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little sun: A Poetry Collection

by

Lillian B. Aff

**Submitted to Scripps College in partial fulfillment of the
degree of Bachelor of Arts**

Professor Warren Liu

Professor Michelle Decker

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Russian River

I lay in the daytime lantern
rocks and branches and bugs
poke into my back
the book is the lampshade
I look for someone to return to
in those pages of her
I look up: no one is around
I swim to the rope swing
I stain my notebook with silt
I get up; the pebbles plop
I see the river
I see the redwood horizon
I try to get back

I saw Mary Oliver walking down the dusty path
I asked her, where do we overlap?
we ate blackberries, juices leaking on our faces
until no one recognized us
the underbrush pricked our fingers
we were dappled in the shade
we looked bruised: we blackberried
she saw me before I knew her name
she saw me in a hospital bed in San Francisco
she saw me learn how to be straight

and Ada Limón, with a transistor radio,

came up from behind,
started playing “Respect” by Aretha Franklin,
maybe the memory was meant to be imagined,
maybe we’ll both keep pretending,
she seemed to say,
she said nothing,
she was an observer of neighbors, and friends
and many close deaths
of the winding roads and of my home
she went to the river where I swam every day
for seventeen summers,
sometimes wading, sometimes gliding
like a water strider, sometimes sinking
under the weight of unnatural men
pummeling us against the car seat
sometimes screwing through the pain
sometimes sitting in the memory and skipping rocks slowly,
surely

my mother sometimes calls me to sit in
silence for two minutes and thirty-eight seconds,
or until I hang up the phone
I never know what to say
to a swelling expectation, the weight
too much to hold in my heart
when I’m far away I imagine
I’m fixing her a plate of potatoes and steak
despite a meal’s momentary essence

so, let’s talk about presence:

presence is rolling the minimal into a ball
so that now we're in fetal position,
seeing the liminal as the middle of the ritual
even when we know it's almost over

I still want to be at the before of everything
I still see my mom sitting on that same beach
with her book a fold-out chair,
handing me a scallop-shaped cracker
with a wiggle of easy cheese,
warning me not to go too far in:
the river has its undercurrents

I imagine what she would say, now, if she could
say it and if I'll ever know what it's like to be
aphasic:
when a stroke of bad luck causes your words
to hover

I wonder when Mary and Ada's voices
became the voice of my mother

The throwaways

I found you in the gravel this morning,
your face covered in dust and blood

I tried to help but you refused me
even as you crawled desperately, clawing
at the rickety old fence with your French tips

I held your hand all the way to the stairs

when I throw away your little nip,
you replace it with another liter

but I remember you
lush with pinot grigio and Marlboro
lights on the deck that never turned off
chattering on the phone with no sweater on
now you are
a soul-sucking cinnamon fireball
in my constant periphery, digging
in the debris for fifty milliliters
when I scream it into the trash
you, a mouth minus sentences
a moth drowned in the draw of amber

but I try anyway, you can find me

in the throwaways with all the *fuck-its*
and *fuck-yous* and *I'm-leavings* and
I'm-throughs

I see you break the vacuum
you tell me it's my fault with no words
it's the legacy you gave to the *Fix-it*

Fix-it will

do the dishes again

Fix-it will

cauterize the wounds

Fix-it will

make dinner again

Fix-it will

be dad's fragments

Fix-it will

fill in your blanks

Fix-it will

pay for life support

Fix-it will

fan the flames

Fix-it will

witness the end

you can't throw me away, I dissociate
when the plastic hanger breaks

(Fix-it remembers what you forget)

over my shoulder, always looking

behind me just in case you find me

I feel the driveway pebbles puncturing my palms
the glass shatters and lacerates my finger
it gets less clear the more it cuts in

(Fix-it is singing you the blues)

the shank twists a little bit, but I can't feel it
I embrace all the sharp edges

I blanket the bottle in cinnamon syrup
can't let it hit the center, cocoon
a self-outside of myself,

(Fix-it was never themselves)

hardened at the throat, you
can't swallow me whole,

I will make you leave me alone

how often you throw it all away and leave
what's ruptured behind

I scorch, galvanized
a blazing butterfly with a jagged hole
in the center
burning your trash pile riverside
glowing orange in the firelight
in all this waste I take flight
unbound by the roaring flask
in my side

I will brand new patterns on my wings

I will become my own pride

Broca's area

is, and, the, but

stroke of bad luck

drive park

frontal cease

start stop

mom pause

Your protector

Saw him draw the ampersand with a stick
while I was shaking sand out of my shoes
whose line was it, anyway?

