

I SUPPOSE THE DARKNESS IS OURS

by
Alan Britt



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(for my mother)

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THE ANGEL

I saw them
it was her hands
 she dropped the red seeds
 on the ice
 she filled her thighs
with the darkness
 I believe
 she was unable
 to fly
even though
 she had wings.

DEPARTING

Four kisses
and the rustle of your trousers
in the hallway,
newspapers collapse into a pile,
then the soft nudge
of a door handle against my solitude.

IN CASE YOU'RE THINKING OF GOING TO SCANDINAVIA

Waltz with me,
I can exist for a torn sleeve
or a thin shadow across this paper.
A letter mailed from Spain
arrived at the wrong house.
Talk with me a little while longer,
until our moment is up.

ELLIOTT COLEMAN

Elliott Coleman is not a man exactly,
but a cloud.
When I shake his hand
it does not feel like the touch of a man,
his hand is more like a warm breeze
that drifts behind a Florida pine woods.
His thin voice rises up slowly
over the white handkerchief in his brown suit pocket.
This cloud is occasionally seen walking in ordinary places,
he turns up now and then at the gallery
or enters with his sealskin cap and black cane
through the doorway of the cafeteria.
A cloud with a cap and a cane!
As the afternoon grows late
he is nowhere to be seen
having been hauled away hours ago
inside the tired taxi cab.
And for all I know this cloud never sleeps,
judging from the dreams on his face
the leaves in his curled hands.
I believe he spends his entire nights
flying into the burrows of dark animals.

BROTHER

Wherever you go
with your shoes
that sing in the grass
blackberry leaves
grow under your skin.

The squirrel
gnaws a broken twig
and arouses your hand
that quietly folds
your collar of moss
as you leave.

THE DAY FOLDS IN TWO

The hours are landing
in the tops of trees one by one.
Laughing and talking and pulling
brown ribbons across the sky.
And when they all
lift up at once
creating a darkness
the moon begins to rise
inside a blue flower.

BRANDON NIGHT

I.

A man wades through floodlights
in his back yard.
The treeroots shake their halters
and dig their hooves into the sand.
Crickets in the hedges.

II.

The house closes an eye.
A tractor trailer truck
floats on a distant highway.
Leaves spread through the darkness
and grow on the sky.

III.

The porch light
slices open a back yard.
A young woman
rattles the door's jalousies.
Insects rub against the night;
crickets fly inside her dreams.

IV.

The house's eye opens.
Wind falls beneath locomotive wheels
that pass on the other side of night.
The narrow glass on the white table
holds my cold water.

WORK DAY

I unfold the wrappings and lick
some of the rhubarb from the tin foil.
Beside me in the car, I have hedge
clippers, a saw, and an electric trimmer
with a long thin blade.
Down the street I watch two men
unload their heavy equipment
from a blue truck. They have lawn
mowers, rakes, shovels, electric saws,
and assorted other tools. In a moment
I wonder what I am doing here, in
this car seated next to a pair of ancient
paint spattered hedge clippers with
wobbly handles? But the rhubarb
from the foil; how good it is.
Rhubarb on this hot summer day.

IN CASE THE TOWN IS ON FIRE

You were so lovely,
you unbuttoned the sun
and let your sleeves dangle.
Your tiny foot
dug a hole in the air.
We laughed
and had a good time,
I suppose.

TO OUR HOUSE CAT THE COLOR OF WHEAT

A lamp lights
up your whiskers.
In your perfectly round eye
a door opens,
an arm
waves a black scarf
behind that tiny ocean
of your brain.
You stretch your thin body
and tap a paw
against my chin.
I watch black fish
sink unseen
beneath the depths
of your amber waters.

AFTER SPENDING A DAY AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF ART

I draw your outline
on the air,
one high cheekbone
and two loose apples in your blouse.

An awkward word,
like a tiny white parachute
follows me everywhere I go.

JOYCE

A flute grows
in my hand;
somewhere beneath the bone
you draw
an ocean
for its tiny fish.

MY WIFE'S OATMEAL BREAD

Two loaves
fly in the oven.

MARYLAND SHORE

The fog
lifts up its woolen skirt.
Yellow foam
sloshes about the cold ocean.
A hand reaches toward me
from beneath the waves.

BONNIE RAITT: CHICAGO BLUES

You touch windows
in your guitar strings.
The metal slides against your blood.
Your words twist and rise
birds of smoke.

AT THE END

This is not the way,
it is not right to start at the end
they have always told me.
But they never said no one existed.
How could they
when they didn't know themselves?
They never said I could put your voice
in my pocket,
alongside the wood carvings of my bones.

WILDFLOWERS

A girl with two dogs
picks wildflowers
behind our apartment.

Each stalk armed
with white blossoms.

The dark long haired girl
bends low
and places a bunch of flowers
under her left arm.

The two brown dogs
sniff the air
and drift across the weeds.

GREEN CAY

The waves continually roll
against Green Cay's rock covered shores,
the brown pelicans circle overhead
and all day sailboats weave their way
between the tiny island
and St. Croix.

When I swim
Green Cay is always in my eye,
when I sleep
my body touches it.

