

Carrying

In the face of death,  
somebody said something to us about  
resurrection. Does that mean your empty eye  
sockets will see?

– Raúl Zurita

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Suppose, before they said *silver* or *moonlight* or *wet grass*, each poet  
had to agree to be responsible for the innocence of all the suffering on  
earth,

because they learned in arithmetic, during the long school days, that if  
there was anything left over,

you had to carry it.

– Robert Hass

# Contents

Opening	3
What's In the Heart	4
Carrying	5
A Story About Fire	7
Hypothesis	9
Confession	10
Animal	11
Taking It	12
Field	14
Incarnare	15
Q&A	17
Fragments	18
After This Rain	22
Dangle	23
Morning	25

# Opening

When they closed the casket, I opened  
My heart. I fought the pavement with my shoes.  
Ran, danced, sang. My throat hoarse but the song livid.  
Found a country within myself. Dodged all  
The bullets off a war, the one with everyone  
I loved. Nursed a wound beside a river that sang  
About my sorrows: The woman whose voice propels  
My veins to explode, the man who shrouds me  
With his shadow, the kid who's still holding on  
To the string of a red balloon. A stone leaves my hand  
And embraces drowning. All of this to say  
I swallowed my pain. I turned my back  
Against a kingdom to work the loam. I screamed  
Only at some point to cover my mouth.  
Let it be deserted. Let the heart grow in the mist  
Of thickets. Let the trees cover it.  
And when your blood throbs, when it has  
Untethered itself from the cage of hurting,  
Learn to crawl toward and ask somebody  
To open your eyes.

# What's In the Heart

A house with opened doors. A child  
Running from one of those doors.  
A window with no curtain looking at the world  
Past his little shadow. A garden  
Full of holes, making room for ants.  
A fruit rotting somewhere. A clearing for everyone  
To seek or run from. A graveyard.  
Sometimes, a butterfly fleeing a gravestone.  
Warblers chanting their sorrow song  
On a burned-out streetlight.  
The eye of the moon  
Worried for a derelict on a sidewalk.  
The sadness of a white gaze.

I forgot who it was who told me that  
Naming the threat puts a better face on it.

A knife then.  
A fire just put out.  
A mouth darkening after its last breath.

# Carrying

Suddenly this brokenness. To tell you I lost  
Track of how long the air preserves  
Your sighs, how many times your breath quivers  
At night, who hears them, or pretends to,  
Is like cutting down a tree in a forest miles  
From the reach of everybody  
In the throes of waking. As in  
The dream I had last night when your bare hands  
Reached out to me, so brightly  
They could have been filled with light.  
And I clasped them tightly against my chest  
And held onto them and said to you: I promise,  
I know this pain. How could I have lied.  
This morning, nothing escapes my breath.  
I walked out of this house like an animal  
slobbering for prey, careful with each step,  
Not knowing the earth somehow  
Mirrors my yearning for a feast. I don't know  
Who God thinks He is. I believe His hand  
Touching every breathing thing in this world  
Is a curse we refuse to abandon. When I remember  
The morning you cupped my hands and pressed  
Them against the soil, to teach me  
How to make a garden out of twigs, I think  
Of how badly you tried to impersonate the rain.  
The way it asks of all of us to take refuge  
Underneath roofs we left to rust, to shroud  
Our skin with so much clothing, to protect

Ourselves from its needles. Before it gives  
In to the fall. When I was a child, I only wished  
To be free. When I was the bird I watched.  
When I was the leaf dangling from a branch, waiting  
To fall. When I was the burden of breath I want now  
To let go. If I were still a child, I wish these hands  
To be empty. I want to hold nothing. The way I hold you.