I picked through my purse for an excuse
to leave beyond the river's edge,
an example that was firm, but kind
after all, we have to protect what isn't ours

realized I had an "appointment",
swam across to the other bank

(I walk through my front door and she's there
accustomed to phantoms, I sidle past
but the past comes at me from behind
tackled by memories of tangling fishing tackle
in my dad's little driftboat
and skipping stones slowly, surely

I decide I need to lie down
but the lies want to spoon
I say nothing to the windows
or the fishing rods
the sewing machine looms
my medals sit in the closet with the printer paper
and a picture of my parents' wedding

my dad smiled wide
my mom wore this lace long-sleeve
with a V neckline
it tapered out to cover her baby bump,
her small frame protecting
the memory of the physical
did she scream?

Zoe was about to be born
9 years before I was born
and it was her they were born
to protect but they couldn't
forget the before times when
she was such a smart toddler

please don't cry anymore
let's make popcorn
and watch *Dirty Dancing*
in my head mom always has a witty quip
no matter how shaken she is
when she leaves,
a part of me will meet her in the tomato garden)

he chased me beyond the river's edge
into the roughened current
to him a lack of skill was no deterrent
thought he could perfect it, freestyle
in my waters if he pretended hard enough

he forgot how to hold himself
above water, and dragged me down
with him heavy as an anchor
he never learned how to swim
I thought I was going to die

skip stones

all alone

like

someone's watching

you spit in

my mouth

stretches

to forget

thursday night

is it

ok

it is

too late

to say no

to skip stones

all alone

The pond

I used to carry around quartz in my pocket,
rubbing it for good luck
feeling the edges when I wanted concreteness
firm crystal faces, no cleavage plains
when it shattered into fractured swirls, conchoidal

Maybe that's why I always see that pond
in the back of my mind,
the one surrounded by gabbro and grapevines
not because he handed me a stone
but because I was violated by it
by being laid down on the gravel, groped
as the unrefined, quartzless igneous
stabbed me in the back

I held that crystal like a hazard sign
but my hands still reached for the smooth edge

spiderbirds

I watch the leaf swim in circles,
like a mobile from spider's dusty web,
a limited flight

suspended

I conflate the sounds of the birds
with a far-off helicopter
it fades off into the distance
I'm left with twinkling chirps

I've suddenly never felt more like
forgetting myself wholly,
so that I won't be trapped in your suspension
of my logic, constraint and movement
wrapped in silver, so
jealous of the birds

completely

restricted

this must be the place

drifting into you
eyes intersected

sing into my mouth
on my right arm

I got plenty of time
to figure it out

if only I could get
a you tattoo instead

muffled heart sounds
flood into my lungs

hand behind my head
the left side of my neck

smelling fate within
the softest contours

coughing up joy
restless legs shudder

I see your face with a view,

sense the space behind it

the distance is so great

you cut your hair yesterday

impermeable

leap from

one

two three and three

two for

you my darling

you my

love

caved when you came in

like the trumpets

metallic bright shrill

yielding

to

yearning and a bird

clawing

circling

overhead

you

sleeping

and

sleeping

j a z z z z z y

notes

jumping into

bird songs

still I wait

for early morning

Zoe always said

son of a bitch,

stop,

handsome,

help,

the only exclamations

so hungry, hypothalamus fried

I tried to make friends again and again
but how do you talk when the words
cycle into themselves
how do you Big Sister when the words
cycle into themselves

She couldn't stop Herself from eating, son of a bitch
the peanut butter out of the jar with Her hands
25 and 4 foot 9, a person I couldn't hold when
I was 9 and Her hands were clammy, son of a bitch
never could tell the saliva from the sweat of Her
learned how to say son of a bitch from Her

I'll never forget the days She smiled back
or when I looked in Her eyes and knew She saw me
but I could never be a movie on repeat
with lines She could anticipate and regurgitate

She loved to watch *The Little Mermaid* transform,
turning yet, turning back again
finding a voice that was stolen from her

Anastasia with her puppy and undeath,
saved from stabbing by a merciful storyboard

and *Hercules* with his happy mortality
tried and triumphed, son of a bitch
labors so fruitful...

