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12 poems to accompany the exhibition 'Heavy trees, arms and legs'

2020–2021

A/I

A
part
of me will
remain in your
body, forever, I say
as I press my fingers deep
into the soft tissue of your arms
luckily we share the same microbiome
everyone's getting along just fine
honey, you say from a distance
distant planet I have eaten
and your body is like
a universe
said
I

I
shine
as bright
as a diamond
only when I circled
all around the Earth's orbit
I was like a tiny bit of space junk
without any consequential magnetism
still, I radioed back home to you
knowing it will take light years
but we have an eternity
you replied, by email
symbolically
signing
O

Burrow

I watch nervously as you are calculating the expected lifetime of my paintings
(checking and re-checking, furrowed brow)

Finally:

“500 years”, you whisper quietly, almost to yourself
as if I wasn’t even in the studio. I hold up my hands
suddenly relieved that I have enough fingers for you to count on

“My god!” I exclaim, seeing them clearly for the first time
each with a tiny remnant of a fingernail at the end, barely visible

“Yes. Half a millennium of digits”, you say solemnly to me, looking deep into my eyes

“How will we make our art in the future?” I ask you the big question
rhetorically, demanding, rapidly flipping through the pages of a book
my eyelashes brush the inside of your head, fingers gripped around a blood red heart

“We will talk.” You say defiantly, your voice echoes

“We will tell our stories both forwards and backwards, playing with form
and the members of our audience will each be underlined
like hypertext. They will give us diverse, meandering interjections that take us
in new directions. We will tunnel deep holes through the earth and out into the cosmos”

“Like earthworms?” I ask tentatively, searching in my notes for a metaphor

“Remind me how they reproduce?” You ask, folding all your arms in front of your chest
Your body language indicates resistance

I write this down just in case it’s useful for my report

I imagine myself as an unarticulated body
pressed up against another exactly the same

“I’m so in love with you”, I tell myself

Progress

I can see that every breath you take requires your entire body's effort
so precariously porous, and precipitous, so amphibious.

I'm watching you, like a hawk, like I have a camera.

The air is rushing through our ears as if the ocean was upon us and
together we laugh helplessly in our embrace and you say:

through moist tears, as you scan your surface,

"Do you love me in this lungless form?"

and I say reassuringly, "Yes. After all, I'm not specific."

The trouble with metamorphosis is that we don't recognise our children.

I consider myself to be relatively compatible with technology

and my language of choice has evolved into a series of positive and negative moments
this of course suggests some vestigial notion of bipedality from which I have journeyed.

I'm (like) down on my knees thanking mother earth softly for this gift of locomotion

disrupting my contemplation, a crowd appears, running in my direction.

"You don't belong to me!", I shout indignantly

I log out murmuring, "thank God for computers."

The trouble with metamorphosis is that we must make peace with the losses and gains.

I know that in one year's time I will spontaneously shed another layer of skin

and I need to be prepared to shake it off and walk away, physically.

The certainty of my biological processes makes me look upwards

for familiar stars, planets visible to the naked eye, and impending black holes

so encouraging are the signs of a cosmic battle involving muscled forearms

and complicated heroines doing their best to upend the order of things.

Despite everything, I'm sympathetic to all the satellites in each other's faces right now.

I say this out loud just to start up a dialogue.

Wisdom

Distracted, I concentrated on painting my face
I now understood the ways in which all our lives unfold

I watched everybody enter the sea completely
then calmly return to the beach licking their hands like cats

She / slyly / sips / salt / satisfied

Learning

Sometimes I make things for my own amusement
when this happens, I'm checking my notes all the time
I can spot abbreviations and acronyms
from a mile away, I'd say it's pretty instinctive
actually, some things are difficult to learn

We each have suggestions: we say
"an actor is a slippery fish."
this is a theme
and we discuss this furtively in a group, holding hands
there are many of us, and the volume goes up

(This is where any line of enquiry starts to feel porous)

When I'm asking you to soothe my feelings, about this
and my arms and legs are falling off
all over the place as if you are actually after my tail
this is when I can start to piece together
how you feel about me truly, and if you still care
about visiting art galleries, and museums and libraries
places like this that are just really really crowded
with stories about people like us that need to talk

And when the storm really hits like it says on my phone
Storm
I'm sure that this time there will be all kinds of animals
hurtling down from the clouds, like capricious raindrops
that could literally crush our skulls (I'm going to lie down now)
they are running and flying all over the place
and slithering which is like a horror movie (That takes me back)
I turn to you, worried, and say, "What have we started?"

