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A Synonym for Gone

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In Memory of Emily Barton

A Synonym for Gone

Crossings

Surrogate

The principal asks me to stop by. "It's about Millie," she says. "All of the children have a mother coming in for the Mother's Day Tea. Millie's mother has to work." Dr. Stevens says that the counselor asked Millie who she wanted to invite, and Millie chose me. I explain that I am a father and it might be a bit awkward. "You'll do fine," the principal says. "Wear a suit."

The room is bursting with color. Mother's Day banners hang across bulletin boards. Millie is wearing a green jumper. I pull up a chair and greet the students and mothers around me.

The children serve us punch and cookies. They sing a song then each child stands and reads a poem about their mother and what they are thankful for. Millie rises up when it is her turn.

I thank my teacher.

He teaches me to read and write.

He teaches me to say, "I can do this."

Applause is loudest for Millie who spoke not a word of English when she arrived in the office, who held her mother for the longest time before ever letting go.

sea turtle

the weight of the moon

on her back

Solitude

There are two large paintings on one wall, almost identical, each one with two groves of trees divided by a river. I see distant hills, open areas of meadow grass, and patches of flowers near the forefront.

The painting on the left is dull, grays in the water, hills fading into sky. There are no sharp edges or shadows, no reflections flashing in the current. Dusk.

I turn to search for my wife's name on the hospital monitor. Her first and last names are abbreviated. She is in a recovery room. An attendant will guide me to her in twenty minutes.

The other picture is more in focus, trees and shadows are sharper, hills are separate, distinct. I am drawn to the water, reds and purples, ripples of light. The sun is coming up. I know now, it must be morning, and that alone, I will hold on to.

a whistle
to call me back
river mist

Tipplers

Our backyard is small, fenced so the dog and my little sister can't slip away. There is a swing set, brick fireplace, three dwarf fruit trees, and my mother's garden.

George is one of our neighbors, retired now, spends most days tinkering in his garage. He sharpens mower blades and scissors, changes points and plugs on his car. A quiet man except when Sam is over. They are like fire and gasoline—not a good combination.

My mother wears a halter top and cut-off shorts when she works. Her hair tumbles from her shoulders as she crouches to weed between rows or stoops to pick tomatoes.

George and Sam open the backdoor to the garage in order to see my mom. They giggle and laugh like children, hide in the shadows. Mom ignores them when they whistle like wolves as she carries her basket to the gate.

My mother turns and stares at the two men in the doorway. That alone is enough to silence them as they hide like insects in the dark. "They can't help themselves," she will say as the latch closes behind her.

hum of crickets
laughter pours
from an open bottle

Crossings

Late morning. Live oaks shade benches and swings. Couples walk hand in hand along the brick pathway. Boats that pass on the waterway break the silence.

In the distance, on the other side of the river, a fishing boat is towing a kayak. The passenger in the kayak is hunched over. The young man in the fishing boat stops just offshore. He is talking to the man in the kayak as he releases the rope. The kayaker paddles closer to the bank, tries to step out, and falls face down in the water.

Men in khaki pants rise from benches, wade in the river, and gather the dripping man in their arms. There is one at either side, another steadies his back. Wives call out, "Are you all right?" and "Your wallet is soaked."

The next day, egrets poke in the mud flats. The rattling call of a kingfisher is heard through the trees. The kayak is gone from where it was stranded. It may have drifted off in an outgoing tide. There are no answers just chatter about the stranger who passed before ever touching land.

*will we recognize
what we become?
light in the wake*

Remembrance

Manuel wears a long-sleeved white shirt. Rosa dresses in a cream-colored blouse and cardigan that falls to her knees. White curls tumble to her shoulders. Their faces are brown as the mountains.

A few hours before sunset, they drive the coastal highway in search of open sky. The clouds clear near Carmel Beach and they find a place to park. Manuel pulls off his boots and rolls up his jeans. He opens a bottle of red wine, bends to slip off Rosa's sandals.

