watch the dirt turn dark with relief.

Love the bees. Like you, they have names and middle names, memories, deaths.

Open your hand to the tug and huff of toddlers, the macaroni on the table hardened to half-smiles, half-moons.

Watch the fish rise from the lake of childhood. See how they're filled by the fruit of air.

Refine stillness. Let the good milk spill.

Praise each freckle, a star in a constellation

of your vast fleshy galaxy.

Thank it what eats your heart into grave simplicity, leaving it easy to pack, the pit of a plum.

Guard your true promise. Be lucid and wide. Animal-soft. Full as a bride. What matters is nearly invisible. Search for it snout-like, close to the ground, bloodhound sharp

and howl.

Monk Parakeet

"We wake up to different birds than at home." —My friend Diana, describing her travels on the back of a postcard

After sauntering down Bourbon St, after beignets at Cafe du Monde, fiddlers in the French Quarter sawing Irish music into the air, second line parades with top hats and white umbrellas, trumpets oogling behind them, art galleries, po'boys and live jazz in the courtyard, a man singing "Sunny, one so true, I love you," pretending it was for me, after dueling pianos at Pat O'Brien's and the drunk man slapping his wife's bare shoulder to the rhythm, the way he looked at her like he wanted to peel off her tank top the way you peel off wallpaper, after sailors on balconies swaying, Cracker Jack bright against the dusk, after casinos and crawdads, after sun and fog and the smell of urine rising, my favorite moment of New Orleans was the morning a tiny but boisterous bird chirped his heart out over traffic lights while I was waiting to cross. Spring, and time for his solo, riffing the news over Julia and Magazine streets, he was greener than green beads, louder than Charlie Parker. Later. I would learn he's one of thousands: a budgie from Australia, stormed in-hurricane hard-since the 60s and refusing to leave, nesting in the city's palm trees. Wild heart. King of Spades. Open your emerald throat again.

Bird Poem with the End of the World in It

One morning in May, I wake up to no birdsong. Not even their tiny engine purring like casual talk among themselves—not hallelujah but *what's for breakfast,* or *who left the light on in the basement?* Not even that. Just silence. Maybe it's a sign.

On the other side of the world, people eat songbirds, little delicacies the rich serve up on a silver dish. Sparrow, blackcap, thrush. Some smaller than the palm of your hand. The trick is to trick them. Sticky nets in Cyprus. Mock mating calls in Lebanon. Millions of birds swallowed whole by nets. Later, by candlelight: sparrow dressed in pomegranate molasses. Finch with a sprig of rosemary. *Delicious*, they say, but *Listen. No music.* Whole forests, whole countries, whole continents quiet. That terrible breath before the angels sound their trumpets.

Our parakeets screech and jangle the cage, but sometimes they sing, a trill like the tiny ladder they scurry up and down. One is mustard yellow and two are sky blue. They argue and peck each other. They kiss and sleep in a row. Like us. The emerald one escaped last year, flew off toward the farms on the other side of the highway. It was November, already cold, and he couldn't survive the night. I lied to my son. I said he was okay. I could never be a prophet. So much sad truth to say.

In summer, birds are bodiless, hidden by leaves, just a world of green and then song. You can hunt for them, but their faces don't matter. It's not what you see, it's what you hear. Like the holy ghost. In winter, half of them fly away while you sleep. They are there and not there all over again. All over again the holy ghost. In the skeletal trees, they perch, tight-bodied and brown, surprisingly plain and still singing. Like God, they make music out of nothing. After Ravel's Daphnis and Chloe: Lent (Chiffre 156) Peu A Peu

Little by little the birds of paradise wake up,

ruffle their papyrus– thin and polychromatic feathers, nuzzle

> breast to breast, trill into the light that breaks

like water poured into a pool stilled by stars.

> Now the day opens and, exultant and fluid, the birds take over the sky.

Fig and bergamot. Sweet lemon tree. The impossible jewels inside and the birds coming.

There are lovers here, their bodies like rivers, like waterfalls.

Lovers like an altar burning so predictably, their bodies thin and wingless, about to be broken. I don't want another love story. I want immortality like this, beaked

and hungry, shucking the fibrous shell of us,

the husk torn loose and the seed glimmering.

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Ruminate: "When It Comes"

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SWWIM: "So Long"

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About the Author



Sunni Brown Wilkinson's poetry can be found in Western Humanities Review, Sugar House Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, SWWIM, Crab Orchard Review and other journals and anthologies. She is the author of The Marriage of the Moon and the Field (Black Lawrence Press 2019, finalist for the Hudson Prize) and The Ache & The Wing (winner of Sundress's 2020 Chapbook Prize). She also won New Ohio Review's NORward Poetry Prize and the 2020 Joy Harjo Prize from Cutthroat, a Journal of the Arts. She teaches at Weber State University and lives in northern Utah with her husband and three sons.

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