CRICKETS

Crickets of sleep,
bring back my bones.

THE ISLAND

Crickets rub their wings
against the moon.

The hills lie down
on their sides.

A breeze
hops over bare rocks.

Papaya leaves
tap my shoulder
beside an open window.

DRIVING THROUGH BARTOW, FLORIDA

Old men stand in gas stations;
their shirt pockets opened by
orange trees and country music
Pine trees behind broken wire fences
Morning crawls through the abandoned frame
of a late model car
and hides in the feet of cowbirds
at the side of the highway

THE NIGHT, & AFTERNOON

The night rolls over in the damp hay
and reaches for the afternoon's waist.

NO ONE

No one hears the mosquito's lament
more closely than the water lily.

THE CRICKET . . .

The cricket
in a vacant lot
awakes
in the moon's shoe.

THE MOON

The moon tangled in a wire fence
is a spider crawling up the sky.

WISDOM

A pebble or a lamp?

TIME

Anyway it is hiding
under your backbone.

"THE FAMILIAR FRIGHTENS
MORE THAN THE UNKNOWN."

—Duane Locke

My breath, an ocean
in one hair.
The white caps sail
far away
into the chest of drawers'
darkened wood.
An eye
speaks from the waves;
a guitar hangs
from the eyelash.
I am convinced
that what matters
is not the rows of traffic lights
that sag from wires
and surround the city,
nor the cold cough on the broken corner;
but the damp heelmark beside ferns near an ocean,
or the yellow light that quickly flies
from the rain heavy squash flower.
What matters
is an ocean and a hair,
the voice inside its nest of flutes,
fingernails touching the rotted wood
of the wind's bedroom door.

ALL MECHANICAL THINGS

All mechanical things are a farce.
Only the blood takes the shape of birds
and becomes frightened away
from the moon that perches under an aluminum awning.

SOUNDS

There are sounds that cannot be heard:
seasonal changes in the blood
the tides of the flesh.

There are sounds that fall silent
in the dark beneath a clam shell.

I walk across white sand
knowing I own no sound
until I hear the wingbeats of the heron
rising behind grey palm fronds
on its way down
to the cold beach.

THE ALTAR

In a grocery store
a child wipes her foot
on a butterfly.
She kneels down
before the gum machine
and stares into its glass head.
Her saliva
rolls over the colored round balls
her fingers
streak the glass.
Thin music
settles around the edges
of the big window.
An arm
slams a silver shopping cart
into its steel nest.
A row
of cash registers
chip away
at the child's skull.

IMAGES FOR A LONG OCCASION

i)

a hand
touches a summer peach;
becomes a raindrop
and vanishes

ii)

an arm
relaxes against a coat button
and recites the number
of dead legs
in a recent car collision

iii)

a child
emerges from a pear
and hides beneath a dark leaf

iv)

a man
starts to moan and becomes a thumbprint
on a glass door

v)

a tree
waves its branch
at a fern
in a glass container

THE VOICE
(for Aimé Césaire)

the voice
sings through the radio's dusty vents,

with ink
on its teeth,

bank buildings
on its eyelids,

drips into a glob
on the floor,

its song
taunts the dead birds
along the highway.

PAPER BIRD

i drew a bird from a piece of paper
and put it in the sky,
it flew for a short way, moving its wings,
it flew until it became real
a bird of flesh and feathers,
and then i became sad

TO THE TORTOISE-SHELL PERSIAN CAT WITH ONE EYE

Jumping through

Bartok violin,

the hibiscus bare bush

dark voice in cracks along the oak's surface

Your back rises with the fencetop,

the hurrying grocery shoppers have thrown

you beneath their wheels

and positioned you in a wrist

holding a wine glass

They hold your soft legs

and speak about never kept

lunch appointments

A yellow stripe

moves by a bush

and your closed eye is caught

between the wings

of a zebra butterfly

who will not land

A POEM TO LILITH, OUR BLACK CAT

" . . . my cats whose eyes
are like unripe berries
or charcoal on a golden plate."

—Silvia Scheibli

A black fern lounges
upon a window sill,
and yawns
in our rocking chair.
I walk on air
in search for your ancient existence
and lift my arms
into branches
covered by red bottlebush flowers.
Your waters,
from a long way off,
flow through these prickly flowers;
but I stand confused
before your peculiar nature
as you stalk a dead tangerine leaf.
Your paw prints echo
in a cold vase
on the shelf.
The sun
ties a white handkerchief
around its head
and chases you across the room;
it climbs under your chin
and warms your legs.
We have heard experts
speak of you many times before
in public lectures;
the biologist's shouts
sneak behind white cabinets
to unlock secret fluids
that twist your jaws
and bend your small legs crooked.
The latch falls from a door,

A POEM TO LILITH, OUR BLACK CAT (cont.)

there is a sigh of despair,
 and their torture floats like dust
 along the window ledges.
 Such a celebration
 over life:
 a testimony
 of agony!
 I am certain
 they have never really felt
 your fur
 of black water
 and fish.
 I am certain
 fires light up the rough darkness
 in your blood,
 but this they do not see.
 Their misunderstandings
 dry up inside glass jars.
 Such a dishonesty clings to their faces,
 they do not even adjust their ties
 according to the confusion on their lips.
 It makes no difference
 what they say;
 for ten thousand years
 their language has limped about
 on a pair of ragged boots
 and paved our roads
 with blood stained antlers.
 They are unable
 to love you;
 in offices they scrawl
 your name on blackboards,
 then you are only chalk dust
 beneath their eyelids.
 The grass inside your bones

(cont.)