The sun begins to set. Dark reds, blues, and golds streak the sky. Rosa hums the old waltz and begins to practice on the sand. Cold surf washes around their feet as Manuel slowly spins Rosa in circles. The wine bottle slips from their hands, bleeds in the sea like a wounded fish. Manuel wraps an arm around Rosa, and kisses her for a long time. "Your teeth are chattering," he says as they hold each other in the darkness.

from one sandy lane to the next tiger lilies

Symptoms

I am not contagious. My phone is not ringing. Friends aren't calling, asking when we are going fishing, asking me to study the tide charts and water temperatures, wanting to know if the ocean pan-fish are on the move, or if flounder are moving from brackish creeks out into open water. The phone is quiet.

I am not contagious. There are no new messages about band rehearsals, no lists of songs to practice. No one is asking where I place my capo when I play "Nobody's Child." No one is wondering about Hank Snow and why he recorded a song about a blind orphan. There are no questions.

I am not contagious as the dog follows me in and out of waves. Strangers stop to pet her, ask about her spots, then bid me good day. No one is curious about test results or treatments. Here along the sand where gulls squabble and terns hit the water hard, no one has a clue who I am, and I feel fine.

no one fills
the seat next to mine
waiting room whispers

Independence Day

It is the busiest weekend of the summer. The air and water temperature are the same. There are reports of fishermen catching pompano in the surf. No warnings posted about riptides. Parking lots near the beaches are filled to capacity.

A Stage I conservation alert remains ongoing due to an extended period of dry weather as well as an influx of vacationers. Home owners are expected to cut back on irrigation and car washing. No signs of rain on the horizon.

Little is known about the young man who washes up east of the commercial fishing pier. Officers arrive on the scene shortly after dawn.

He could have chosen any of the backwater creeks that wind deep into the cord grass. Places where egrets poke at mud flats, and boats scrape oyster beds. Instead he chose the pier next to the sandy beach—a place where he knew he would be found.

across the inlet
seagulls dip in and out
of baymen's voices

in the slow turn
of a shrimp boat
dusk

Notes

The surgeons are unable to repair a crack in her thigh bone. They feel the bone will heal on its own. Muscles are no longer limber due to the spinal muscular atrophy. Throughout surgery, arms and legs were placed in positions they were unaccustomed to. Therefore, bruises appear behind shoulders, knees, and arms. The marks will fade in the days to come.

Reminders: Walk behind my wife in case she should lose her balance. Lift her feet as she moves her legs into the car. Lower them when she gets out. If the bed at home is too high off the floor then remove the frame. Purchase a winged-back chair that will allow her to sit in an upright position. Install stainless steel grab bars outside the shower and along bathroom walls.

Questions for the Head Nurse: In order to be discharged, how far must she walk? Should I bring her warmer clothes for the ride home? When will the prescriptions be ready for pick-up? Can the bed linens be changed? Will my wife be going home tomorrow?

voices close to God twilit sparrows

Breathing Twilight

Belonging to the Dark

Some nights, if the wind is right, I drift in my rowboat down past the Marina and I can hear the voices of people around campfires. Their language is one I have never heard before. I drift deeper into the cove where the water is shallow and dense with lily pads. I cast my fishing line through spaces between them; hop my plug like a frog and listen for a splash. I look up at the trees in the distance and there's a dragon's head in the sky with a twisted mouth and wide eyes. In the morning, I row back to the very same spot and there is just a row of ragged pines bent from years of wind and ice.

low country
the fog fades
into deer

Reel to Reel

My father is dressed in his blue suit. His knees are wrapped with bandage and he walks with a slight limp. Vision is poor now and faces are no longer clear to him. He recognizes people by their voices. The room is all knotty pine and for the first time all of his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren are together in one place. My father never sits down. He dances with my mother and he dances with his granddaughters—every song, every style from the forties and fifties. Between songs, my father says, “I am sorry son, I can only dance from the waist up.” And in the evening dark, it is my father’s smile that lights the room.

paper boats
the children father taught
how to swim

Breathing Twilight

Summer's end. She sits close to the bank, clutches both knees to her chest. Hair from the blonde wig tumbles down her back. Arms are thin as straws, pale in the evening light. The aging duck senses her presence, begins to quack her way across the pond. "Come here you beautiful girl," Emily calls.

