

This Semblance of Movement

by Colleen McHugh, '02

Afraid because my walking hurts the ground. Hesitate. That there would be nothing left to write. There are cracks in everything we've made. That does not mean futility. Father's faith in truth and then this stubborn repetition but what if. The moon looked paper-thin tonight. So I thought if I could slide more softly from now on.

Sifting Liquid

I am peeling off the liquid skin of a memory. Pulling crooked strings out of a silent field of dreams, sister keeps asking what she's missing in me. The sky was three shades of blue tonight, glass stars and frozen landscapes, caught in the pantomime of living. Time unfolds its battered wings and in that space I smile.

Stealing blankets and the young girl fell. My first day home from the hospital, she only wanted to play, but reaching to tug, share a piece of my soft security, she tripped, cut her chin. The first blood of our tenuous intimacy. There was a safety scissors haircut (Mr. Rogers would have done it that way) and hours under chairs looking everywhere and up. Entranced by mobiles moving across distance, light, and eyes. In my crib, I would stand, arms reaching out for her, babbling. She, translating thoughts before lips knew how to form. My mother recalls a time early on when she woke in the middle of the night to noises down the hall. A four-year old and a three-year old at two in the morning, laughing. We had been building a bridge of cards from her bed to mine, so that we wouldn't fall in the water between us if we wanted to hold hands.

The most unlikely of stories I never thought to question. Sister, less than a year old, lying on her mother's stomach. Head down, moving with the rhythm of familiar breath. One word. Baby. To discover, shortly after, for two months their silence had been shared.

I remember the ways we used to pretend. In the water, we could have been dolphins, at home different versions of Barbie and Ken. Our Barbies lost countless heads perfecting dives off sofa's end and to think that's how I spent my years. Do I laugh or merely cry. When we played I think I was always the boy but I don't know if that changed the way I feel. Her eyes I remember blue blue blue, but now they're turning green. And we talked about future, houses next door, children born the very same year. She would sit on my stomach until I couldn't even breathe we told her you need to learn the strength of your own strength. How can she be so soft and still so unaware.

There is a way of agreeing this is how things should be. A reason I need to feel the cadence of their words. Birds migrate thousands of miles, small wings hold their rhythm for days, they never seem to fall. Determining the characteristics of a flame we kept alive a flower already three days gone.

Orchid seeds lie dormant, sometimes thousands of years. There is always this awareness of music. So what if I am frightened by the sound of streams. If only we could wait for water, start again to breathe.

Arctic

To stand in a shadowless space would disrupt the mind.

Just before nighttime, when it starts to turn that certain kind of quiet. Suddenly more aware of footsteps, meditation, you could be the only person there. When light is finally silent enough to relax faces, soften lines carved round heavy eyes, natural trace of a smile remains. Landscape turning liquid like the shine of melting ice. A long, exaggerated quiet. Silence of time when thought is sudden but slow, carefully spontaneous. The texture of well worn stone explored for the first time. New, but still the grooves seem to fall just right. Like you've held this moment in your hand so many times before.

There is a rock I keep in my wallet. Smooth, flat, like the profile of a face, complete with rounded, jagged nose. Beneath my lamp, another rock. Green and grey with almost forgotten glints of gold scattered upon its back. Small, but intricate as a sculpture. As if it had been carved to please the touch. And rocks I don't remember, found somewhere along the way.

Walking through the vast expanse of arctic land. In the distance, the outlines of Inuksuit emerge against the glowing sky. Inuksuk - the capacity to act as a human being. Massive rock formations, constructed ages ago, directing travelers and wanderers, who always stop for a moment, touch the surface, leave a small and silent offering. The body of stone, when viewed from far away, at a certain angle, a certain moment of light, appears to be human. A comforting presence amidst soundless, motionless terrain.

As if standing on the North Pole, looking up, across the islands of Nunavut, past the Hudson Bay, to a large expanse of land that lies above, its edges dropping off across the rounded curve of earth, where the rest of North America imagines itself to be. Disorienting only because we've grown accustomed to a single line of sight. A map that shows a different point of view.