A POEM TO LILITH, OUR BLACK CAT (cont.)

drifts across rocks and rain puddles;
left alone you create a silence,
but your solitude is destroyed
thousands of times, by rusted engines
that prowl through the dark woods,
and by young boys
unable to understand your silence.
But you are the secret murderer,
with your silence and perfection,
with trees in your head
and ears that sit
like a child's body.
Entire nations crumble
because of you;
women run through the brick streets
barefoot and crying.
For centuries glass
will fall from our windows
shattering the carpet,
our ears pushed against
newspapers.
Wild rabbits leap through the bushes
inside your whiskers,
more confusion,
this creates an eternity
where only a madman
sits and draws his circles.
Geometries and physical science
are buried underneath the rug,
their professors are worn out
and no longer speak to us
as they pass along the sidewalks.
Overturned houses,
death pulled by its roots
from our bodies.

(cont.)

A POEM TO LILITH, OUR BLACK CAT (cont.)

Salesmen, with briefcases,
 begin to eat their samples
 while sitting underneath bridges.
 The newscasts go on as usual,
 people ignore the daylight
 calling it false,
 the radiologist's frustration increases
 when cancer spreads
 through the beagle puppy's tiny chest.
 But, in a corner of the room,
 as usual,
 you lie
 inside your smoke,
 peaceful,
 dreams of wasps on screens
 and leaves walking across shadows,
 your tiny feet
 that dash over the brittle roads
 asleep like beetles.

FUTURE MOMENT

Our black cat sleeps
 on a green bedspread
 that flies through my body.

RESORT

They buried the last mockingbird feather
underneath the beach resort's
glass eye

the sea's waves wash over the knuckles
of a stray dog

a finger slides down a wine glass
a smile tints an eye

an old man who lives
on a pier
dreams
of the yellow spotted salamander
that walks on his spine

(ORCHID) The wind blows
the hair into brown fire. An arrow floats
from a purple star and plants a pale orchid
in your breast. The sun dances in a lime,
canaries fly out and drop yellow lightning
on the damp sky. A raindrop grows inside
a mushroom's voice. The ocean spreads its
shoulders' white hair across rocks. The
moon sleeps beside a river in the crumbled
bones of a panther's skull.

THE SIN

Your hair flies through stones

A dogwood blows back and forth
in your yellow eyes

Your arms, dark pears

Your finger, a bee in the wind

Your voice, cotton falling from a stalk

Your feet, water among treeroots

Your scent, canteloupe that bursts forth
on a summer afternoon

THE SUN GOES THERE

The sun,
an angel fused
with a peach,
shakes your bones
over a field
fish begin to sprout and leap
through yellow weeds and poppies,
the sun rises
over the land and pours the blue-streaked fish
into the mountains,
the trembling mountains
the earth's dark breasts.

WIFE

A bird darts
from your hair
into the room

Crawls down my shirt pocket

Arms cover your face

I want us to lie forever
beneath the black violins

The bird builds its nest
inside the music

MORNING PSALM

(Nathan, do you hear,
Nathan, the silence,
they call you,
do you hear their boots
against your temples?)

Do you hear them call the sun
out of the barn,
if your eyes are ripe,
if the bruise has formed around your mouth?

Nathan, do you hear them,
they wear your dark skin
like the crystal
that sleeps in your skull?)

LATE AFTERNOON

I have nothing to say
and very little time to say it.
I was tired at the end of the day
so I wandered through your tomatoes,
the dust on their leaves
was coughed up by the wind.

I was hungry
so I spoke to the quiet cabbage,
I was lonely
so I slept beside the shadowy eggplant,
I was nervous
and was soothed by the shy squashflower.

I had a dream that I would never
see your face again,
or touch your hair and arms.
I grew tired,
the sun fell from a wire fence
onto the damp earth,
bees began to swarm around my thighs.

STUPID SONG

Do not leave me on this highway,
I do not want to see the afternoon
take off its shirt and reveal its breasts.

(Take me to the sheep's dung.)

I do not want to stand
under this knife that quivers
in the building's thin belt.

(Let me sleep by the sheep's dung.)

I do not want to stand here
beside the rock's severed hands,
as you can see I do not know
what is good anymore
so now I must leave.

(I must sleep in the sheep's dung.)

All I want is that blue cloud
to throw around my shoulders,
I do not want to sing in your coffee house
nor dance in your parade.
All I want is the blue cloud
to slide between my ribs
and disconnect me from them.

(I need to sleep in the sheep's dung.)

I really do want to rest
beside the rock's cold blue veins,
I want to open the cask
of ancient blackberry wine
that still sleeps in the bushes
along the fields.

(But all of this is near the sheep's dung.)