

Two poems from: *Vanishing Point* (tinder/tender press, 2018)

The Wind Telephone

In the wake of a loved one's death in 2010, Itaru Sasaki found comfort by placing a phone booth in his garden in Otsuchi, Japan: although the rotary phone inside was not connected to anything, it allowed him to voice his grief. In 2011, the town of Otsuchi was destroyed by a tsunami, with thousands killed or missing. By 2016, over 10,000 survivors had come to Itaru's phone booth to place calls of their own.

Dial up. Hear the click click click
of what you once took for granted
unspooling into what is gone,
voices threading the wind:

*Please listen.
The world ended. Here I am
calling your name.*

In the garden a cloud
of gnats rises, shadows coalesce.
Only a breath keeps the living
apart from the lost.

*Sometimes I don't know
what I am living for.*

Sleeping and waking, eternal
the rhythm of days: to rise
with the sun, brew coffee, doze off
on the bus, shuffle papers, come home,
pick tomatoes, repaint the door.

How else to give voice to my love?

Like a million hearts, yours
grieves the distance between
a before and an after.
I would place a grand image here –

maybe the clouds split, a shaft of gold
burnishes gun-metal gray waves
that spume upon cliffs...

But no. Each day darkens.
Dove wings of glacial ice
melt into muddy moraine,
jet streams sigh off their courses,
the polar bears drown.

*Does nothing
have meaning now?*

Time
boils down to the gesture
of lighting these candles your children
will never return to blow out.
Let the wind wish for them

all we promised each other.

**Italicized lines are based upon a radio story from NPR's This American Life, 9/23/2016.*

Lullaby for Laika

Laika, a dog launched into space by the Soviet Union in 1957, was the first creature to orbit Earth.

Little one, there are so many tales I'd rather tell
than the story of how you were chosen: a flea-bitten mutt,
you stood out because you had survived hunger, cold, and neglect,
and still, when they called to you, you wagged and came trustingly.
One moment, a stray, mooching down Moscow's gray streets.
The next, headlines crowing *Muttnik!*
as they launched *Sputnik 2* and you sailed through the sky.

As a child, I imagined you bounding weightless
in a Zero-G simulator eating astronaut ice cream. Storybooks
portrayed you as a small, spunky space pilot manning the helm,
peering down through a porthole at Earth's blue eye

where kids like me gazed up at bedtime and wondered
what courage it takes to blast off into orbit.

Growing older, I learned the true meaning of "training" for you –
confinement in smaller and smaller boxes,
20 days at a stretch – and heard myths about your death:
maybe they poisoned your food as a mercy,
or maybe your air ran out. Maybe (this was confirmed later)
you roasted to death shortly following launch.

Burned in my mind like a falling star pin-wheeling down
into darkness, your story returns to my thoughts
as I lie awake weeping for children detained at our border.
A lullaby for you could be theirs as well:

*Sleep now, little one,
drugged into silence. Sleep and dream
in your cell where lights never dim,
where monitors hum, where two times a day processed food
drops before you, and you have no choice
but to lie in your own waste. Have no care, little one,
for the dirty secret no one told you:
they have no plan to bring you back...*

Ah, Laika, such is human cruelty.
At least the technician who buckled you in
gave you one last kiss on the nose.

Tending the Past

— *for my grandmother*

Wrap your feet in rags. Come stravaing
home down a lane between potato fields
as daylight waters down to dusk
and hearthstones stir with fire. Take off

your shawl. Bend to your stitchery
by candlelight, pretending not to laugh
at your brothers singing Etel Betel's tochter
und Chaim Yankel's zohn. Unpin your hair

and brush it to your waist at bedtime.
It is better not remembering
some names, some times: just drop them
like a glove, their loss unnoted

in the mystery of how this world rolls
over us. Rolled in the same old quilt
wake up a million miles away
from Meskaporichi. Though home

is all you see, even with closed eyes,
bend to your stitchery until the whistle sounds
then shuffle out into grey streets
where lamps already glow. Walk slowly

in your flowered shawl and listen
past the cartwheels' clatter, shouts and horns,
the streetcars' racket down the Bowery
for a voice as gentle as your father's was

then take a man from home and love him well.
Take his name, although its syllables pile up
like fallen chimney stones. Brush out your hair
and sow the rugs of your apartment

with hairpins and tears. Wrap your son in songs
you carried from the shtetl, feeding him
on things kept to yourself
no one can make you tell.

Swimming in the Sky

An astronaut on the space shuttle described viewing the earth through a porthole: Because of the multi-layered window, she saw her own reflection with two small earths for the irises of her eyes.

At dusk the lake fell mirror-still. I'd tiptoe
out the saggy dock, lie down and watch as low sun
filled the water. Leaning out, I met my eyes
reflected, my face cast back over my shoulder
to the sky. Below, the shallow liquid heavens
turned left into right, dream into waking,
shadow into body figured on a looking glass
through which bullheads and turtles lazed
along the bottom. Clouds swam in my eyes.

As sky slipped down from gold to red to grey, I'd wait
and wait forever for the evening star:
Star light, star bright, I'd sing to it,
fourteen years old and hungry for the world
to spill its riches at my feet the way stars spilled
to the darkened lake. This was, for me, the edge
of the known world: where moonrise
lent the tree-hung shore to shadow,
where quicksilver light bestowed its pathway

to a far horizon. As smooth as sleep comes on,
I'd slip into the water, limbs fluttering
like fins down deep, no splash or ripple troubling
the surface where infinity and time and timeless space
unfurled around me. Lying back, my body glowed,
a noctilucent cloud adrift above the world. I dreamed
so much those days of how great lives unfolded:
Robert Falcon Scott, who died on polar ice, I read,
was birthed the morning after his young mother swam

as far out as she dared, until her white limbs numbed,
swam out and lay in waves of silver moonlight, telling him,
the baby in her womb, *Fear nothing, Child*.
Fear nothing. Child that I was, how did I dream
this life I've come to live? Did I dream the baby
who'd float in my body's ocean as I swam to free us both
from gravity, the swell of water bearing us
in weightlessness? The night my own dam broke,
when labor turned the universe of me

(new stanza)

back to a simple body, how mightily it seemed
my child tried to hold back the sea that rocked her.
Morning dawned at last: she washed up on the dry shore
of her father's hands, all glistening and wet
the way I stood in shallows after night swims,
shaking droplets from my hair, my limbs, stars falling
into sky and water into water,
the cosmos shivering like a field of fireflies.

