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Nine Poems on the Death of my Mother

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A poem for my mother, wax tablet with rose branches, San Francisco Center for the Book, 2015. Thanks to Jesus Camacho for assistance with construction.

Nine Poems on the Death of My Mother

A man stands against the
background of
winterclouded sky,

—
wing
white edged
—

geese grazing at his feet.

The flock forms a metonymy, feathered and analogous,
like atoms bonded.

a man
He is bird
metaphor
whose face is in silhouette

“... when free-living animals approach me . . .
it is as if this exile from paradise had been lifted.”

Now a page turned,
the verso blank

Mother, is this you?

This fine ash,
this dust, this grit?

Your eyes, at once galactic and flecked
with the colors of a mallard's
plumage, the scaled wings
of a moth, but moist—

a wetland

Open field,
lying like a

wrist
on a table, uncurling of fingers

blood's course, slow iambs
of indeterminate feet

:

the clarity of streaming water
through which are seen ovoid rocks—
swift spring's ice-loosed rumble: the ocean's de-edging of

broken glass—

tumbled

◦

a trudging—

the glass, lifted to her lips, from which
trickles water to escape
at the corners of her mouth

a bog of grasses, where she walks, in search of birds,
the quick flick of wings,
the tread of sneakers

in the forward flow of
unmetered riparian breath

◦

Hands, three fingers furled (only the index fingers and thumbs extended)—like lilies, turned tight in upon the spadix, pollen thick scent—inside the smell of sweat, urine.

Swabbing the caves of the body,
high pitched cries like those of a bird in distress.
The smell of excrement—
through scrubbed corridors, daily washed linoleum.

Begun at birth or earlier—
swum,
in filtered light,

Not one but three snowy egrets in the green field,
where the old man came every day
to work on the garden he'd planted,
a surgical cicatrice x'd across his chest—

Three egrets planting their long beaks into the dewy grass.

churning,
a sea-surged issue,
grasses tufted every which way,

More miraculous than a painted screen,
snowy egrets—
a curtain of feathers
seductive as eye lashes,
mantled,
stick legged

wave struck

What of
this body on the bed,
 shoulders propped
by pillows against the inevitable slide—

Where along its boundaries?
How gapped?

 An Arctic sea rises in the molecules of her feet.
Breath laps at the heart.

Take inventory along short cool fields of her flesh—
white hair, length of leg, clavicle's slope.
Bones of the ribcage through which I site earth's bulky
sphere. Human bird.

 Splinters of shorn grass.

 Arachnids' nests, dried.

Who

wrote the sound of "ah" —
 line like eaves from which hang the word,

 a sound continuous as dna or the pad

of naked feet across tundra plains,
echoed by the howls of dogs—

 here

 where there is no breast,
only the thin chime of
life

 who asks why?

 what of?

The gander's mate half eaten by foxes,
still sitting on the clutch of eggs

—a dense mat of feathers—

the gander dumbstruck

“... whenever I moved away from the flock
... he would creep after me, his body hunched ...
motionless about twenty-five or thirty feet away.”

her bright feathered breast flecked
with blood, dirt, saliva

your eyes—
a mallard's
plumage,

wetlands

the sparse green cover of grasses,
pebbled shale, alpine snow waters

Immediate cause

a. ventricular arrhythmia	time interval between onset and death	minutes
---------------------------	---	---------

due to

b. malnutrition	time interval between onset and death	weeks
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due to

c. failure to thrive	time interval between onset and death	months
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due to

d. dementia	time interval between onset and death	years
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A sheen over the skin, chill, humid—

only the ear lobe

touchable like living flesh

Blond ash,
bone' and body's conflagration
lifting into
air

—cloud covers the western sun past noon—

Invisible descent into

waves roiling below

where fleshy throats of day lilies

submerge

and vanish

In the old world a white haired woman sleeps
in the shifting shadow of a fig tree.
Grey blotched across sere grasses, tabby cats
lurk and disappear in the garden's grid:
doves their victims, aphrodisial pink
of breast, grey pinion, the neck white ringed.

The sun scribes an equator—
across her foot, curved inward, nested in cotton sock—
draws snores from breaths, and scrawls into night.

In the new world there are no fig trees, only islands
of dirt around which rocks stream. There, roses
supplant and awaken each May, speaking of young
wombs, and health wafts, following irregular tracteries,
oblivious to the failure of kindness.



Detail from *Nine poems on the death of my mother*, wax tablets, rose branches, ceramic bowls and candles, Berkeley Art Center, 2003. Thanks to Adam Broner for construction.

Note on the Text

I did the original installation of *Nine Poems* as a commemorative piece to my mother. I was curating an exhibition of visual poets for the Berkeley Art Center in California, and my mother had died the year before. I had written the poems in the months after her death. Because she was a visual artist, I wanted to make the memorial like a kind of altar, something that reflected the moment in tangible real terms, rather than words alone. I'm not sure how the idea of wax tablets came to me, but when it did it seemed entirely right. It took me some months to figure out how to make the tablets. The first obstacle was to blend the various tones of wax so that the color was more reminiscent of skin, rather than the deep amber color of natural beeswax. The next obstacle was putting the text on the wax. I did this by laser printing the poems on a very fine Japanese binding paper, which is almost translucent. I then poured the wax over the printed sheet. Surprisingly, the paper disappeared in the wax, so it looks as if the words are floating on the surface of the wax. In the final piece the tablets were suspended over votive candles, and some began to melt. Not only did the melting wax give off a sweet smell, like incense, but it suggested the ephemerality of life, the gradual loss of that which we love. In the most recent versions of the piece, which are just single tablets, I added a leafy green branch from a rose bush.

JAIME ROBLES' latest books of poetry, *Anime Animus Anima* (2010) and *Hoard* (2013), were published by Shearsman Books in the UK. Her most recent creative piece, *Three Propositions*, is a short film mixing imagery with three poems written in response to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. A visual artist and writer, she has produced many of her texts as artist books, and her bookworks are in collections at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; the Beinecke Library, Yale University; and the Oulipo Archive in Paris, among others.