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Finding Mostly Air: Poems

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FINDING MOSTLY AIR

| POEMS |

SIDRA ELVEY



Finding Mostly Air

Poems

by

Sidra Elvey

April 2021

“We sing of what we think we know
Mother, father, skin, and flowers.”

-Sylvan Esso, “Dress”

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Proof of Existence

Why do I feel such a compulsion
to list all the things I love?
I just want to fill a notebook
with the titles of all the books I've ever fallen for,
all the movies I've been spellbound by,
all the bands that have made me forget
every sense except sound.

I want to name every piece of media
I've ever been caressed by,
my lovers and exes and flings and paramours.
I want to shout these names
from the cliffside so that the stars
hear them and know
that down here on Earth
we are still making art.

Insects

I squirm at my own emotions
as if they were worms on the sidewalk

long and writhing and in the way
of my rainboots. I startle

from my heartache
as if it were a shiny black cricket

on the kitchen tile, begging
to be crushed with a sneaker.

I shudder at my worries
as if they were hornets trapped

in my car, unable to find the open window.
The swarms in my head whirl

and buzz, a hot heavy day
beside a summer brook.

Catching Up

Friends I haven't seen in years
bribe their way into my dreams,
slipping past the bouncer, and I wake
with their birthdays on my lips
and their favorite colors behind my eyelids.

I spend the mornings remembering
throats sore from screaming each other's names
at softball games, and fingers pruned
from diving into the neighbor's pool
for filthy golf balls.

People always thought we were all sisters,
and that tickled us, thrilled us.

I think about studying for biology,
curling our hair for homecoming,
talking about God in the in-between
hours of basement sleepovers.
Blonde hair going green with chlorine,
bony feet racing over cut grass.

I know I thought
they would be in my life
forever, and I worry
I've betrayed them somehow.

But how can you collapse
so many years into a coffee date?
Like folding a tri-fold cardboard
science project into a jeans pocket.
Stars burn out
and crocodiles go extinct.

I owe them my favorite bands
and tv shows, homemade jewelry
lost in dresser drawers.
I owe them a poem they'll never
read, written in secret code.

Keeping the Void Company

On one of those quiet afternoons
when clocks seem to have their own logic
I call up the empty space within me

and say, *hey, we should hang out more.*
She doesn't say yes,
but she doesn't say no, either.

We dance together, alone
in the kitchen while waiting
for the water to boil.

We go on walks around the block
experimenting with new podcasts and thoughts
and making eye contact with strangers.

We lie in bed at night and practice
telling each other gentle things,
glimpsing the moon between the blinds.

She doesn't always have much to say
but neither do I. Still, there is something
inside her, something about her—

I think the space within me is empty
in the same way the night sky is empty.

Dead Words

Verbs wilt in my mouth
and adjectives go limp.
Articles crumple under pressure
and contractions buckle
at the apostrophe.
Carcasses litter these pages

but the undertaker
is patient, gathering up
stray punctuation
and letters in her arms
and laying them down to rest.

Ode to NPR Tiny Desk Concerts

I've been feeding a new addiction,
clinging to NPR tiny desk concerts
as the constant background noise of my life.
I am captivated by these videos
—recorded 8 months ago or 8 years ago—
of people crammed into a small space
shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart.
There is a strange visceral reaction
to shared experience and filmed intimacy,
and I am sucked into the setlists and bandmate
banter, looping one concert into the next.

Listening, I'm no longer stiff at my own small desk.
I leave behind tangled headphones
and glasses of stale water, and am transported
to this one big afterparty of artists
who let me shake their hands
and who don't laugh at my tears.
I will my thoughts to be replaced
by other people's lyrics and beats,
just hoping to be absorbed
into this music that is alive.

Social Circle

I can count the people
I talk to everyday
on one hand
and still have fingers left over
to scratch the itch
under my shoulder blade.

Confession

I don't know anything about music.
I don't know the difference
between melody and harmony
and I'm probably tone deaf.

