

Skin's Dark Night



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A 2 R I V E R C H A P B O O K B Y

Amy Pence

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Naked Bulb

Tight bud—bulb
from socket,

Blake's angels
arrayed inside
the burnished tree.
For that visitation,
he received
a beating.

For this: images
fill our heads
with secrets.

Bifurcated Iris

The dissolution
of happiness. The soul's
petals: a veined
and ripped
pigment.

Our bodies toss
in separate beds.
Far from each
other.

The dead
peer down

loathe
to us.

Blazing Star

God, the barbarian,
tuft-like, transient
bracing—

trails beside
this evening's shattered
plate glass window.

Merciless, the scattered
shootings—

ever, ever
in your hands.

Spiked Dahlia

A trick of light:
 feasting moths
across the open
body.

 Certainly, the soul
feeds its own: velvet
and rapturous.

 Certainly, the young
girls closed down
their essentials.

Hair
tangled with semen,
the death instinct—
faceted,
thick.

Potted Lily

Vanity, not for
her own aging hands—but
for all the delicate
roots earth
left in her.

 The earth, left.
My grandmother's
solitude stolen
from her: how

 exacting—regret.
Clatter of flatware
thrown down
on long tables
all around.

Purpled Clematis

Why does this soft text
so resemble a body?

Lift the cover—
let it
saturate

steeped as we are
in guilt,

memory, dream.

The skin's dark night
fitful, knotted
with wings.

Sweet Peas

Not one season
did a general need

sway me
from planting the seeds:
 some pearled,
hunkered, some
browned
like teeth.

 Not once
did I see
those blooms
as other
than they were:

cloven ghosts,
emptiness,

lips tangling
across
our arched
and wounded
bodies.

Planting the Bulbs

Twelve open graves:
 heads
swollen and fat like
greed, mistrust,
anger.

 I humanize
you:
bury each death.

All winter
feel them
transfigure.

Roots ease
deep into my body
unlock

red tulips that open
ablaze.

Eclipse, Or Small River Stones

There is no time to catch up to the moment
when the girl will lose her luster.

No time like the present where we sit
on the eve of the solar eclipse,

when we are confused by a profusion
of dream-time lifting us

across the water, across the water.
We are in the pall of a smog-soaked day,

sometime in the future when I eclipse the dream
of the accident over the accident of the dream:

the car passes us on the curve of the Interstate
and I think it might explode. It's that moment

when the poor approach the chain-link fence
and extend their swollen palms, a dream

transposed to the wet surface of time.
I am standing still in the desert, near

a waterfall, when the girl plunges fifteen feet,
hitting the boulders, and I cannot change it.

A man stumbles from the rocks with blood
on his hands and I've eaten the shadow

from the moment, because I cannot
change. But see myself as a child bending

to pale stones in the creek-bed, smooth
as if tumbled—only the earth is raw.

Across the water, the sad shapes: a girl falling,
a girl raped, a girl touched with knives,

the poverty of their faces, hungry
when they approach me.

Anonymous Emmanuel

*(postcard, 1911: Laura Nelson and her son
hanged by a mob from bridge, Oklahoma)*

All morning fog
along the hillside
flinty, trailed by white

figments: obsession, redemption,
source, our sickness. What god
lights up the sphere in

these freakish trees?
Christ breaks from my mouth—
dry as chalk.

Oh Anonymous Emmanuel,
my gingham dress rusty
with barbed wire—my soul

just lingering—fluted,
watching my body swing
so near me.

Pines, their barbarous spires,
leave shadows creased
in folds—

First noon, evening, then daybreak—
a murderous red earth
I cannot enter

that the men, their jeering
have defiled. Still, the air's
unstill. I'm spun like

a plum broken open. How
to reconcile earth with
the stain, my death,

my breasts still wet
with the sap of milk
for my Sara, my mouth

still with the unutterable—what
I did not say, could not
as they beat and hanged me

was *Lord, Lord*.
Scent where honeysuckle stifles
white with pink tongues:

laughter and the rape
of their picture-taking, how
they posed alongside me

my neck snapped:
spent. Dark hats
across their hearts.

My god eats in these
bestial trees, my soul flees.
Only when a weeping comes

with my people, boots
thick with red clay, only
when I'm cut free

do I fly, tunneling
to earth, to heaven inside
this soil and source.

Prana

Collapsing ashes, moan, elastic the music that rose
from the model ghetto that was Theresienstadt. A theater goes past,
a toy animal carved and birdlike. How the appetite expands, diminishes
until it is hollow like a flute in the cavernous maw of the body.
Beautiful arrangement, soiling wind. In metal filings sound reflects
all the patterns nature intends: honeycomb, coral, the shell's grave
new underworld. I am tiny breath and hunger: grandmother, grand
father, great uncle and aunt. Notes creation etched: not numeral,

but symphony, not gold fillings piled, but design.

