

A
BRIEF AND
ENDLESS
SEA

poems by

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NOW IS THE TIME TO LIGHT IT

for Patrick Lane, z'l

*Cleansed in the dark where the dead have come for blessing.
The spirit leaves us slowly, forever.
Everywhere the wind covers your passing.*

*The old lantern by the pond has always been there.
The air breathes like a tree before the dawn.
Cleansed in the dark, the dead have come for blessing,*

*fly like moths with only night to guide them
and who I am falls behind. The dead gather round you.
Everywhere the wind covers your passing.*

*Touch their lips with your wings so they may sing,
Be with them what the heart is when it sleeps,
Cleanse the dark and let the dead have blessing.*

*White moon. The tide. All things receding.
How hard it is to save everything.
Everywhere the wind covers your passing.*

*Stop losing things I cry, but they keep dropping.
I imagine you in the mountains you call home,
cleansed in the dark where the dead have come for blessing.
Everywhere the wind covers your passing.*

all lines taken from poems by Patrick Lane

GIRLS' BASEMENT LOCKER ROOM

Down there, in front of the mirrors, we traded
sweaters and boyfriends, redid

each other's ponytails, prepared ourselves
for the upstairs parade. Showers

connected the lockers to the gym where I learned
the names of football plays—the dive, the sweep—

so I could cheer with precision.
In the cafeteria, a boy I had loved

for four years, ran his finger
along my leg, from white wool socks to the edge

of my pleated skirt, regulation knee length,
not the cheerleading skirts, much shorter.

I perfected the cartwheel and the high kick,
contrived to fail my math exam.

Never impressed by my marks, my mother worried
I was too independent, too smart for my own good.

Meaning marriage, of course. Warning
or prophecy?

But what if I had taken up calculus
and the saxophone, moved to Brooklyn,

what kind of difference would it have made?

A woman sitting alone on a fire escape,
playing jazz to the hot summer night.

FIRST TIME

Jericho Beach, 1960

This moment was to change me
from girl to woman. As splendid
as sunrise. As beautiful

as Beethoven. Ode to Joy.
What it was: sand under my thighs,
girdle twisted around one ankle.

You should wash yourself out
when you get home, he said,
you know, a douche.

WILD A LITTLE WHILE

The Hammersmith bus lurched. I was standing,
then falling, against a boy, well, a man,
young like me, not yet twenty-five.

I smiled back at him.

I'm getting off here, he said.

I will too, I said,

because it was summer and London,
and I had nowhere to go.

We went to a park, sat on swings,
sun and sky and the rough fabric
of his shirt against my cheek, the sound
of city birds, and soon the stairs to his flat.
A bedsit, a narrow bed,
a small fridge. A window
overlooking the Thames.

I didn't know his name
didn't know if he was a singer,
an engineer, a day labourer or a clerk—
I was nowhere and everywhere,
a girl with a ticket home
though he begged me to stay.

And the sun rose and fell,
somewhere else. It was day,
it was night. We ate on the bed,
or did we eat anything at all?
I can't remember, just know
we watched stars from the porthole,
that attic ship that sailed
in a brief and endless sea.

CELLO

*When he asked if I still loved him, I didn't answer;
but of course, I loved him.
He'd become, by then, like the rhyme scheme between lost
and most.*

Carl Phillips, "In a Field, at Sunset"

There was a boy, in Germany, one summer,
he spoke halting English, and I had no German
but we were young enough not to care.
It was August, and along the Spree River,
there was a cello playing. He asked me to dance
and because it was summer, in Germany,
and we were young, I did, and after many days
and nights, we were still humming the tunes from that cello.
I saw him again, just yesterday, so many years later.
When he asked if I still loved him, I didn't answer;

Could I fold the years back? Seal them against time,
which disturbs all the moments we thought we had.
Did we kiss? Of course. Did we talk, then, as now?
There were times when the silence between us
was richer than words, heavier and deeper, as if I knew him
from some other life, but as I said, we were young
and I am less wise now with all my years. Perhaps
the trees leaning into the river, the tall grasses
remember better, those hours after the cello.
But of course, I loved him.

He read me Rilke, I read him Yeats.
Because we had no language, we listened more carefully,
the words rising and falling, like music.
Was it years, or hours ago? The sun on our backs,
the sharp grasses, dragonflies drifting above,
the languid scent of our bodies, deliquescent sun,
such words to stretch along his skin,
his lustrous skin, his eyes solemn, so liquid
he filled me up. As I said, I am less wise now.
He'd become, by then, like the rhyme scheme between lost

and ghost, and I try with words
to pull that summer onto the page,
the long days by the river,
his hands, his spine, the curve of his neck,
the way he woke my skin. And later, at night,
an owl, that low gurgle in the trees above.
And beyond that, the ineffable something
that halts my steps now, along a dark city street
so many years later, a boy I loved the briefest
and most.

NOTRE DAME

Because of a boy with sad green eyes
I miss the gargoyles of Notre Dame,
though I remember his hair, the way it lies
against his collar. The rest, a dream.

I miss the gargoyles of Notre Dame,
but I remember his scarf, the winter breeze
against his collar. Seems like a dream,
my head on his shoulder. I miss the friezes

though I remember the scarf, the way the breeze
lifts his hair. But I miss the arches, the beams.
My head on his shoulder, I can't see the frieze
or the stained-glass windows, the reds, the greens.

His hair through my fingers, I miss the beams,
the beauty of Notre Dame, and later, by degrees
each stained-glass window at Chartres, at Reims
because of his collar, a scarf, a moment's tease.

All the beauty of Notre Dame lost, and later, by degrees
I can't remember his hair. How memory lies!
The touch of his wool scarf, a moment's tease,
because of a boy with sad green eyes.