I quit piano when I was eight,
frustrated and uninterested
in coaxing patterns from ivory.

I avoided band and orchestra
with a fever, finding paint and clay
more accessible than keys or strings.

I faked my way through musicals
in high school, calling myself
a soprano, but unable to read the sheet music.

But when I'm with you, every note
somehow resonates, even though
I couldn't name them.
And when we hold hands,
I transform into a symphony,
even though I couldn't differentiate
a major chord from a minor.

I don't know much about music
but that doesn't stop me
from singing along to the car radio.
Like a song, all I need to understand
is that you are beautiful
and make me feel like dancing.

Paper Sky

Winter days where the sky is so blank
it's just a sheet of paper, suspended
above our heads. If we climbed
onto our roofs and stood on tiptoe,
we could draw on it with Sharpies.
We could scribble down our dreams,
our fears, our regrets. We could
write our initials and draw little hearts,
or sketch cruel caricatures of teachers we hate.
We could stencil in animal doodles
or use it for scratch paper for our algebra homework.
We could craft the blank sky
into one giant diary page,
whose secrets will be melted away
with the thawing of spring.

Pregnant

Last night I dreamed
I was pregnant. A record
that skipped forward nine months,
nine years. Foggy talk
of contractions and ice
chips, promises of onesies
and pacifiers. Try to conceive
this, how it feels to push
away from what is possible.
I only understood that it was coming
any moment, and when I woke
I was left with terror on my tongue
and the leftover ghost weight
of a globe in my belly.

Baptized by a Sunbeam

I spent the morning in a ray of sun
on the living room floor,
my two dogs beside me.
A week into the new year,
and sun is already a rarity.
I basked, closed eyes, crossed paws,
feeling the heat soak through
orange fur and black jeans.
I tried not to think
of all the people I miss,
or about the state of the world,
or even of the length of my to-do list.
I just sat in a sunbeam
and allowed myself to forget,
at least until the sun rose too high
and the carpet was left cold.

For My Sister

Our fingers saturated in grease and salt
from overpriced french fries, our faces
aglow from too much vitamin D.
We smell of chlorine and sun screen
and when we reach the summit
beyond the wooden rails,
we see the half moon.

I ask her to hold onto this memory
for me, to hide it within her craters.

I'll need it when we sit on phone calls
seeped in silence, listening to her breath,
grateful that she is getting back in line
for another go. More hours separate us
than ever have before, and I am counting
weeks until I can see her freckles.

My harness unclips at the thought
of her alone, and I fall from the cart, spiraling
into vertigo and waves that go over my head.
I reach up for words that could bring
any comfort but find mostly air.

She always wants to go on the biggest rides,
sit in the very front row.

We are becoming the swinging gondolas
of a Ferris wheel. I am the pause at the top
of the loop, the moment of suspension,
and she is the knowledge that we will drop
again. I will take her back.

I'll go upside down for her.
I'll buy us all the empty carbs and sugar
we can stomach and we'll skip all the lines
and scream our hearts out at the moon
as we climb and drop and climb again.

Valentine's Day

I've been keeping the three yellow roses
you gave me by my bedside,
even though they are dead.
I trimmed the stems, refreshed
the water. Still, they dry.

I press my nose to their wrinkled
petals and breathe in sweet rot,
sick with sugar. Their heads hang low,
heavy with the weight of expectation.

Really, I should toss them out
with the food scraps and Kleenex.
I'd still be left with a half
liter vase, tinted with leftover sun.

The leaves and thorns will decompose
among the garbage, crumbling
into fragrant grime, and my bedside
will reclaim the space with dust.

It's just that we always say
we don't need roses
until someone gives them to us—
and then our roots suck up tap water
so quickly we can't imagine
ever running out.

Fireworks in My Palms

There is indeed something poetic
about snapping, the soft pop

of skin on skin that says *I hear you.*
I see you. There is no better way

to express approval, solidarity, empathy
than by flicking your fingers

and letting the sound speak for you.
I find myself snapping

outside of poetry circles too,
using it to congratulate, agree, underline.