The duck is white, dappled with splotches of blue, brown, and black. She waddles on shore, shivering in anticipation of a treat. Emily feeds her pieces of shredded wheat, handfuls of cracked corn mixed with bird seed. The duck nibbles at her fingers.

After a time, the duck settles belly down on a patch of grass. The two friends are quiet as turtles pop their heads up, and carp swim like shadows through the water.

A month passes and they are both gone. There was a bond between the two, kept them coming back to the water's edge where silver fins rose like sails, and geese called from the sky, where fingers stroked a wet head, and smoothed the ruffled feathers.

pinks in the clouds
her make-up brush
where she left it

Senescence

1968. My father finally finds a boat that is good for sailing as well as fishing: wide beam, plenty of cockpit space, sides blue as the sea. After work, he launches at the reservoir, the small motor whirring him into deep, cold water. He lets the boat drift as he laces a live herring onto his hook, adds weight enough to carry his bait down to the bottom.

One evening, the sky darkens, lightning flashes in the distance. Other boats quickly line up to leave the water. He continues to fish while thunder rolls and echoes across the lake.

The bolt strikes close to the boat—a flash, *crack*, and every hair on my father's arms is standing straight up. His legs are no longer steady. He sits for a time, takes deep breaths as rain soaks through to his skin. Finally he starts the motor and moves his boat toward the launch ramp.

His barber is first to notice. "Your hair has turned white since last I saw you," Mr Earl says. "Are you feeling all right?"

My father decides to sell his boat and he never purchases another.

pine shadows
the weight of boots
filled with river

Blue River

My room is small, enough space for a cot, record player, and a crate filled with albums. I keep my clothes in a suitcase.

At night when lights and voices dim, I turn on the phonograph, raise the tone arm, then lower it gently at the start of a platter. Volume is turned down. Walls are like paper.

Tonight I am playing songs by Eric Anderson. They are slow; heartbreak wanders through them. A woman's voice echoes like an angel on the title track. The final cut is a prayer. *Oh Jesus I'm falling, please see where I am, help me to get around the next bend.* I feel like the one singing the song, not sure of what will happen next.

It's late when I click the player off. My window is open and I hear tree frogs. I am trying to say a prayer, sometimes in my head, other times I whisper the words, always starts the same way, "Lord, thank you for these blessings." I don't know whether I am asking too much or if I should kneel down. This is all new to me.

bottom land
a *thank you Jesus* sign
shrouded in mist

Scent of Lilac

I hold her, after she lifts and stretches patients, fluffs pillows, fills in for a missing family member, explains a rare condition, tops up glasses with ice and water, updates medical records, and makes someone laugh. I hold her after she finishes her three to eleven shift; rushes out to her yellow VW, showers at her apartment, changes, then climbs back in the car.

I hold her, after she drives the four lane, watches for deer in the moonlight, sings louder than the radio, after she leaves the highway and slows through country roads that curl like smoke.

I hold her after she parks beside her parents' house, after all the lights are out, chickens settle down in their coops, hounds curl in beds of leaves, and crickets chirp their night music.

I hold her until the night passes, and engines start in the distance, horses bow their heads and cows saunter toward the barn, lights click on in the kitchen, and the last of moonlight shakes from her hair.

dogwood blossoms
she closes her eyes
to listen

sun catchers
one last touch
of her hand

The Infirmary

Sunday evening. I check in with Margaret at the nursing station. She is wearing a white dress with short sleeves, white cap high on her head. "You'll like this," Margaret says. "A car-full of girls drove over to the coast and returned red as tomatoes. One of them is spending the night. Don't let your eyes pop out of your head."