# A Story About Fire

My friend once told me a story about fire,  
How it eats everything including itself  
When all has turned into ash. At my grandfather's house,  
We used to sweep the gutters, gathering leaves  
And afterward throwing them into a barrel  
For burning. My grandfather's love feels like fire.  
Every day, he would wake me up at dawn,  
Not saying a word. He liked letting his body speak  
For itself. In this sense, silence became a plurality.  
Our glances at each other courted friction threatening  
To combust at any given utterance. I was silent  
In my sweeping. In this way, I learned how hard  
The pavement is, how numb it is to all the carcasses  
Of leaves and cats and derelict homes along the street.  
I was silent in filling my rusting barrel with leaves  
In the yard. In this, I saw the many days of my childhood  
Burning away as I hear my kid neighbors calling  
For me, asking if I wanted to see the new slide  
At the park, as I ignore them. I watched every leaf  
Turn into ash. It amused me how none of them pleaded  
To be saved. In this way, I learned. The only way  
The body survives a love that burns it is to allow  
The body to be consumed in flames. I let my body  
Speak to everything that burns it, as my grandfather's  
Love turns into ash. Nobody said the dying embers  
Could char as much as the combustion's hunger.  
Nobody said how silent it is in its persistence  
To transform what is living to what is dead. How silent

The fire is in the barrel now. How even the ash  
Splayed around the very thing that consumed it.

# Hypothesis

Half of what I think is false is worrisome.  
This morning, I woke up as a child  
Putting on his shoes, preparing  
To run for a thicket only to wake up as myself again.  
Made breakfast, spoke to myself, stared at a blank canvas  
To find the burgeoning flight of crows emerge  
From it. I must have forgotten to draw  
The curtains. My window deceives  
Me again with the shadows of trees, and I believe everything  
I cannot hold. Half of what I love is dying.  
My grandfather called today. His voice escaped  
My ears the soonest I saw the many routes  
It took to avoid the street named Goodbye.  
Somebody tell me he will live at the other end  
Of this telephone. Give me a roll call of all  
The names he once called himself.  
Somebody tell God I will repent  
Before I make a second call and hear  
Only the ringing. A friend once told me that  
When a person dies slowly, our bodies  
In grief become a hypothesis. Maybe I am  
Still a child, and my days are running  
Toward a thicket. Maybe I know how  
To count but pretend I have no fingers. Maybe  
Somewhere there is a phone ringing,  
And I am elsewhere strolling,  
Trying not to look at the names of the streets.

# Confession

Today, a friend asks me to speak of truth. I once loved  
The little yard we turned into a garden. The pots cracked but still  
Lining a pathway, the fallen petals licking the stones, the crickets  
Crying or perhaps making love as the blanket of night expands  
Over the city. At breakfast, I once broke bread refusing your prayer,  
Thinking instead where my parents slept in the darkneses they created.  
Those they flew into when they promised me a good life. We bowed  
Nonetheless because bowing allows us to mark the earth with certainty.  
There were times when I thought about graves when you handed me  
The shovel. When you asked me to carve the soil, I asked about the need  
For graveyards. Another hand pulls it, another shadow bends, another hole  
Is full. This is where the seedlings go, you tell me, tapping and disturbing  
Their little funerals. Today, sadness and its many children are lost,  
Asking me for directions. I once told them, Try the window, but they wouldn't  
Leave me alone. This was the time I learned I'm scared of falling.  
When you died, I fell and kept on falling. Every step always a proximity  
From a cliff that knows my name. Every patch of earth a mouth asking  
To be fed a body. Another day passes. Another sparrow leaves  
Its nest. Another bird is left to sing out of the brokenness he's born into  
As sunlight reaches for your shadow and makes room for leaves.  
Every heart is full of holes.

# Animal

“He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster.”

–Friedrich Nietzsche

Stare into flower. Long enough to forget the world as mother  
tells father about hell. Is it home if you do not suffer?  
Cadavers in crematoriums know this well: a way to wake  
when you are dead is to give yourself away. The need to pretend  
as flowers only to attract bees. Tell me about repetition.  
Every litany rising from our tongue is stone we push to recall our ruin.  
Can we trick death and not push boulders for eternity?  
For God, promise, heavier than stone. For promise, reduction  
only to possibility. Less certain than earth attracting dust.  
Bone to gravity. We should learn to wake the same way.  
Enough morbidity. Everything modular. Let us become disciples  
of every event. Worship trees more often. Listen to silences  
our bodies indulge in as sadnesses consume our life. Study hurting,  
pain. Let me have your disappointment. Ask if you were sad  
the day you watched fourteen sunsets. Forget clocks exist. Sleep  
and wake with new eyes. When we look at tragedy again,  
it would have been reborn with new eyes. The trouble with looking  
is looking. What comes after? Beyond flesh and bones,  
numen we cannot grasp. Making and unmaking death. The animal  
we know. This unbearable stillness of my limbs.  
This prayer the wind swallows as flower turns into abyss.

