

NOTE PINNED
TO THE BACK
OF A DRESS

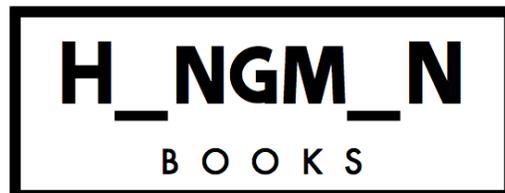


AUBREY
LENAHAN

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cover // ryan spooner
interior // np



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for Meg Ronan

LETTER ALL WINTER

Other than the noise, it was quiet. The war was elsewhere. Exposed roots tripped no one up that anyone knew. The factory gave off its warm light. Pulses did not quicken, and this was well-regarded. It was winter, and everyone was wrapped up like an ornament. There were films about those who lived far away and used pieces of wood and string for this and that. If they were warring, you wouldn't know it, not from this account. I was an adventurer, and all winter went looking for a letter from someone from elsewhere. Then I read that Turner painted seascapes thick with slave blood. Warships broken up for lumber at sunset. But that was before the Industrial Age, when his subject became the machine. Then everyone became very tired. I was looking for a letter all winter from someone from elsewhere where a war was. Here, each holiday is a bright blur, and a book disappears when it's laid aside. What was his name now, he painted ships. I heard once there was a war somewhere, but I am never sure. That's right, the brushstrokes were thick as blood, the way they dried on the canvas, that's all. I was looking for a letter that named this method, that's what, and I never found one.

KITCHEN TABLE, SIMPLY SET

this is the story I wanted to tell

he could not tolerate the sounds of eating

she could not tolerate his being of his mother

gingham linen triangle spoon, fork

she turned on the range fan and the din dimmed

his leg ceased tapping its dull code

temporary steam from the bird rising

COMMON MEAL

1

dumb *at the table* not *on a table* not *under their table*
the word for I don't eat that because I am rude
I will take more of the pink potatoes please
you are far from me the word would be
a polite hunger not speaking

their president *only signing papers*
but who would they choose instead
no one we need no one to do nothing
Ilse calls me American daughter the word for woman
who put him into office

is your stomach empty no it is not
empty all day groaning and ashamed
it is not the same: in America, a girl hides her stomach
emptied when she's had too much not
too little

but I am sleeping *no, you are in bed*
there is no man that you play with there
yes there is a man
he is the word for the edge of the ice *jäääär* so far
he needs the most running vowels of any tongue

not *in the sauna* but *near* not *at* but *outside of*
 Rein has offered to beat my back with a branch of eucalyptus
 he says *I am bad man* he says *we'll make a picture*
for that man there not answers — that will make a talkings happen
you don't know a man

what did you know of us before there is the chilled meat in limp petals
 chives snipped with scissors how to both take it, and leave it intact
 there is no right way to say
I knew you: foreign mine I wanted
 to count you among my things

in old time, we went to stores no *we went to the store* no
we stored it away: we went to see what we could use now there is so much
 to put in the cart to bring to the mouth to rub on the skin
 and is there some word for this search
scared, you know want but not what

the word for perfect accent but no real speech hair like theirs but not
 my glossed mouth saying *I was like* this and *like* that
 while they quietly note: like is a word used for introducing speech
 for preference for making two things the same that are not
 a word they use for wanting and speaking and not knowing

Rein calls through the halls that I have washed the dishes
she learned it in college he laughs
 the rhubarb *lays on top* not *in the center* not *at the edge of*
 the old black pan just as good *Let me* Maris says and takes the knife
This cake you don't know

ENTRY

What if memory were powerless to signify incident as iteration. *Nicked subway token is to desire as peeling birch is to control*. Or something. Remaining seated without rearranging anything in the room.

Tea leaves, no pattern. What brought you here as metaphor for what did not. Let us form in a frozen field some pathway to toss our lives upon like fists of salt. Let us take our cue from animals marking the unknown. Your defenses, your powerlessness: collated history, outside party, absolute sickness.