Not even skin—for there is no metaphor—just sound that rises
from throats open. Sound rises, rises, rises. In this century, sin
will not wash free. A sin we cannot begin to enter until you listen,
listen, listen—until your body takes it in: collapsing ashes, moan,
the sounds that rose from Terezín.

Expedient Means

She looks like a saucy ripening bean, the girl in her faded fatigues. Traffic blades beyond the bricked marketplace, festooned with flags and banners, past the open ruddy throats in the hibiscus, the twisting of some vine I don't know. She looks like creature comfort—just a little buxom and buttoned at the center with a red rhinestone, an array of rings. So the body becomes a vessel for this emptiness, expedient, open—underneath the tight soul enclosed—dreamlike in its little amphora, its tortoise shell.

She looks indelible, her blackened eye undramatic, factual. A drone as simple as the locust goes up, the poor lantana shoved out of place by cigarette butts—the alleyway flocked by tourists relegated to their last bastion of picture-taking, a phosphorescent decay. There's the clatter of the vacuous: the batterer overly familiar to us, his sloe-eyed din, his fingers in the rungs of her. These expedient means, bitten blessings, her young face smudged and iconic as any downtown billboard.

Sentence

Two girls play with cards / too
big for their palms / one
wears a silver ring at the joint
that rubs thumb / All
over Vietnam water puppets
blow and pump: manic /

triumphant. Venus de Milo:
romance pared of excess
How I can't let go: late 70s
near Henderson, Nevada—
a hitchhiker walks dazed
her forearms severed away.

Armless

Who has time for the sodden agony of angels?
They fall, like dimes, fattened gnats
from the heavens—

Notice the architecture of their wings?
Easy and hinge-less they open,
already plied by too many hands.

Who has time for their keening?

Like dying rabbits, they leave
trails of sound you recognize:
that old aching pressed up against the bedroom wall.

Don't cry, someone might be saying,
don't cry.

Who will catch these tufted, fleshy creatures
their beautiful dark hair floating
past us?

Who among you
will help me hold them?

Damage

Cinematic: the gardenias
as they brown.
Plucking the heads / my hand
going again and again
to them.

These pictures
burn steadily:
a brazen badge like the Virgin's
heart aflame
or my scalp cut
razor-thin.

My mother's glass-shorn sheets.
Drunks: obsessive and cutting.

Draw closer: this poem speaks in tongues,
draws its mouth across your body.

For the body is not safe.
Never was.

For My Mother

The spiral, the meander, helix vine
to trumpet flower,
a center of itself—small blooming embryo—
your hands coming to my body's side
with some fear
we both shared,
arranging the blankets into rungs—
a delicate ladder, all the way up.

Salt, cell, flower, the infinite branching
apart, the word
wanting to have you right.
But can't have you right, can't hold you still—
the dim blue veins under the skin,
the radial trumpet heart.

Metonymy

Her small hands give me each puzzle piece
the crocodile, the owl, the porpoise—
a freight of angels. The thick
presence in our house
chips away at the dirty porcelain sink.
God making his rounds or
my dead father's hands working
to show us the black wings
underneath

Take Back

My knees, my joints, my ligaments
stretched in a foul midnight air, these
insects rubbing their legs,
the folded bodies so close
in us. Take
back, regret

that I did not touch
my father's slumber, did not
regard the dying man, did
what I shouldn't have done,
said, droned, my brute knowledge
disembodied. Take
back the beast, my
mouth, the heat, my
silence suffocating
that wends,
winds, that flies
in every face
to find you.

Absent Presence

Inside death—the lived world
 its immense unfixed fixity
 green shoots of grass
angry thrust of the amaryllis
 its painful branching underground

Silence in a dark farmhouse
 far from the road
Or looming headlights
 to illumine suburbia

There's a pathway, genealogical
creeping below the hard and broken
stones father, father, father
whatever you're missing

its silence
its oceanic quiet
 fills the body
inside death

There inside the body, room
 for small creatures, room
 for immensities, room
 for numerous folds, unfolding
 like O'Keeffe's *Dark Iris III*: an internal suffusion
 pungent nautilus of gray inside death

In suburbs, in cities, in the illicit creeping heat:
death, that machine that guts & bends
 waking the sleepers inside
 the sleeping
 waking the dreams
 inside the sleepers

The sift & visible conscious
like a giant lidded eye dreaming, then wakeful
 ruminating
 nestled and nestling.
 a lathe that runs and churns on emptiness
 the lack
 what we want and want
 inside the very skin in the body
an easeful repetition
mother, mother, mother
the cellist woos us, bending—
sullen throb, into those infinite tines
as if nothing stops,
ever—

House With Windows

The inevitable texture:
My daughter's hand
in my palm soothing

the various rooms
in our bodies. How flesh
folds, freckles like paint

on a Lucian Freud—
a feast as her sighs ignite,
vault our ceilings.