The girl is sitting up in bed with a pillow behind her back. Blue gown is untied, slips down her sunburned shoulders. She tells me about a small town where she stayed and the wide beach along the shoreline. "Sand is so clean," she says. "I couldn't find a single shell." I read her the menu from the cafeteria, and check off her choices.

I fill her plate with two pieces of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, string beans, and a slice of cake. Squeeze lemon in her tea, gather a napkin and silverware. Then carry her tray past students on their way to supper. "Your angel won't be here tomorrow," Margaret says as she holds the door open for me. "She is flying back to her dorm."

the silent pluck
of a blueberry
evening song

Scout

Coal stove glows like a sunrise. The house groans from the wind and cold. The new baby is bundled as she passes from one relative to the next. Some whisper, others sing lullabies as Maeve sleeps through it all. Wherever Maeve goes, the dog follows, always a quick sniff to check on the baby then she curls up beneath her with eyes wide open.

At night, the house settles down. Maeve will wake a few times before dawn, and each time she stirs, the dog will rise and be there just as we gather the baby in our arms. "You are my gentle giant," my wife will say. "You are the best Nanny." The dog will plant herself down next to the rocker knowing everything is safe, everyone is all right.

all the places they once were winter creeks

Daylight

Spring Thaw

The beach is deserted. We walk along the sand, pass by waves of seaweed and sticks that piled up through winter, stoop down and sort shells and crab legs; hold bits of smooth glass up to the light.

I tell you about the lady who used to look out for me. “Watch out for those motor boats,” she’d say. “They swing too close to shore.” I can’t recall the last time I saw her.

Most of the cottages are boarded up. One couple is trimming trees in their yard. There are mounds of brush and leaves. “They are ready for a bonfire,” you say.

We talk about the town we grew up in; how everyone migrated to Main Street after school. Cars rolled down the street with radios blasting, and hands held cigarettes out windows. You saw me once, hair down over my eyes, skinny as a stick, wearing a yellow jacket with my initials.

The sun is getting low in the sky. Wind from the bay feels like snow. You have goosebumps on your arms. I hold you and say, “I never thought we’d walk this far.”

enough
to roll a stone
pull of tides

Choosing Sides

It is late autumn. My sister and I are wearing plaid coats with fur collars. Homes line the street behind our backs. Newly planted shrubs sprout beside foundations. My sister has her hood up and my hands are stuffed in pockets. I squint at the camera as she turns her head away. Our shadows are one. A longer shadow stretches to the left—belongs to the one who begs us to cooperate.

behind the smelting plant
boys pounce on the one
with the football

Saturated By Sea

There are three men out on the pier. They bait their hooks with pieces of red worm but nothing is biting. Along the shoreline, sandpipers search exposed mud for snails. My granddaughter looks down steps that lead to the water as waves splash her sneakers.

wading the shallows
clams the size
of her fingernails

We cross over to the edge of the salt marsh where wax myrtle and red cedar grow. A sign says to hang an oyster shell and make a wish. Scarlett and I rummage along the shore for shells with holes then lace them on branches. A breeze shakes the trees and the shells rattle like wind chimes.

My granddaughter is tired so I carry her along the trail that leads back to the car. We pause along the way to hunt for fiddler crabs and again to pet someone's new puppy. I ask Scarlett what she wished for. "I wished for a stuffed animal," she says. "I like elephants. Is that a good wish?" A great white egret lands and disappears in the tall grass as I hold still for one more wish.

rain soaked earth
she springs to reach
a stepping stone

A Synonym for Gone

Two days after Christmas. My son's clothes are packed. We pile suitcases in the trunk, cover them with armfuls of new sweaters and shirts. It is almost dusk. "I haven't cleaned the car since Emily passed," my son says. "I didn't think about it." Together, we wash all the windows that are covered in grime and fingerprints. Headlamps are thick with haze. We buff them again and again until they are clear. My son is ready to follow the road that lies ahead and to see the stars that shine from above.