She stuck feces covered vhs tapes
in the old tv
and oh, how it stank
the shitstain smell,
acidic with bacteria,
tinged with applesauce
we could never get it out of
the shitstain brown carpet

Her room was seafoam green
linoleum so it was easy to clean
out the blood and piss and vomit and drool and shit
shit without end

and I changed Her diapers

oh yes, I did

always on the night watch
vigilance for the blue light of the screen
waiting for a thud or a seizing,
heartbeat in the brain, pulsating
magnet over Her chest
signals sending

She scribbled and scrawled
figure 8's that looked like infinity
symbols on top of each other
and wrote Her name over and over again

Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe Zoe zoe zoe
zoe zoezoezoezoezoe

covering the coloring book pages

I always wished she'd write my name

Modern Antidote

Started taking my iron pill again
and eating two avocados a day.

Is there anything else to be done here?

I want to kill the spider on my sill.

I burn incense three times a day, but he
gets stronger, more resilient with
each bout of smoke. He panics when I
open the window and disturb his stillness.

Maybe he's meditating, drawing strength
from the stones I placed strategically.

The coiled copper and river rocks were
so lonely before he joined them together
with his fibrous superpower,
a connection I could never weave.

Started taking my iron pill again
but I ignore my headaches with my lungs.
I only study clouds when they're my own.

(all spiders produce silk, but not all form webs)

burnout (avoidance)

tell me what it is

to languish

a void dance

together we're nothing
we sit on a couch
we pass the pipe
you play a video game
where cowboy killers take
what they want and leave
the rest to depixelate

I fill the void avidly
desperate to be august
but why be austere ?
when I could languish here
in the humidity of the hot box
where a sliver of light slips in-
between the smoke

I avoid dancing with myself

spark up to forget
my mom on the phone
filling my voicemail with ummmm
ahhhhhh call me back home
I can't go home, I'm hanging

out with no one so I'm less alone

I'm void of mind

I need to stop pretending

you're nothing and I mind!
empty, mocking, faking kind-
ness, a morbid, pearlescent,
oily face with _____ behind it
there's nothing wrong with being
something, I bet you could be
something more than nothing

I used to want an us more than anything

the void dances with me

...

hanging in their vortex, the stars
call me to join them and I

listen, looking for someone to burn
me out, extinguish me before hubris
wins out first

when it's August I pretend
introspective, but really (really)

I am

I'm starting fires with my stare
alone, conducting currents , sending
signals

I can kindle many flames ,,

but ,,

it's hard to hold a candle
when I'm a little sun

the wax melts selfishly
into my palms, fading love
marks, for who can burn
what already smolders ?

Variation on a Theme by Mary Oliver

*we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished
by the mystery.*

I.

I caught a lot of bugs back then, or,
what I thought were bugs—roly polies,
the only terrestrial crustaceans
adapted to live on land alone

I would hold them in their tiny spirals,
protecting their gills from dehydration,
but how was I to know?

I didn't know what an arthropod was
I didn't know I could kill just because

I held them, then I dropped them
onto a castle made of wooden blocks,
left them to shrivel in the sun, a string of pearls

Five years old with copper blood on my hands
I didn't know that they bleed blue

II.

I had a nightmare, many nights, that giant
roly polies came out of their shells,

exoskeletons like snakes molting,
antennae the length of my arms

They teleported me out of my room,
into their cave, where they dissected
me, piece by piece, taking an ear here,
a finger there, testing if humans have
anterior shells to mark the past,
then they'd put me back in my trundle bed

They came back the next night and did it
all over again, but this time it was
my heart, my liver, my kidneys:
turns out I didn't need those
the next time it was my iris,
to test if I could control light
that time it was my larynx so
I never have to guess what it's like
to be voiceless—that's the best thing about
recurring dreams—subconscious conscience

I'd wake up in my own waste,
tangled together with stains on the sheets,
sure to fall back into my vivisected body,
wildly terrified in posterior hindsight:
out of pain came more pain
I'd done more than I could have known.

Preying

You're such a bold and relaxed tree frog.
All I never wanted was to be a green frog.

I tread lightly, a wave on the leaves,
avoiding a tongue that licks clean. Frogs

are only out for themselves, carnivorous
camouflage, hungry and unseen, my frog

misses between the eyes, but catches me
from behind. Your swelling body flies, but frog,

can you push me down your throat with vision alone?
One-eighty range but you're not too keen, frog.

The ambush was in the waiting game: you
picked the wrong log to land on, frog.

You try to swallow but I cut your snout,
my mandibles spout blood as a lien, frog,

I'm no cricket, I'm a pale praying mantis.
I'll glean your grave in your greed, frog.

