

THE INSOMNIAC'S WEATHER REPORT

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ISOBAR
PRESS

First published in 2011 by Three Candles Press.

New edition published in 2014 by

Isobar Press
Sakura 2-21-23-202
Setagaya-ku
Tokyo 156-0053
Japan

<http://isobarpublishing.com>

ISBN 978-4-907359-07-2

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the following publications in which many of these poems, sometimes in slightly different form, first appeared: *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Best New Poets 2006*, *Burnside Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Diner, 5 A.M.*, *Harpur Palate*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Isotope*, *Literary Mama*, *Rattle*, *Reimagining Place*, *Verse Daily*, and *Yomimono*.

‘The Beach at Big Salt,’ ‘How to Recognize Your Own Shadow,’ ‘Lagrange’s Problem,’ and ‘Navigating by the Light of a Minor Planet’ all appeared in the chapbook, *A Pilgrim’s Guide to Chaos in the Heartland*, published by Concrete Wolf in 2006.

Cover image: *Fire at Full Moon*, 1933, by Paul Klee © Museum Folkwang, Essen.

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Uses of Water

WHY THE RIVER FLOWS AWAY FROM ITS SOURCE

All poems should be about water. Or bones.
And bones. Muscles like slingshots cradling knees.
Each step, wading through skin, sloshing.
A flood you cannot be lifted above.
Turning toward a longing for home.
A gold roof for the emperor. A blue roof for god.

Have you grown crooked as a plum tree,
or crooked as a black pine?
You will not know until you get there.
Your father, showing you bamboo,
its straightness, said, ‘Each segment
has a beginning, an ending.’ He was wrong.

Your mother, when your first piece
off the wheel listed like a weft-riven
spider’s web, said, ‘Never mind.
What is nearest perfection
is most easily broken.’ You’ve never
made anything worth breaking.

See, there is no water in this poem.
There never was.

WHAT YOU SEE IF YOU USE WATER AS A MIRROR

In Shinto, the eight elements
of beauty include impermanence
and perishability. Choose one
as your watermark. No,
that is the wrong one.

Begin by learning the 10,000 ways
to spell water. Puddle, swamp,
ice field: waters that don't
move. Estuary, geyser,
glacier: waters that do.

At lunch today, someone said
you were beautiful. The reader
is beautiful, he said. You weren't
there, but somewhere thinking
lagoon, waterfall, tide pool.

Knowing understatement is an element
of beauty, you thought drizzle,
fog, dew. All there is
to know about beauty can be learned
from water, so when you ask for

the other five elements, you are told
mystery, incompleteness, and – Wait:
to learn the final three is to dishonor
the previous two. You must choose.
But here's a clue: cove, tributary, sleet.

WHAT YOU WAGER IF YOU USE WATER AS A DOOR

Sometimes the bodies are never recovered.
Once only an arm remained in the barrel.
Still, over half those who hazard Horseshoe Falls
bob to the surface below, gasping and flailing.
Mostly they survive their baptism by thrust.

To become the bullet in Russian roulette,
survivors say when asked why, though
some holler Fame, Fortune, or Political Protest.
As if a reason were needed. 2,632
cubic meters of water per second

obeying gravity speaks a primal language.
Listen closely. A river never lies,
even when falling. Nor tells the whole truth.
No matter how clear, water is still a door
not a window. Don't be fooled by your reflection

or its absence. Your body was a door prize, once.
If you lie down in trenches dredged by glaciers,
remember Ice Age. Forget newlyweds
who watch you crest and disappear,
clasping the bodies of their beloveds

as if that were the secret antidote to gravity.
St Niagara whispers, 'All doors are wounds.'
Which they are. A waterfall is a way to sieve body
from soul, temporarily, to try endlessness on.
A hinge on a hingeless door.

WHAT YOU MEASURE IF YOU USE WATER AS A CLOCK

The problem with the sundial
is in telling time at night.
How to know the hour
without consulting the sky –
the Egyptians were left
with only earth and water.