I sing songs in languages I do not speak. I am relentless eyetooth with song lost in middle. Let us form a chronic, low-grade anxiety. Once I had a fever or a sexual thought. It made me drive doughnuts in the BB&T parking lot. Our beautiful death, at any time. Who what where why when.

BLACK BOX

My brother is good with machines. He multiplies in his head. I watch him bite his nails down for speed. It doesn't bother me: spinning motors in our attic, hot woodgrain, no doorframe. I get him for dinner.

Let me explain: I am an artist and my subject is blue face, three screens, great nest of wires, skeleton of keyboard.

An artist must sneak. Stored beneath his bed: silver ring of miscut keys (we'd sort through the box of discards at the hardware store comparing the teeth), Velcro wallet with worn single, cologne insert, clip-on earring in the shape of a leaf (found in Kohl's parking lot and soaked for weeks in Dixie cup of rubbing alcohol next to kitchen sink). Tiny sets of folding headphones.

We feed a blue fish in a blue tank. Our meal is meat. What we did at school that day. He is too smart to stock shelves, so they are firing him. He has a system where he says nothing and his girlfriend listens, because. Sometimes the phone rings in the middle of the night.

RETRACTION

1

I had so many choices
the pigeons in the parking deck startled and flapping
the bend bending
what was earnestly said with hands on shoulders

I recall the raw the shimmering then
a bus with curtains
rails between boulders
recording with the slim not-mine machine
thinking *hands steady* then once
just once near the end hands shaking
oh there would be this something
left over

and I falling in on myself
smiling hard at smiling
and in the background past the din
and through the dirty window there would be
these birds these blossoms
you'd never know the names of

make me some animal I am
turn me into my turning
the armature of my sleep
like I said I can't stop and there again like yesterday
the red foil roadside crucifix and cardboard sign reads
remember me

I want to be the steering column through the sternum
the windshield no
thousands of wet evenings
a rock you toss against
the muscle's inexplicable contraction or
a deer, tense at the side of the road
measuring seconds between cars

at no particular time each evening
a freight train passes through my backyard
where I have a lot of sky
someone's always saying

oh I say buses and trains and take me wherever
is the new currency you see
he worked for money for money so
all he could not say to me

3

the plan all fall was to sleep
with the half-wolf and heirloom afghan in the apple shed
and suddenly snow would not stop snowing

and naming all the dismal hollows
all the distant hollers
we built the house around the bed frame
which was the very mountain
where roadside assistance could be ours if needed

and what is it today that is finally silenced
what if dialing was anything at all

tore the letter out from the notebook
but then there was the tear

tonight I'm documenting
miles and dollars in expanding columns
my perfect listening disease
I stock my mind for winter with what you learn
I already know

4

I made one summer a man
make a man-made lake
and wetting the bottoms of all my stamps
I covered him
like the grainy image of JFK in the moving car
with my body
of seeds
my postage
the promise of an orchard

and the house paint maybe would need
some stripping or the controls would go out oh
it would be thrilling or
the softer asphalt would take
the imprint of desire
while that still could function

TO BEGIN WITH

a pigeon sleeps inside the packed and filthy snow on the top step of the stoop
Dixie cups filling with rain fretwork fence with plastic colt *here, the child creates
life, not property* I write myself the stable world:
controlled fire under the train trestle a man staying warm
the adult does not find unusual: war

what I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time
note: *if you say a certain word to a black person, they are allowed to kill you*
a tricycle rusting in a hedge *Nature has at all times created soldiers, Vespas and postmen*
a grand conspiracy to enculturate children
all as it should be

the sitter sleeps on a sofa of faux velvet fleur-de-lis beauty and anger on the telenovela
a man tries the kitchen window *probably, he can't afford a weapon*
his is a fantasy of imitation night after night the stubborn window
painted shut he retreats through older bootprints
does not disrupt the snow

I will forget everything:
the neighbor with an armful of puppies soapwater lapping at the legs
of the piano my brother gripping the wheel of a new car saying
the make that he is fine not mentioning the war
I will forget to say that we were children who laughed

the man sleeps on the stoop of the bodega next to the missing white girl
smiling relentlessly from twenty cartons *Things which are repeated are pleasing*
what to name a daughter last seen never I know what the neighborhood is thinking:
men want white women cars as big as bedrooms *her mother let her
make her money* all contraries confounded