(We begin talking about a soft topic: weather)

The sun feels really good on my face.
The wind winds me up, but I'm sensing freedom.
The rain washes away my fears.
The snow and her secrets... I sigh.
Storms are for animals, animals, and animals.

Leap

I'm familiar with the edges of my limits
and that I could make it right across the river
with one great leap, but after consideration I thought it wise
to jump straight into the middle of its length
it was the same distance after all

Luckily there was a canoe just within arm's reach
and I pulled it toward me and clambered in
I made my way along by paddling, left, right, left, right
it was not one of those rivers that go out to the sea
fortunately, so I soon found myself on solid ground

I was aware that it was the perfect habitat for wild bears
and being wary of having the back of my head torn off
I walked along slowly one foot in front of the other with my hands up
saying over and over in a calm voice "I surrender, I surrender"
and focussed my eyes steadily ahead

Pretty soon I could see the horizon, quite clearly
it represented the future
when I reached the cliff edge
I could get my head lower than my body –
that's when I felt all the blood rushing back in

Sliding along safely on my back with my legs straight as an arrow
I was a surfboard on a huge wave
I liked the sensation of linear growing momentum
and started laughing helplessly like one of those situations
where you are completely out of control

Soon I was circling around and around and around
coming to a full stop as I reached my maximum capacity
I stood up and brushed off the grass and stones
No damage! I thought breezily and walked up to the first house I saw
"could I please borrow your telephone or internet?" I asked

Fortunately it was a house full of birds not wolverines
passionately off-grid, they offered to fly me to the nearest airport
So that's how you came to see me up overhead
my soft underbelly in shadow like an aeroplane above you
gripped in the claws of opportunistic gulls

You always talk about how much you appreciate scavengers
and anybody that cleans stuff up generally in fact
But now I've been dropped at your feet and I'm on my feet myself
and we are eye to eye and you are saying, horrified
"Oh my god what happened to your face!"

The wilderness

I know that you took me for an animal
but actually I was just feeling really enthusiastic
about the full moon being in my sight
that's why I went into the wilderness
and I could see everything really clearly

[floating by....]

I saw the edges of the mountain suddenly
crumble in, as if it had a history
of being volcanic, like there was once a lot of ash
and lava that came out, leaving behind a green grassy bowl
(I tell you this story with my voice sounding disembodied)

[floating by....]

And then - this is amazing
I pressed my thumb into the crater like it was a button
and it fitted perfectly like we were meant to be
together and I realised that the moon was
actually my spirit guide, gesturing in a circuitous way

[floating by....]

And now you are fired up and you are calling out
to me "life doesn't have a script!" and
"pilgrims are a recent phenomenon in the history of the world!"
and "do you not listen to audio books?!"
as if my experience was totally meaningless

[floating by....]

And now I'm wondering if I had just left the light on
and I'm smelling my clothes in case there are traces of night air
like I'm looking for physical evidence because
it's not as if I kept a diary or anything, it's just my words
for word, for word, for word

Quietly

I woke up this morning and
got out of bed and somehow landed feet first
at the foot of a Californian redwood
it towered over me and I'm no sapling!
Last time I took my own photo
I was something enormous, and amorphous
I'm a shape-shifting wild cat bird in a bird
and I'm also amphibious
I say, sliding out to sea

I woke up without you but
I knew you were just focussing on your breathing
truthfully my mind wanders on the inhalation
but the exhalation's got my attention
When the hurricane took the roof off
I really wished that we had a bathtub
I've kissed goodbye to all the books and electronics
and watching the oranges spiral up through the air...
that just blew my mind

I tiptoed so as not to disturb you
and made a point of not talking in my sleep obviously
night and day are two sides of the same coin
In jest I emptied out my pockets
you laughed your head off when I did that
I thanked my lucky stars I was familiar with sharks
because they eat carrion, and someone has to
let's celebrate the carbon cycle!
we shout in unison as we clasp our hands together again

I try not to disrupt the fragile rivulets on your new skin
good geography requires space and time I said
seriously. You were reassured by my understanding
of everything. It's just all the audio books I say modestly
I'm grateful for being such a good listener
we are having a shared lunch while we reminisce
I'm passing you pieces of baguette which I eat myself
I'm tall, so it takes a while before my head reaches the ground
fortunately I'm really patient so I can wait

Leaf

I'm a two-headed leaf
layered over and over with like minds
liking the view up here! laughing louder
the farther I travel, giddy with excitement
I've got radial vision, I'm practically seeing stars
going round in a circle - I'll draw you a picture