# Taking It

To put a finger in the wound,  
You have to be a stone longing for the edge  
Of a creek. To stop the cascade of pain,  
You have to be a boulder. To endure  
Everything blasted, the earth, nothing  
But the earth. To survive the buzzing noise  
Of *Everything ends you'll see*, you need  
To christen yourself. Little Assassin, switchblade  
In the pocket, waiting to kill every fruit  
Of feeling inside the heart. It happened when  
Grandfather appeared to me in a dream. Listen kid,  
I'll dig a hole in which to stay the night,  
An empty socket waiting for the eye of light.  
The next morning: Some possibility of being  
With him once more losing its shape. Every shaft  
Of light a blade tearing tufts of grass to reveal  
The air dancing its way to nothingness. Dance,  
Little wind, I can hear you whisper. Here,  
Say the ants, follow this trail. Mark me  
On my body, says the barren tree. Court me  
With your throbbing desire to enter  
This twilight, welcomes the thicket.  
Your footsteps a cry for help.  
You wail only to hear yourself.  
To carve a place then. To keep your body  
Close to the earth. To be one with it.  
Oh this task of confronting one's ending.  
This sad labor of running, falling, getting up,

Falling, staying down.

# Field

Somehow we come back to the world, even to look down on hands still bleeding. How to say this. Just as you learn every bull charged charges, just as you find yourself compelled, even ready for clouds, to renew wonder, just as you stretch out a spring, you forget to dance. Watch out for trees if you have to run after the sky. Watch out for animals keen on laying eggs in your wounds. Do you remember the first time you bled? So much salt in your wound, so much grain, you could call yourself field. There, what grew in tangled ways? Tree trunk cannot be one of them, perhaps only its roots. Time to admit you cannot die from contradictions. Observe this fact: particles annihilate each other only to disappear. Where do they go? Elysian fields perhaps, waiting for applause for innovation. Disappearance is too easy. Have you tried existing in a room? Consider faces keeping their grin before you leave me alone, before comatose, before close up shot of my mouth making up prayers. Dear God, will you forgive me if I say I am tired? Dear God, how to say this. When I was in third grade, I confessed my love, confessed myself, too. I confessed my sins to you. Said I want you, want to watch you smile as time struggles to repeat itself. You disappeared. I looked for you in dreams, poems about dreams, dreams about poems. When you died, were you happy? Perhaps you dreamt fields with just enough trees to avoid, clouds nursing you. Perhaps lullaby, futility of mouth opening wider than cathedral. Perhaps everyone counting stones. Everyone gathering them in pockets. Everyone throwing them into the ocean, wishing for less things to bear.

# Incarnare

“The object of this poem is not to annihilate”

– Robert Hass

Quick. Nurse me to sleep  
lest the dream about dead children consumes  
my mind again, draw first blood  
again. Like God’s teeth  
spilling blood all over my bones resting  
in their catacomb.  
Something about metaphors makes you wish the world  
would cradle all the dead  
bodies it swallowed.  
Continues to swallow. Else, swaddle  
itself in soil like a child searching for the tongue of beauty  
in the mud. Bereave is the norm.  
Believe it. In 2021, epigeneticists  
rediscover wonder. They learn  
that bee proteins print genomes  
yielding heterogenous insects.  
In other words, the bee is many bees.  
What is new we call surprise.  
In Manila, mouths bloom like flowers  
when the sun sings the tongues of their petals,  
forgoing convulsion as cause of death,  
thinking instead: prayer  
will nurture, even save us.  
And them. I swear  
this is true. Mornings we take salt

from the market to coat rice again, learn  
taste again. We steal it.  
Yesterday, another body  
hugged the soil, praised hunger.  
This hunger, many  
hungers: the apple of our crime  
still the apple of our crime.  
Let the world remind you  
that some limbs are drawn  
to gravity like branches, depending on stones  
bodies swallow in their grief,  
crows resting on their shoulders.  
Some days, poetry  
and prayer are the seed of my death, blossoming  
in my veins, reassembling all the dead  
bodies as dried leaves. Compost  
of this country. Land of loam and blood.  
What fruit shall they bear?  
What word will satisfy  
The world, desecrate  
the appetite of an animal?  
Beauty, surprise me.