Earth begat the hourglass –
tangled eternity tipped upright
circular at each end
strangled in the center
the fulcrum of past and future –
because movement draws the eye.

Greek for ‘water thief,’
clepsydra was the ancients’ way
of heeding the passing hours
as water flowing into or leaking out
a vessel, a hole, a break in continuity.
The body is also a vessel.

But water will flow unevenly,
perfectly mimicking hours and years,
and sand can be sieved, finitely –
qualities of time best ignored by you
who, dust to dust, are seventy percent
water in the meantime.

All timepieces model pure motion,
the slide of earth round sun,
gravity's tug on water or sand.
All that convincing movement and yet
you only have need to tell time in the dark
if you believe the darkness ends.

HOW TO DESCRIBE THE DESERT WITHOUT SAYING WATER

Wanted: bauble of milky mouth.
Fat knee of shameless need, kneading.
Wanted: fontanel ticking, a fist
of collateral tightening. Frightening
whorl of faintest resemblance – thin
as glaze, angle, or desire.

What I wouldn't have (forsaken).
Crone whispered, Bridegroom hissed –
*My groggy head in vespers once
northward canted. Cant = can't.*
My fault. Crone's nostrums: always
it was water, variables afloat, science

listing. Crone intoned the Water Deva,
snake in the well. From feminine flotsam
infused a brooding brew. Awoke my desert(ed)
troth to sit unsheathed in a rainstorm.
The one constant was water – no planet
without it breathes. I was no planet.

And now. My moon blooms amphibian.
Glory, my taproot has plummeted.
My matrix is configured. Hosanna.
Madonna figure, de rigueur,
who once beleaguered be.
Full regalia my penetralia *is.*

WHERE YOU DRAW THE LINE IF YOU USE
WATER AS A WATERSHED

Coral blooms, a brain escaped to the seabed.
Soldierfish and damselfish – their clean colors inhuman,
not found in our dingy bones, our muddy blood.
In the iris, maybe. Of a stranger, perhaps.

Everything resembles the human body, or
doesn't. Even then I am reminded it doesn't.
These eyes I use to see with are locked
in their sockets, backdropped by gray matter.

This body I pack around, an oxygen tank's
antidote, will it ever be satisfied by the net
of comparison, dendrites filigreed
across synapses, sieving self from not-self.

But now my body begins its inborn origami,
folding an eyelid over the bright iris of the stranger
who floats in my womb while I float in the sea.
Now my body rejoices, finding a hinge

between self and not. A being to be, finally, adored.

WHAT YOU LOSE IF YOU USE WATER AS A PRESERVATIVE

The first lullaby in *The Singing Mother's Handbook* is 'Can the Stars Be Edible?' Open your hymnal and weep. Croon, lark, cantillate. Milk seeps, leaks, smudges edges you thought skin had bound – if loss is potable, why not stars? There are soups of bird's nests, of rock lichens.

People sup on bee larvae, on sea urchin eggs – the same people who wipe the dribble of clay off a pregnant woman's lips and lead her away from the river's loamy banks. 'But I want,' she protests, 'to give my baby...' She falters. 'Spit,' she is told and handed the songbook open to 'How to Hold an Architecture of Rain.'

She flips the pages randomly past 'The Map of Sacred Things Just Out of Reach' and 'Ten Ways All Lullabies are Forfeitures are Good Practice.' She sighs.

'But there are no words to these songs. What use is this handbook?' No use. No words.

Not for your resistance nor the tender way it will be crushed.

WHAT YOU DAMPEN IF YOU USE
WATER AS A BOOMERANG

Between mother and son
the body as fact comes
sooner than between
mother and daughter.

I had not counted on this:
the polygon of bearing
sons, I did not know you
would hold it against me,

the body, for its lack
of edges, its fluidity.
I did not know you
could not move beyond a thing

without calling it [m]other. The sea
is not a boomerang, returning
unchanged – who boldly inked this
edge of continent on map? As if

blue roofs of ocean
shift and slap in maneuvers –
familiar and chaotic – the body
and its households recognize.