Clapping is for auditoriums and theaters
but snapping is for anywhere.

Let me set off little fireworks
in my palms, start a standing ovation

with my fingertips. Listen for the morse code
that says *thank you for existing.*

Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Iris*, 1926

Maybe it's only a flower.
Perhaps these curving black lines
and swooping white silhouettes
are merely petals. Maybe we are foolish
to run active eyes over this oil. Breasts and organs
have no place here
among the leaves and stems.

Then again,
it could be the epitome of femininity,
the height of sex and poise
and pride. My body is made of canvas
and to canvas I shall return.

But maybe it's only an iris.
We do not have to read every word
in order for a book to make us cry.
I will just look
at these blacks, these pinks, these grays,
and bury my thoughts like seeds
in the dirt.

In the Shower

Do not look behind the plastic curtain
because there I drown myself
in sunflower, shea, and eucalyptus.

I scald my skin, burn
off the day's remnants,
force a reset.

I scrub corrosive thoughts
from my scalp, rinse
bitter memories from my hair.

When I emerge, I will
be as the phoenix, fresh
skin ready to be re-calloused.

Inhaling Memories

When the air begins to warm, to move
about in gentle patterns like tracing lullabies
in fresh sand, nostalgia settles
in muggy waves.

The air of crisp mornings
that foreshadow an upcoming heat
returns me to camping in late summer.
I would wake up early,
before the air was laden with campfire smoke,
before the children on tricycles
made a thunderstorm of the gravel roads.

The air of windy, overcast afternoons
with threats of rain in its wings,
brings me to the weekends
of neighborhood yard sales.
Puzzles with missing pieces,
and musky, worn jackets;
VHS tapes no one will buy
and 50 cent cups of lemonade.

The air of stubbornly chill nights
holds almost forgotten secrets
of walks on the dirt road leading to the cottage
my family no longer rents.
Of that first night I saw the constellations,
laid out above me like a promise, and I
wished on a satellite
as if it were a shooting star.

Maybe this air, this oxygen,
is recycled every spring, to remind us
that we breathe the same
as we did then.

Falling

You ask to hold my hand
on the ride back to my apartment,
which makes me nervous,
since you're driving.
But everything makes me a little nervous.
So I intertwine my fingers with yours
as I settle deeper into the passenger seat.
Outside, it's the gentle dark that falls
just after an autumn sunset.
I don't know exactly where we're headed
but I feel comfortable here, next to you,
even when your playlist loses connection
and leaves us in soft silence.

Mandela Effect

My father tells me he has bad news,
so I go to meet him out in the driveway.
It's dawn, and the sun is ribboning
indefinitely, like the median on the freeway.
The two moons are still visible
in a lightening sky, one a crescent,
the other full, a perfect holepunch.

Neighbors are going about their business,
taking out trash and collecting the mail
as if in slow motion. No one is looking up.

Have we always had two moons?

I ask my father. He studies the heavens,
his expression shifting. His face
doesn't look quite right, a little too thin,
a little too out-of-focus. He says,
I don't think I've ever noticed that before.
Yes, I think they've both
always been there.

We stand there together, looking
up. *What was it you needed to tell me?*

He just turns and stares at me,
his eyes reflecting the sunrise
as, behind him, the moons fade into gold.

Morning Prayer

May I be grounded to the trees.
May my shadow be stretched
to the horizon and may
my footsteps be swallowed by mud.

May I be lifted to the sun.
May my skin be drenched in moonlight,
and my veins replenished with rain.

May I be drowned in the whitecaps
until I recollect my own breath,
until my core is flooded
with galaxies and intention.

Then may I be grounded again.

Sidra Elvey is from Grand Rapids, Michigan. This chapbook is her senior project for the Honors College at Grand Valley State University. Her works have previously appeared in the GVSU student journal *fishladder*—“Georgia O’Keeffe, *Black Iris*, 1926” will appear in the 2021 issue.

