



Mitten

Scraps & Patterns

Bronwen Tate

In memory of Marthe, Marcia, C.D., Christy, and Olaf.

Dusie Kollektiv 9

“Somewhere in the Cloud and Inbetween”
—A Tribute to Marthe Reed

New Orleans Poetry Festival, April 2019



First, do it badly. Second, make a lot of them. Third, sleep two extra hours. Look back and hum. Find a hole and fill it in. Trim a jagged edge. Prune a hedge—keep the blossoms only. Press three pale pink and forget about them. Return to the earliest path. Soak in lavender. Track solstice, come out pruny. Know what shape the moon is in. Give in to a familiar. Voice complaints. Move the elbow a bit. Remember why you wanted this. Be tentative until it accumulates. Cut the worst. Decide that tangle was where voice lived. Sort and braid. Listen later. Punch it down like dough, trapping wild yeast, caught from naked air only when a shape is offered. Muscle water and flour. Hold that shape.

If unneeded help is hindrance, let your children fall
a little.

He said when his loud “no” scared the baby,
our son still ran to him
for comfort.

So we are to them.

The weight of it.

What is too easy about what comforts us, that we should want
difficulty. What is partial in every eye? Allow it, save it claim
totality. Another’s voice bears our own sense back to us. That
we receive it. See how we carry, soft fingerprint on warm wax,
our malleable selves, brittle in colder harsh regard. For a
slower way that knows sleep, I don’t wash my hair, owe no
one prettiness. I pinch my belly fat. But not in front of my
children. For them, I move in the sway of yearning till action
makes it so. So stir the soup.

Start the clock when you show up to thinking. Find water and walk by it. Scramble eggs at a slow, low temperature. Ask your body what it knows. Round a curve and see headlights—turn off high beams. Ask each word what it used to mean. Lack was fault or stain before it was absence of a thing desired. Desire three absent things. Snap a pussy willow twig near the fire pond. Linger in the library for the view. Lilacs. Strong espresso and unscorched milk. To walk along a street of unknown faces. Walk now by faces you recognize. They remain unknown. As an apple tree shares the redwood's wildness.

Remember how a beautiful daughter
searches her face
for a trace of her homely mother
dead now three years.

I process what I read like a bumper crop of peaches:

score
blanch
peel
preserve.

I keep what might feed me in winter.

I process the news like a fish-tank's filtration system,
murky at first and clearing slowly.

Repetition seeps in even while precarity ebbs. Ebbing, the tide completes half its burden. To move forcefully, then, to travel even with the difficult small children, out of the span of habit, to an unfamiliar shore. Shored by discipline, still seeking the sweep of vision. All perceptions in the flush of arrival flawed, partial. Partial, bites from a browning apple. My reflection, then, unwashed hair and tired body, is belated, obscured, unfaithful. Faithful now, I trust to the future self who will revise.

Trying to remember, I tug a thread. Turn a thimble. Tumble
the unknown, what I lived daily but saw no sense in
documenting. Tug until what's tamed by repeated recall gives
way to rawness. In fatigue, fuzzed and flame-lit. In time, a
space summoned.

I have called up the garden,
chickens pecking
bulbous split late-season zucchini, how their feet
contract between steps
like a pianist's hand.
What is repeated is forgotten.
What is circled-back-on is dyed a deeper shade.

Cheeks recall the blown yoke,
albumin's grip, sore whistle at the last, how color
accretes with beeswax, nobbly, soot-stained, layered.

Eggs left soaking overnight, wax melted
at last against a scorching flame, soaking into a paper towel
leaves a little blue.

What color
underneath
still palest yellow.

Nights when I wrote nothing, still, I lived. Faithful to the increments of my accretion, I answered what I saw in a voice harkened like sensing cilia to the being its making called into presence. Nights I fell asleep heavy with children's hands, extending to my body that had enclosed them like it held them still. In sleep, I pardoned the day—bread placed in the oven underproved, statements interrupted on female shame, felt female shame, harsh note, smeared snot on sweater sleeve.

Before driving again through redwoods, we threw away
thawed cake last eaten with a woman
now dead.

Licked dirty bittersweet
from a finger.

Feverish baby all snot on my neck,
the let-down still when he cried

If a woman writes in public, some old dude will still ask if it's the Great American Novel. It's a letter, I say. *Is it a "Dear John" letter?* he asks. Evening, I watch a student dance, leg trembling to hold. Running within constrained space turns gesture at an angle. Effort scored by breath. Walk off a longing. Swell the gesture. Fall with purpose. Look at your hand as it rises, our elementary school librarian told my friend the dancer, as if it belonged to someone else. Now a woman breathes through a body. Eyes unopened, the gaze declined.

Every useful map is a reduction: water, elevation, population, borders. Each true vision aspires to connection—who drinks the water? What snow melt flows past? Each day, maintained against incursions: even an empty house gather dust. Each hour, a window frames what birds appear. My daughter leans to kiss the side of my head. Can I speak of her eyes? *What's wrong with sugar?* My friend asks. His mother is dead. Before class, he offers a student a spoon of honey.

Marmalade pith and grin. Summer summons stun or win the
kith and kin, bitter underflower's trowel badgered seldom,
winter eager. Run like eyes open up white like sleep past the
edge. Read into a hedge, your bets are showing. A hot coal
sparks damp mired earth. Marigold, braid, and deer, go gather
others—call them with murmurs.

Without sleep to fray the margin, what is gathering?

Day is small as the square
mile I stay in,

expansive,
a magnified cell.

Not writing, I still compose in my head.

Words, not colors. Words and their colors.

Not sounds. Their sounds.

It lacks a hand-sized object, I told him. And so, the pile of socks in the corner, snow's grating slide and thunderous collapse from the peaked roof, soreness in the lower back when I balance my daughter on my right hip, flaxseed pillow holding heat from the microwave, dark spots from the time I left it too long, removed it smelling like burnt popcorn. Take out 'like' and locate earlier. Thus Potash hill, sleep a sticky syrup in my throat, no green leaves, no new green leaves.

I will listen to no reassurances.

When the car struck, the dog and the baby
were still sitting on the blanket beside her.

I dream her husband visits the cooling body,
her breasts still full of milk
the baby cries for.

What is to be given is never ours alone. Outside again, pass
under a tree, look up for the owl I hear mornings. You made
an altar, I told the student when I saw her installation. Take a
penny, leave an acorn, take a feather, leave a slip of paper,
draw an acorn, write softer than a feather. Are you still here?
This poem won't hurt you. Close your eyes and let it blow soft
against your face. Its breath is peppermint tea. It speaks of
rain on the landscape of your childhood.

When asked about the snakes that live in the hearth
by the pond where we returned each night rain refrained

to eat lukewarm spaghetti and watch the children

pour endless cups of water
into the sand,

my daughter said,

it was being a naked face.

Think of a mitten: useful in its season, warm, shaped by its
purpose. Tear out what's gone wrong, the remnant kinked by
its former shape. Soak, lie flat, return. If it's hard, do it every
day. Think of a bowl left outside—it can't help but collect the
rain when it comes. Hold still. Fill and overflow.

Rain at last

Estranged by snow

It's heavy, dark, fast

Colophon

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