cutting back lilies
he gathers what remains
in his arms

moonlit water
geese call back something
I can't name

For a While

Track Three. Sinatra sings in short, smooth phrases accompanied by gentle orchestration. The tune moves leisurely, a walk through a familiar neighborhood. He starts with the things she left under the sink: shampoos the color of sea, hairsprays and gels, body-wash that smells of flowers, combs and brushes still tangled with her hair, Scottish soaps and witch hazel clear as a day without clouds. That is enough today. Tomorrow, he will open her closet.

Sales are slow. People can't make up their minds. There are Christmas presents to buy and fuel tanks to be filled, and maybe a garage door can wait until after the New Year. In the long spaces between customers he can't stop thinking about her. Pictures her riding a horse or stepping into the ocean. Work will get going after the holidays, he tells himself.

At the end of the song, Sinatra sings, "They forget, that I'm not over you, for a while." He repeats those lines but the words begin to fade.

couple on a bridge
the dart of fish
in a marsh creek

Green Fingers

I drop my wife off. She places her cane inside a shopping cart. I park the car then find Joan studying ferns that have been reduced for quick sale. “They’ve been in the sun too long,” my wife says. “A little water and shade, and they’ll be good as new.” Joan picks one to rescue.

We move down a row. Joan apologizes to other customers. “Nothing to worry about, honey,” one of them says. “I stopped being in a hurry—long time ago.” My wife pinches a stem off a coleus. Leaves are the color of red wine. She’ll take it home, put it in water, give it a few weeks to sprout roots then plant it in soil.

I wait in the check-out line while Joan begins the journey back to our car. “Did she just have surgery?” the cashier asks. I tell her that it is a progressive disease and that my wife has struggled with it for some time. “Bless her heart,” the cashier says. “It looks like every step hurts, and will you look at that, she just keeps right on going. Bless her heart.”

the road home—
where the willow
used to be

A Myth of Mermaids

There are more dogs than children on the beach. Strangers share stories of rescued hounds, runners, and ones afraid of water. “Her coat was red and she had the longest ears,” a woman says. “I miss her every day.”

A man stares at a spot near the fishing pier. “I saw one yesterday, just the dark dorsal fin, a piece was missing, that’s how you recognize them.” I study the waves for signs of a dolphin.

A few souls take off their shoes and socks, roll pant legs up, and stand in the shallows. One of them reaches down and pulls up a round object. She shows me a live sand dollar, reddish brown and covered with spines. “Have to put it back,” she says. “Won’t last long in the open air.”

A beachcomber shows me shapes in the wet sand. “They could be footprints,” she says. “I’ve never seen anything like them.”

I study the receding water for signs of shells and crabs—the sparkle of something. Weather is changing, a few rumbles of thunder, and the sound of a voice calling in the wind.

moonlit palms
the movement of songs
beneath the waves

Come to the Light

My wife is in a yellow gown. We both remember a two-piece bathing suit that was much the same color, a small sailboat gliding across a reservoir. She lifts her head to see the tubes in her arms. Doctors and nurses keep asking about her birthday as I kiss my wife good luck.

when all the dreams
are put on hold
spinal anesthesia

My knuckles are swollen and I can not twist my wedding ring back on. My wife can't go on with the pain in every step. The perimeter of the house is too great a distance for her to travel, a strip of sand too great a barrier to cross in order to reach the sea. Something has to change.

between stars—
the point where talking
stops

There may be minimal improvement in mobility but the suffering will be diminished. In the weeks to come after the surgeries, pain will lift like a mist and vanish. The surgeon says my wife will feel as though she has wings and we will wait quietly by a window for her time to fly.

life of a mayfly
the breath it takes
to say *I love you*

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