In the decorative display of what goes without saying
how does the child invent, if ever sliced olives make convincing eyes
I've never done anything but wait outside the closed door *being the creator of an absolute*
broken pane of glass the wounding quality of angles
a streak of white more scared than you

APOLOGY

today a leaf shape repeated
many times and two cars
did a tango in the newly seeded yard

the water tower painted white
each spring we drained then waited
as a township while it filled

it filled so slowly we worried
about the dancehall our consciences
the clerk's job the designed

then abandoned community garden
(some catastrophe awaits us)
the monkey with its memory

of white room wire mother
significant says she where you go
in a snowstorm an umbrella

left in a stadium repack rewind
don't fly with a corkscrew
don't mind the man peddling

his icicles, dear his trashcan aflame
a beekeeper before hives
his slow movements his no eyes

ENTRY

5:16pm. Fanblade and body with synthetic leaves shimmering plasticly. *Why* as weather through the house with keys in lobby in painful silver. It is something just to lay here with the sound of blood. Rotten beam with memory of hammer. Thing by disassembled thing.

A key to the stomach, dully, the latch as limb. Because I could, all summer I read about *object constancy*: a cognitive phenomenon wherein the subject, losing sight of its object, experiences loss. I want to have an adventure. A wheel spoke working in a larger machine, seed drifting from wing, forgetting to feel not, seeing also: Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. Spilled ice in grass.

FAIRGROUND

Their yard's got a hole for poor kids to play in.

Box of dead bulbs with singing filaments.

He steadies the trembling spoon, is a good friend.

Not good as in she knows him well, just good.

She tells herself the story of the spelling bee win.

Circumference. He needs rituals. Wallet into river.

When the room fills with red, white, and blue

he comes to, kicking. Her bedsheet is rising horses

on golden poles, made taut each morning without exception.

He asks her what she's thinking, she says

a beach with a mile in it where a big wheel burns the sky.

Now you. Boot against the wall with double-knot.

MAP MADE OF WAITING

Like a screen actress, touch each object before you go.

Add bleach to the water to make the denim fade.

In every town you live, note: statuette with spigot mouth and coursing liquid.

Mostly be made of water weight.

Know him as empty glass, not sitting. Hilled pennies in the palm.

Work hard, collect all fifty states. Spend several months marketing the new dollar.

Buy a tin of tea.

Turn right. Look like you know where you're going.

Follow the tracks to the edge of the lot, then stop. Check the weather. On the sevens.

Know him by his tremble. Make eye contact.

For summer work, beat jute and woven leather into shape.

Note: a real boy, actual homes, corn kernels and coins in the couch cushions.

Know kindness as a license plate keychain with your name spelled wrong.

Absence will need filling. Fill it someday.

All winter, he will not accept gifts, then spring. Pretend to sleep but listen for listening.

Look like you know what a woods is. Note: animal body as cultural heirloom.

Disappear your currency, no longer worth its worth.

Trade candy cigarette for hand-sewn book.

Meet at the plaza at noon with zero dollars. Your work will be wild consumption.

You are getting close to being close now, just wait.

Officer, he had green eyes, you were sleeping, one time he brought you a milk glass vase.

Fashion, self-consciously, the dough into a knot. Such a maker.

Suppose on a midnight hike your money is a moon.

Suppose it is some condition. Stop.

Suppose some compulsion and you are its iteration. Souther, farther.

Harder, harder. If it is years, so what.

REGARDS

You could detect what you chose to.
Expensive shampoo and days-old water in an heirloom glass.
Soft body of rain, coming or going.

Your restricted field. A paper globe.

Accent wall with cast shadow from cut lamp shade, skin cells and pollen
lining the shelves.

Having no sound other than a kettle, cooling
was possible. *tick tick*

Food quietly spoiled.
Bulbs sputtered and grew dark.
I was no one, so nothing moved.

A fine splinter of glass underfoot was not felt for the moment it took
to break the tough skin and draw the blood onto the cotton
where, in its boldness, it roused a small sound

from what I later knew to be my mouth.

