



Close Your Eyes, Look at Me / E. Marie Bertram // gold wake press

The Magic Hour / The Body Is a Greening Field / Taking Stock / Stumblefoot/ Aubade with Heat
Lightning & Rain/ There Is a Bridge between Your Body & the World

The Magic Hour

The sun is setting in its orange, life-of-the-party way,
In its power, its *sine qua non*, its chemical display.
The sun is setting over the watershed of Midwestern fields,
The confluence of two brown rivers, the steel,
And, at the Cape of Good Hope, where a pair of oceans overlap,
It lifts itself back up, looking down over the karoo
For the red flames of aloe dotting the mountainsides,
The shipwrecks anchoring the coast. The sky is an open field

Populated by clouds of memory. What else is there to say?
Yes, there will be chocolate ice cream in the morning,
And sea glass to roll in your palm while you're getting a crown
Put in. Yes, you will be saved, we missed you terribly,
We've been waiting for you all along.

The Body Is a Greening Field

More the idea, the fact, the subtext of a horse
Than the horse itself:

As in, here the horse, here the rider, here the leather straps
To fasten & make snug. As in,

A horse grazing on honeysuckle, on wild clover,
Its wide flanks unmoved by the honeybees' resolve.

Yes. That. Or,

The horse, the saddle, the stall fragrant with cedar & shit,
An evening damp with stars, waves
Inside the water bucket breaking, the bit warm
In the animal's soft mouth.

All of this & nothing.

I pick her out of a crowded barn & she is beautiful:

Sturdy, sorrel, a wild blink in the eye
Cached by her steady gait.

Riding, I tug the reins gently, suggesting a pathos earned
Over the years, but firmly, suggesting honesty, the tension required
To survive the storm, still standing—

Broken, but still good.

Her hooves fleck with mud, snaffle wets with effort.
Leaning forward, pressing my cheek
To the animal bulk of her—the strong neck, the *heat* of it—
I give her my full weight,

Arms draped about her like a shawl.
And the weights fall from my sleeves like tiny anvils

To the stable floor.

Taking Stock

1.

Vast spaces remind us, repeatedly, of our smallness: the ocean's dark dye, dogs feasting the shore; redwoods mighty for surviving fire; the flight it took to get here, ice lacing the plane's small window. Outside a bakery, a woman brandished a bread knife as if planning a grievance. Even the songs we caught ourselves humming harbored reminders: *a lion's heart, little lion man, the lions & the ladies*.

2.

At low tide, all things seem possible, though I know this is distortion. A haggard man, an auburn hen his only companion, the hen so still—sentinel? pilgrim?—to his vagabond. Beside him, a spiral staircase standing the sand's dampness, its weathered stone testament—wasn't it?—to resilience, the ability to withstand the wearing down. It was as if the sea, in its lap & furl, were saying to us, softly, forever, *Close your eyes, look at me . . .*

3.

The day bent with the ease of a birch bough, though not without solemnity, & the pliance of it left us balancing, longing for salt, a tacit hum where something warm should be. What does it matter that the stars afterimage themselves? That even the kindest hands will dead-end in dust? Let's kneel & kiss this boardwalk, lips mashed against the rough, wet groove of the thing.

4.

The lesson seems to be not only to admit defeat—to be able to—but to do right by it, as if the act of repairing the damage done—attempting to—were enough to make of sorrow, joy. Or, if not joy, then the memory of it, those frayed, lighted edges, a kind of dark lace, bending & open, like palm fronds taking on the dusk.

5.

Human, curious, imaginative, intended to be candlelit, flush—yes. But never before had I thought of desire as a measure of security. We want more & more of it—don't we?—whatever it is, & then, wanting, we want more. Smell of resin & ginger, wet soil, exhaust; taste of mint & metal. In this world, the smallest wish is the aching truth. No one understands this better than me.

6.

The difference it used to make, once, between you catching me, holding me there—a buoy—& me the strongman, the salt sailor, holding your sky up with my two ungloved hands. Enough the tragedies, the tiny cruelties that stack up daily: fist, broken window, silence. This land—inverted comma, welcome pause, *evershore*—is, from the mainland, breaking. Wait. Don't go. Gather the kindling. Something must be burning.

7.

What if survival is largely determined by where you are on the map? But the act of mapping, itself, necessitates favor & omission: that which is acknowledged, that which is taken away. Regardless of its use—or, perhaps, because of it—a stone remains a stone remains a stone. What's the price of beauty, then, of drawing, from the hard dark, some scintillance? On the map of relief & longing, where is it, finally, I lay my body down?

Stumblefoot

I tell another woman *I want to swim your inland sea*, as if language—in its falconry, its matching dress, its *stammering*—could keep the winds at bay. As if a lover's body were the pitch & sway of the sea, or the damp, reassuring peat of the earth. Because it is. Isn't it?

What spectacular we have spooled up tight inside us. In dream, I fill my mouth with sand & walk into the current. I dip my fingers in. It's summer, season of the swell. The honeybees, one by one, so many, vortex the purple fists of blackberries until the blur becomes form, form a dropped veil. We feel the urge to name them, each one: *Fallen Into, All Told, Tiny Rapture, Found Wanting*.

We were together in the dark, & she said *Take it, just take it*. And I did. What a thing to say. Nightly, the stars revolve above our heads like giant, complex mobiles. Like stars. When we met, snow hardpacked our feet, our hands four shy colts standing maladroit in a corral. Our faces have changed since then.

There Is a Bridge between Your Body & the World

May then. In the pink. Wild, greenstick spring. Every field a mud harvest. Mud every time. Spring rests, loaded, in earth's shotgun, its petals & pollen snug in the cool barrel, ready to scatter its bloom-&-rot like confetti over the sleeping world. And all is terrain, gesture & wait, the space between two bodies, however wide, however insignificant—*is it ever insignificant?*—tangible as an orange, a wooden bowl, a knot of hair slung low at the bolt of the neck.

My life the map onto which she presses her balming hands, her teeth. Hers the compass by which I guide, readily, my weathered hands. In dream, her hands, *god*, her voice in my ear. As if acquiescing—rising to meet her body, lowering myself down onto it, *submitting*—were to leave me rouged, pawing for a handhold. Happy. The body insists on itself: the fact of its being, of, eventually, its having been.

And when longing sorrows around, takes hold like a fist to dirt? By waking, we wake to the tiny worlds we've made, & by rising, continue to rise, regardless of the beauty, dark with hours, as with dye, that surrounds us. Comprises us. Even so, light the lamps. Fasten with love-knots your tired body to the earth.

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