## Q&A

*What pleases you?*

Not the routine of days. I enter the teeth of hours, and always I leave in pieces. Sunlight goes by, the gaze of the moon goes by. All the rusting cogs of this city go by. But I don't worry. At the end of each day, I put on a song on a player, and I listen. Sometimes, I sing along. Having survived drowning, the human voice colors everything.

*What are you escaping from?*

I lived in a house with four rooms. Only two were occupied. One by an old man, another by me. He taught me a lot of things. He once gave me a gun but asked me never to pull the trigger. He lent me a shovel and told me to help around the house. In the mornings, we planted flowers and rid his garden of dead leaves. There was a wall between us, and every day a small piece of it would fall off, as small as a child's hand.

*Where do you go now?*

My friend thinks that there exists a country none of us could visit alive. I think we're partly dead. Therefore, this country partly visible. If you close your eyes, you could make out the black trees bowing to the ground under this blacker night.

*What do you see?*

Me, still burning my dead leaves.

# Fragments

1.

In this world, the red rose in the garden is nothing but the red rose in the garden. Someone else will write a poem about this sprouting and think of everyone he loves. The sun will continue to be itself, draining everything that wants water.

2.

In this country, there are only two seasons: Drought and rain.

3.

I'm permitted to return to my childhood. I'm wearing red shoes. All I can think about is hunger. Lola is cooking pork in the kitchen. I can tell the meat is beginning to disintegrate, disowning the small bones holding it together, by how long the scent lingers in the room. Lolo is crouched outside, tending to all the flowers in the plant boxes he put together in the last five years. It's hot, and I ought to give him a glass of water. I can hear both calling to me now. My task is to walk carefully to each body, carefully so as not to wake myself.

4.

In the novel I was reading, there is a story of a man who is losing. He is a careful man: Looks left and right and left again before he crosses the street, keeps the receipt of every purchase, logs every minute detail in a journal for days both special and ordinary. On January 25, he wrote, "I was in a room. There was a woman before me. We were very happy." On February 4, "Wrote emails at my desk, tried to fast but yielded to dinner, had wine and thought of her all night. She tasted so sweet." On February 10, no entry. When I closed the book, I imagined the man to be in a very dark place, trying to breathe between the pages. The tulips at his desk wilting. My cat snuggling beside me, reminding me to sleep.

5.

I had a student once who grew fond of reading Dante. We talked of how the Italian poet took from Virgil's classicism the idea that – because Art followed Nature, and Nature followed God – every poem is a child of Nature, a grandchild of God. She objected, asking, But isn't life a canvas? Couldn't my life be the art? And she proceeded to recall the many things she did but didn't understand at the time of doing. I didn't protest. We lied to each other, saying, Yes, yes. The world is sometimes a poem we are all trying to write.

6.

What I didn't tell her: There are no edges to our days.

7.

I was in a children's party once. A child came running to me asking about the color of sky. He kept saying brue brue but didn't understand what it meant. I looked for a balloon of the same color and tightly pressed its string in his hand. He smiled. There are nights when I think I should have given him more balloons. Perhaps black, orange, and purple balloons. But a child can only hold so much in his hand.

8.

I don't think I can hold this any longer.

9.

The doctor was kind. Honest, but kind. *The patient has a few days left. Maybe a few weeks. I taught you the stretches. Ask him to do them every morning. He needs this much fruit. See to it he eats on time. Measure the water up to this point of his cup. See to it you do not overfeed, et cetera, et cetera.* A voice is an exhibition. We are all staring in a museum of grief. We have these options: Let the works themselves speak to you or let the curator's labels explain them. I'm hearing the timbre of the doctor's voice, and I'm choosing to be shattered. I don't care to understand. I want to be shattered.

10.

I don't think I'm crazy. I just love the world too much.

11.

Somewhere, there is a house in which night appears with many holes. In one room, an old couple shares a single bed. In another, a boy keeps to his own mattress on the floor. Every time it rains, the boy gathers five pails and places them at different locations. Always, the sound of rain terrifies him, but not more than the cloak it places over the earth. Sometimes, all you can do is state the obvious: Everywhere, the soil is waterlogged, the flowers drowning. The boy is convinced: His heart, too, is full of holes.

12.

Can you see? Even water can be violent.