Because though we think the stars are fixed, even constellations aren't always what they seem. To those whose lives have been defined by the Arctic of Northern Canada, the stars of the Big Dipper form a caribou instead. Navigating the world with differently trained eyes. Measuring life by the characteristics of many moons, named after the changes that surround the weaving lines of time.

He gave away stones and books, chanting one stone one stone I lift one stone one stone and I am thinking I am thinking as I lift one stone. Close my eyes, fingers search stone, finding, it touches back, breath breaks, its own slow tempo once again.

Where life is a constant sheet of ice, white in any direction the eye could travel, our definition of free-standing sculpture would have one time been absurd. Three-dimensional images carved without the intention of up or down, front or back, right or wrong. She said they had no concept of such orientation because, snow. They did not think in terms of our directions. And if he carved an amulet for his protection. So it could be worn either way.

I wonder if it's possible it's true.

There is a time when the patterns of light and dark are replaced at once by unimaginable hours of twilight, and again by days when the sun will never rise. Without the guise of artificial light, this small universe must survive without a dimension. Shadow. To some, the tripartite nature of human beings is body, soul, shadow. The knowing eye of the soul. So what of the endless hours without this kind of vision?

Shadow: a dark figure cast upon a surface by a body intercepting the rays from a source of light.

In shadow, trees can travel, cutting concrete, a reminder that earth has not forgotten how to breathe. Shadows stretch tall, breaking unforgiving brightness, an angled, uneven sigh, spilled across the broken ground. Smooth shades of black reaching corners the body cannot navigate. Crawling into spaces flesh could never find. A new understanding of form, more fluid than the last.

Shadow: An inseparable companion or follower.

A shadow requires an object, or an object requires its shadow. If there is no shadow, there was no source of light. Or if there is no shadow, then what you see isn't really there.

She carried home a plastic bag full of rocks from the desert. From the streams that seem to oppose the desert. An exception to her rule of few possessions. And the other, I watched her picking wildflowers, placing them in her hair, wondering what was gained, what had been taken away. This urge to feel rather than imagine, see rather than remember. I read that we are tactile beings and think this must have something to do with these obsessions.

If the Inuksuk appears at a moment when there is no shadow. A moment when the light will not return. If we imagine this to be a human body. If when my eyes are closed, I imagine it to be a human hand. Stone. Surface like skin. Roughness of the softest kind. If the impulse to touch forever.

In periods of prolonged darkness, boundaries more easily blur, life takes on a different quality, and "spirits come closest to the earth." In this still silence, a deeper senses of wisdom will emerge. The mystery of extremes that keeps this awareness alive.

It's what's bent catches the eye, cracks and crooked lines. At night, everything curves into its own vague sense of rhythm.

There is so much grace in the silent balance of things.

If tilted, it could only ever need to be that way.

Seashells

In South Carolina, visiting our grandmother, we would walk along the beach for hours, filling bags with shells, the stranger the better. A color, a shape, catches the eye and without a thought, we bend down to look closer, pick it up, no hesitation. Sometimes, dropped back to the sand. Other times, placed carefully among the others in a bag swinging from the hand. No idea of what we would do with them after they had been washed and laid out to dry. Sand dollars were the ultimate prize, only found if you were up early enough in the morning. Always a smile, was it wonder or triumph, to find this mystery remaining whole. My grandmother takes these walks nearly every day, fills hollow glass lamps with shells, adorning her life with reminders of the sea. But now, bones bending with the weight of years, mind missing beats, the walks do not come so easily. After the hospital, the first time, my grandfather would wake her up early, too early, in the morning. As if she were to keep on sleeping, it would subtract time from their remaining years. Tell her to keep walking. For health, recovery, when it pained her just to stand. That she was more than tired he refused even then to see.

In our garage, boxes of shells stacked high, my father laughs. He always asks, do you really want to take these all the way back home? We were sure there was something else that they could be.

Trying to be. Gently. The fear of displacing anything. It comes in the pattern of an admirable energy. The mechanism that says:

now,
breathe.

We are just residing here for the briefest moment of infinity. Time belongs to the land, allows each one of us to borrow just a shred. And this denial, this attempt to create our lives anew, it will rise up over us again. And all that is left will be stone.