Each night she nurses dusk
from sky—corridors burn
with delicious light.

Early, the sun throws down
its slick aegis and we grow weedy,
soft sprockets in our hair lifting

to seed. What house within
my house—what soul, bright
and fluted, travels the veins'

dangerous hallways? Too soon
to think of parting, we grow
tufted with pink flesh—

immense, minute again—
spiraled in skin's time—
our ribbed and only cavern.

One Shallow in the Body

As Stein tells it, our memory of the loved one occludes
the whole. And so, I loved the back of E's neck
for its innocence, for what remains young in a man
though age should carry things away from him.
Like the pale, sleek boy who appeared in our courtyard—
moist with light, while my sister and I
slid naked in and out
of an old bathtub.

He becomes sweet now, years away,
when I touch him—his eyelashes so white
they are frost.

But whom do I really miss, among such resemblances?
Like stills of large animals pacing
I can only preserve the gesture, not the source.
Can only recall the drowsy providence of touch,
the tender leaves of abandonment:
how each petal curls away from the center,
a loosening—like hair from a braid.

There was a time when I was so good
I saw the one eye, the one curvature,
one shallow in the body.
Just a fragment of touch
gave me false promise—
that we could reside forever, there,
in the breadth of our offerings.

Inescapable

The night before an early
morning flight, I
can never sleep, but obsess
on my angry tethers to earth.

Night eases its tongues—
such remorse for the body's lost
wings, a white lily burns
its delicious fabric on the inside
of my eye.

I try to excise regret
with a scaling knife: too much love
spent on cowards. Where are
the dead
I could not face?

Look for clues, always
the angel whispers,
holding me fast
to him. His wings, milk-blue,
flutter and quake
against me
until dawn.

On Waking

(After Duane Michaels' *Spirit Leaves the Body*, 1968)

The body rises whole and complete
 goes to the doorless
door, passes through the houseless house.

The body hears a signal
forthcoming, wakes intrepid,
rimless, does not
cling to what it had:
 staged canopies of sleep,
 sweet lozenges: the eyes that once
 beheld it.

The past breaks like bread.
The body needs not.
Odor is not.
No tearing betwixt, between.

Watch the body's heliotrope
turn towards light
enter
the exposure—
less, less.

The Illuminated Blake

(uses phrases from the book of the same title)

The father's hair shows wild centrifugal terror.
He stares not at us, but at the shear of the open hand.

And I thought you monstrous, April evenings
when my soul grew blacker than a raisin.

Notice the frail, interlinear foliage, how
the waxen blades of her thighs meet like graven

images—the indignity of my body, how it
shuddered from the assault of every dying thing.

But after his embrace of pity, see how she rises
from the word pity—face turned inward

from the perversity of separation. I wanted
to live without seeing myself in it, naked

pollen-colored sun, split from the vast masculine
body, contorting under the weight

of brilliance, our creation—the mistake
of the word I gave you so easily.

See how she slips from the mastery of Urizen
beyond the cutting fields, flaming—

End Matter

Skin's Dark Night originally appeared at 2River. Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series. Submission guidelines are at www.2River.org.

About the Author

A professor at DeVry University, Amy Pence has published poetry and non-fiction in a number of journals including *American Letters & Commentary*, *The Antioch Review*, *New American Writing*, *Pennsylvania English* and *Sonora Review*. Several of her poems have also appeared in online journals, including *Mudlark* and *Red Booth Review*. Her interviews with Barbara Kingsolver and Li-Young Lee appeared in *Poets & Writers*. She has completed two manuscripts of poetry, one of which was a Walt Whitman Award finalist, and has begun a sequence of non-fiction essays. Pence lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her daughter Ada.



About the Artist

Edgar Solis, with degrees from the University of Puerto Rico and The Art Institute of Atlanta, shows his fine art photography on the southeast arts-and-crafts show-circuit. For the last seven years, he has been perfecting Polaroid Image and Emulsion Transfer. This process allows him to show images in a way that often blurs the line between photography and painting. He also does black and white sepia and selenium toned prints.

Acknowledgements

Several poems in *Skin's Dark Night* originally appeared elsewhere: "Eclipse" and "The Illuminated Blake" in *New American Writing*; "For my Mother" in *The Antioch Review*; "Take Back" in *American Letters & Commentary*; "Metonymy" in *Red Raven Review*; "Anonymous Emmanuel" and "House with Windows" in *Pennsylvania English*; "Expedient Means" in *Calapooya*; "Armless" in *Mudlark*; and "One Shallow in the Body" in *Willow Springs*.

Richard Long
2River
February 2003

Skin's Dark Night
by Amy Pence

Number 14 in the
2River Chapbook Series

2River

www.2River.org

202 Spring Lake DR • De Soto • M0 • 63020 • USA