13.

But the boy prays and is consoled by the possibility that God must have heard him, must have been, for a minute, baffled by the idea of sadness and suffering, leaving him five buckets filled halfway, ready to be of use the next day.

14.

Maybe irony can explain the world. A young man orders a bouquet of roses at the flower shop. The manager, already struggling in business, promises to give him red ones. The young man picks them up, gives them to a young woman, talks to her of trivial things. He's in love with her, but she's in love with someone else. The next day, they are both alone and happy, patient with the routines of the day like flowers slowly peeking into the world. The next week, the manager decides to close shop, and elsewhere, red roses sprout after a long rain.

15.

Somewhere, a poet at his desk writes a poem about roses, believes everything he says. He gets up, goes out into the city, walks over gutters, crosses so many streets. Everywhere, only pavement. No roses to be found.

16.

Dear lonely traveler, If you strain hard enough, you will hear a voice pleading to be understood. If you strain harder, you will hear yourself.

# After This Rain

Suppose we can live again  
In the past and render the most intimate  
Memory of our bodies as if they are still  
Touching and learning to unhinge  
All the gates protecting our livid hearts,  
Wouldn't you say, Wound me,  
Wound me again until our blood can fill  
The shape of our names? We'd dance  
Through the symphony of days as dead leaves  
Crackle underneath our feet. Sweet animal,  
Let me be honest. Storms arrive  
To remind us we're short enough  
To dance in the rain. And as water drains,  
Listen to it ask a question, Why  
Must I forgive your thirst? Open  
And lift your hands, my animal.  
Let our pain grow like branches.  
And after enduring this rain,  
Let them bear too much fruit.

# Dangle

Tonight, I entered a cathedral  
Of desire. I prayed for the teeth of God  
To break me apart. For his mouth to tremble  
Like a beast whose throat is trampled  
By another and who wins nonetheless. I said to him,  
I want you to trample my throat every time  
I say a prayer. Dear God, why do I count my wounds.  
When I was a child, I stood in front of a thicket  
And thought of all the women I will never love.  
Dear God, I want to contain myself the way hands can  
Bear so much of the future. Let me understand  
At once why the forest can house the sweetest fruits  
And kill them the next second. How far  
Can a child run into a forest? Is a question  
You refused to answer. Here is a hypothesis:  
A child can run halfway into this darkness. He runs  
Out of it from then on. I am running still  
From so much brokenness. What I want to say  
Is when I throw a paper plane into the air,  
99% of the probability to catch it with these hands  
Is thrown into the thicket. Dear God, I want  
To be a fruit. There must be a stilling rapture  
In dangling from branches if only to imitate the crows.  
If only I had wings. If only I had nectars spilling  
From this throat. If only I could be sweet  
And bitter like death. Or face death the way  
You egg me on with your sweet omen. Amen,  
I say to you. Let death spill into this kingdom

Like an overflow of harvest for your feast.  
I shall spit into every gutter cursing your name.  
Understand: Every wish is a seed saved  
From the carcass and detritus underneath our feet,  
Pushing itself above the soil like a fist  
To become something beautiful. What I want  
To say is I am a fugitive. Like a fruit looking for the dangle  
As it learns to love the sweetness of this earth.

# Morning

I tally the days of my sorrow  
At the back of my head.  
I flip every stone in the desert of memory  
To drink from every stalk I find.  
Like an animal who longs to forget  
The hunger engraved in its flesh,  
I sit and ask the world to be kind to me  
Before it ravages everyone I love.  
I profess my misgivings, and I don't  
Expect your forgiveness. Every fire  
I lit and left for night to kill, every foot  
That marked the edge of every cliff,  
All the screaming pleas for help  
Which never found the weight  
Of words on the page. Yes, I know,  
Light will come. Maybe then  
It will unfold the skin of fear  
On this body. Let these be the words I say  
At the hour the walls come for me  
From all directions. The minute stone turns  
Harder than itself. Or before the last breath  
Of the enemy you feed  
At the pit of your sad heart  
Lifts itself to what you call heaven.  
There's a dream about morning I'll never forget.  
Everyone's at the party. All the children were running  
At the backyard. Every parent who chased  
After them couldn't pin their laughter

In the air. And all the trees have stretched  
Their arms as one would in a prayer.