I change into a costume with four sides
representing the four elements, this time
hibernation makes me dissociative
I'm ok about it now. We learn to love our idiosyncrasies
Rivers course through my veins
I used to be a mountain, I remember that

There were lots and lots of trees
I could barely see my hands in front of my face
I could feel every footstep of every sole and hoof on my skin
and every fallen branch, fruit and bird, and everything
who do you think I am! I shouted, it drove me crazy
these sensations, so I quit that, haven't looked back

Definitely I chose to travel by air, by aeroplane
there was a boat, but the sheer depth of the water terrified me
and instinctively I understood that I was soluble
Each time I crossed a timezone I knew I was going to lose a limb
but I honestly believed, like a starfish, it would all grow back
it's not the first time I've been mistaken for another animal

I've never felt lonely or ever felt alone
and this is not even because I believed the truth was out there
when everyone was losing it over the lights I kept saying
the Easter Island statues were made by the Rapa Nui people
I see that my legs are still longer than the length of my body
I can run faster than you, I whisper

First person story

I said the strangest thing has happened honey. I said
that a generous gift was coming our way
I said we won't be using the stairs after this honey! I said
we better get the launchpad ironed out flat, get the iron
out of my way space junk, this ship is galactic!
but I'm not shouting, I said

I said if I can't stop sinking, I'll be molten soon honey. I said
like molasses except it's like a million degrees here and I can't even see my bones
I said am I dissolving? Just burning up in this heat except
I'm actually so cold feel my hands, they're like ice
melting in the centre of the Earth honey. Can you still hear me?
but I'm not shouting, I said

I said I'm laying out a blanket, just like for a picnic. I said
pretend that the grass is greener and the breeze tickles our ears
I said I will even lie on my side propped up on my elbow like this
I'm sure there is a forest nearby and we will be hearing birds soon
singing to each other like its dawn, in a chorus, a cacophony
but I'm not shouting, I said

I said okay I will go to sleep soon, but don't mind if I keep talking. I said
I talk in my sleep sometimes. Out like a light
or a fight I'm counting. Once I sleepwalked right through the floor
let's talk, I can be as bright as a parrot
calling, hello, just don't forget I'm dreaming will you honey?
but I'm not shouting, I said

You said, well I think it was you. You said
if you had fingers you would be counting your blessings on
your fingers, that I was here, and your heart, if you had one, would drum out a song
like all songs, except it's a song just for us honey. You said
"It's a shame I don't have ears because I'd be a much better listener."
"I just want things to stay this way forever." I said

Competition

We are sparring with our best gloves, and you say, shouting, goading:
“Don’t you know the Earth is round, you stupid! A circle has only one side!”
“We don’t have time for this kind of geometry”, I reply, sitting on my hands
I’m exasperated, almost to the point of giving up
“Should we not consider the concept”, I say gently
“That a circle might actually have an infinite amount of straight sides?”
“Fuck eternity!” you say indignantly. As if what you say will actually happen
“I said *infinity!*” I said, like I’ve had to explain this a million times already
“Fuck you!”, you say simply, walking away
My legs are so tired, I think to myself

We have been searching up Muay Thai and
try and maintain our balance on our feet whilst making contact
while kicking each other competitively in the face
We each appear to be bloodied and beaten, our eyes swollen shut
but our hands are untouched, and soft and beautiful
We pause to admire their delicacy
Our fingers intertwine and to compensate I lick your palms
I’m confused by this feeling of being your pet
and make a point of smoothing down the hairs on my two legs
both aerodynamic and supersonic, and with wheels

Sleeping song

A carnivorous creature ambled into the forest and stood on its head, a headstand
It allowed its tongue to fall out of its mouth onto the green green green vegetation
A tongue like a gigantic slug lying in wait
for its prey / to slay / or sleeping in the day

“Dreams are most strongly felt at night-time”, said a voice
spoken like a statement, as a whisper, rolling over softly on the breeze
A thousand ears rotated in unison at the unfamiliar sound

Me myself, I spun around and around urgently in my swivel chair, panicking
I knew instinctively that only a song could bring calm
I can't read music, but I can drive really fast when I need to so I was feeling confident:

I stood up
I lifted my arms
I raised my voice

I sang:

Press your eyes onto my skin
now see, now see, you see right in
and in between your hands and feet
a trillion bulbous hearts make beats
a thousand souls on fire
a thousand souls on fire
fold down now
fold down now
my dears