Watermelon flavored

Today I feel queasier than ever;
it's like when the sun almost comes to you
and then shies away, beckoned by the white;
you stare up and it's gone, but it imprints
on your eyelids like July 4

My stomach backflipped into the river,
dropping its weight like a sandbank, slipping
precariously close to the sure death
of a 50 foot drop into the green

(I looked down and my snow cone was melting)

Redwood vertigo forced me to sit right
at the ocean's edge - head overflowing
with salty surf, urging me to jump in

As the days slide by, like poppies on the
highway hillside, I'm not alone, just here

Tree of vultures

California condors flying over my car ask me
about the time we watched *Moonrise Kingdom*
on the secret beach

Took my laptop to the shore and leaned on
your spiny shoulder, so seduced
that was where the vultures roost

Pirated the movie so we could watch it for free
free from the pillagers who own the secret beach

I thought you were different from the men
who own the Bohemian Grove around the corner
we owned their land when they weren't around
just like the wake of vultures on the tanoak

I used to feel like a diving loon
but now I'm a scavenger's scrap

when I run into the wilderness
it's you circling overhead

Rushing the ending

I've got to leave something up to the imagination
I keep telling myself, it's about concentration
when I walk around, I don't have many friends
in this town so I look to the gradient fade of the sun
setting into the almost periwinkle dusk
and I see myself again, reflected in
the rigid earthen purple of the lupine and chicory

I've made serious inquiries into sunsets
they tell me it's not what I think
under us or above; we're spinning
and then the sun is pixelated
no, wait, now it's a cowboy hat
sinking but, still riding away

with the flashlight on I can see you
out of the corner of my eye—the park
gifts me a flash of pink and purple
sweet colors flowering across my eyelids
the sun sets even after it sets

the sun fixes it

if you drive around for long enough the sun fixes it;
plants you where you can cross into peace,
this dimension arising from the sound of running water
and a spot next to it that beckons, singing,
“this is yours to lie in and bask.”

The Way School Has Been Going Lately

*... but how do you hold
a river in your head before it turns
straighter and black, unfolds into asphalt,
into some mean road rolled out before you.*

Ada Limón

I don't know. When I think
of that one tree it turns into
a granite epitaph in the middle
of Monte Rio Elementary:

*After you hug this tree, you can't
go back to wearing your retro heart
hoodie and your bright pink cowboy boots.*

But the tree was so green. And brown. And wide.

And it stood across from the mossy pond.

Now that I'm thinking, I don't remember
much about that sanctuary space.

I know there was a community garden
with wine grapes and carrots. And a
trail that circled through the redwoods
and poison oak patchworks and blackberry
bushes, woodchips covering the forest
floor. I don't remember much.

That tree though. It was next to our
compost, so it was hearty. And loving.

When I was in second grade, we had
to pick a tree from the sanctuary
to claim as our own. We had
to write a letter to the tree,
sign our names metaphorically
on the land in order to say,
We were here.

And then my teacher, Marin,
would take a picture of each one of us
standing next to our respective trees.

I was wearing an oversized Cubs shirt
from my tee-ball days, hair white-blonde
and baby-faced. I smiled so much I was
squinting, tiny next to my towering
friend who bore my name.
And I can't go back.

Well, I can walk the few blocks
to Monte Rio Elementary
in my time off. But my tree
is locked away, blocked off
by a chain link fence. I bet
I could sneak into the sanctuary
if I tried. But I'd rather be wearing
my cowboy boots.

Eyes

I wish I could say I am
sucking the nectar,
every droplet of life mine:
I can't find the sweet source.

When I feel angry, I catch
hummingbirds with my eyes—
they storm away, but they don't

hide from me like they used to.
Now they know my fear
is the same, why I always

run away, flitting frantic
like a hummingbird
in the shade, so the light won't

catch me.

Someday I'll love Lillian Aff

but today I'm letting them out:

the inconveniences in redwood needles,

the disappointments of hardwood floors,

the color of my eyes when I cry

for my friend who died of leukemia when we were

fifteen

for my friend who violated my body when I was

twenty-one

for my friend who is a friend

no

longer

the lies I told myself,

the lies I told others,

the consequences and the green algae,

blooming neon upending every steelhead

in and out of sight, stepping in slime,

staining my feet, scumming my hands

like box hair dye on fingernails.

Someday I'll love Lillian Aff

but yesterday feels so much closer.

Won't I be kind to me?

When all I have is me?

Again, there's the green algae,
the green trees,
the green river,
my green hair,
green eyes flowing,
green toenails.