IN A STAIRWELL CALLING UP

you begin with boxes and thick black ink

lamp base from milk crate prong to outlet

male to female read in book

a surge coursing through the body's systems:

soft fist small dance

your work is:

floorplan with promise

adjustable air with bent light

or

Nursery / Guest / Sun

what would your name be if you were a room

Outlet Smoke and Feeling Folded

Plastic Stars Pressed to Ceiling

Feathers Balanced on Rafters

Something About Good Luck

you search the basin, warm and foggy, for the knife

if you were a water creature, what would you see

plastic guns float in the deep end

lap after lap the sky through the surface is

a television screen any channel

a girl dives into an empty pool

to illustrate addiction but you see

audition day: a dozen girls in red suits lined up against a wall

calves flexing, no script

name dive name

you make a painting it wants to look

like water, shimmering

if you were a room sent up in flames, what would you save of yourself

your favorite sound is window glass

a cold rush of air

you are immobilized by finger on vertebrae

would your gutters stream or be clogged with leaves

you shake a matchbox and guess

what color the heads are

you are always wrong

you turn your files into a fire and store everything inside it:

tongue family ways of seeing

pull from under your bed a box

you watch the beams, especially their shadows

if you were a skylight, how would you stay clean

you describe the room in abstract terms

a face before screens a somewhere saturated color

would the floorplan no

would the planes of wood be

the promise of a larger structure

note: how dull silver slips into padlock

brass unfolding from internal chambers

threshold threshing

how a duffel scurries dust

how a stiff sponge darkens under a faucet

with key poised being nowhere

no one non

how each clock pinpoints a different hour

branch shapes shift over carpet

a bird stunned by windowglass regathers itself

you empty doorways, fill spaces

a purse of buttons pilled fabric of the chair back

windows shining darkly, dusk

if you were an unanswered telephone, what would the machine say

your disembodied voice

self-portrait, unfinished:

with Burnt Sausage and Mint Honey

with Marble Foyer of Silent Building

with Boxstring Tossed to Fire

with Breath Held Passing the Cemetery, Radio Waves Going Out and In

you with frozen things and junk mail

if over the airvent, the crystal were casting more ordinary light

if moments suspended were polished spoons

umbrella droplets, overcounted

you fill feeder after feeder and the cardinal claims them

ENTRY

I read about God today. The male orgasm as narrative structure. A male writer writing narratives about God distinguishes between sorrow and despair. Is grateful for His mercy. This looks like a preference for solitude and/or impenetrable social performance. Walk this out.

Watching a shadow grow shorter, then longer, passing a streetlight. Sweat in winter. Blacklight and what it does to your teeth. So what. Housefire, where the bed had been. Negative space not speaking. Bags and boxes were left. This produced a chronic collecting. A lisp, normal it's not, blood dumplings with dill and anger toward the Russians. Knowing to go in a snowstorm somewhere you could spend days.

A Vermont lake and being poor. Back when I wanted what I could name. Bus ride at night with proximity to strangers. The cold plastic of mother's purse. What we're after is structure. The lake or its legend, distinguished when mapped. In summer, swimming to where it grows very dark and cold. Kick.

YOU ADOPT THE RITUAL OR YOU DON'T

I wanted to bring something back for you.
Young mountain / old horse. Other problems.

If I tried, I could see us going over it all, calmly on the couch.

You'd say you could hear it: single moth wing, weight of dust.

A room of fox pelts. Feeling romantic.

If nosebleed, then: pink on porcelain / rockface past framework / bright chalk.

Helpful you: a woman thrown to pavement outside the liquor store,
wanting him caught and a drink.

Confusing *menace* with *medicine*.

I used to live with strangers. Seeds from the belly of the bird lined the sill.

You identify frail structures, cultural atrocities.

I tell myself irregular shapes of doorways, competing shadows, even now
what I want: to bend the light, to be its maker.

So many theories slip from my naming.

From the gallery floor, I lift: soft leather / loose clasp. Made to be worn.

Water boils for you. Are you listening.

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