

P O E M S

THE
CONSEQUENCE
OF MOONLIGHT

SOFIA STARNES



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For Bill, these poems, too, as always

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
it shall crush your head
and you will strike its heel.

GENESIS 3:15



Now, a great sign appeared in heaven:
a woman robed with the sun,
and the moon under her feet....

REVELATION 12:1

INVITATION

Imagine one magnolia in the yard,
a solitary grosbeak out of reach
on a solitary branch—
the season's final archive of ascent.

Imagine that it drops a leaf.
Your glance catches it,
forgoes the arbor and the drift-wing
and the extent to which they live,

to reconcile the iris with one sky,
one tree, one mortal bird.
Intent, it's all about *intent*—
as with the eye, no more surveyor

but a lover in the momentary light,
or with the moon, drawn resolute
when tugging at the mist,
the immaculate lagoon, the girl

in mid-discovery.
At last, she stirs, full weight on little
feet, her focus on the door...
How green each word outside her room.

THE WAY WE THRIVE

The sun comes late in February or not at all,
but either way, our waiting rooms
are lit, and through a picture glass, an early

finch inches through molting.
Notice how close to restlessness she comes
(she knows little of resting);

think of unfinished nests, uncertain hands,
the impulse to outlast our hopes
in partial houses. Of course,

this tells us only what we've learned
by living with the tenderness of need, as if
we were the small remedial weed

in a despondent garden.
It tells us only how a thing survives, how
we might thrive past sentinels. Sometimes

by clustering as nesting birds,
sometimes in duos, dusting up a path.
Even the dying leaf doubles its reach,
trilling to younger breeze.

THE OTHER ROOM

For this I pray—the room's proximity
whose distance is as venturous as kind,
calm in the evening, calling off

a silence I know best in increments. . . .
I do not seek it. For *after* is a word—
pressed, printed, turned leaf

to leaf in company.

For this I pray—our papered walls (linen
and grass) to bare new walls attached:

hall, piano parlor, welcome arch.
Oh, hear—the wind, the hustle-gold
of our forsythia spray—and eager feet,
not far.

*In my Father's house are many dwelling places;
otherwise, I would have told you. . . .*

John 14:2

THE GATEKEEPER

Nowhere in reach of silence or dismay;
the word *arrest* will not endanger us
or leave us with a reliquary rose

too long inside its vase.

We will not see stray petals,
ambiguous avowals of a wish that's loose-

arrayed and seasonal.

Of course, there will be mayhem,
one afternoon when everyone's agog

because the earth is shaking,
because a single fault—
too far for dispensation and denial—

has ripped the old foundations,
and instead, the rooms and rafters smell
like burning moss

and mosses smell like peat.

No. He will not let a fault—throat
of his own geography—speak out for him. . . .

For this is what we need not fear at all:
that he will lead us blindly
through a gate, sidestepping stones

and strangers, stems as streets,
and take us where we do not know a soul.

TENEBRAE

—*the gradual extinguishing of candles*

Our story waits its turn, as stories do.
You heard of it, one moment anxious to explore,
the other setting up the lamp you bought
to escape the coming

shadows.

Once, on a twilight hill—
and so you slipped out in your walking shoes
and settled there, settled the prudent measure of a wick
to keep your lantern burning,

But fires will lose their fingertips to singe,
and in the dark you'll shiver on your feet
and learn the cold of embers.

Tenebrae. Tenebrae. *Here—*
It's where the story leads, of course:
in search of huddled warmth, from room to room,
stitch stretched to wanting stitch, full robes

from partial robes, remaking.

It's what redeems—*draw near—*
each retinue of souls who wait,

wait nightly under scattered, scuttling comets.

BY NAME, WE CALLED YOU

O dear descendant: every night
we watch you wander where the gas lamps burn,
the ones that flicker, one on one on one,

and call you by your name—

which means the lamplighter will bring
repeatedly the unraveling of dark;

he'll draw one orange leaf against the curse
and shadow near and far.

O dear descendant, you were given wealth—
scrolled, signed, and watermarked,
to settle bills with paper: half the debt accrued
in war, the other calmly paid.

This satisfies our need
to raise a true inheritor: a child for all eternity
by way of star and nightfall.

Why pretend that strength resides
in millions? One world to match against our age,
one world, orbiting

with this thought: You have a fortune—
count the lanterns, child—
the kind of fortune your ancestors made.

Walk up the sidewalk, wake it with your name.

ELENA LEAVES HOME

(Or: The Quality of Departure)

It's time, at last, to think about a girl—
the girl who changed the fortune of a road
by purchasing its shadows.

Each morning she would drape
tendrils and vines on fences she knew well,
until the solid porch, the slatted steps,

gave way to thoughts of porches.
And so we said, reluctant from our gates:
Don't stay away,

no longer than it takes to wear out your perfume,
to count down stones and statuettes in rows,
to experiment with cobbles.

After all, you are the same small child,
the same young girl,
the same contender for a pending pearl that bears

our own aurora. . . .

By which we meant:
We know you best. We never have to imagine

who you are, never have to wonder why you wear
sandals on winter mornings.

And when we see you flushed and hurrying

to mail a note, nothing but crinkly slush
under your feet, wishing up your painted toes,
the leather. . . .

There goes Elena—we say—we know her footsteps well.

There goes our child, she'll catch her death of cold.

There goes our tenderest up the street.

EMERGE

At times this brings a stork, past rains, abandoning
a tower; at times a bubble dying
in a pond. I hear the word *emerge* and see a fern

or a feather; the first one wild and wispy,
to cure a wound, the role of ancient grasses; the other,
trail of a bird, slim fan or lady's purse—

the kind fairy tales gather.

Does not your heart, weary from things apparent,
ask what each storyline will tell,

which words carry their roots with candor?
Secrets would hunker down, safe in their winter castles,
were it not—

for the prophetic stem, weighty with beans
that rides its pole for air, for what we sense of seeds,
soft inches down, fussing our veins awake,

for every bone that pulls the body alert, to learn
its fragile face.

But what about our hands, the ones we excuse from light,

deep in our pockets?

With chambers dark, I think, the dark is change, is key.

MORTALITY

How can we live inside this house,
a house that knows the door is done,
that bones give what a bone
allows: a ribcage for a robin.

Too soon for spring (it says, it says),
but feathers lick the window sills,
and dogs yap, while their haunches dip,
swishing their eager tails.

How can we dream beyond the sun;
comfort in golden disregard, courage
in its resplendent gun, our screens
half-hiding orchids,

when, just before the sun's undress,
we pull a leaf to pull a birth—
our waking to the day's
address, where flagstones yield to moss.

From shadows and from lesser yields,
nightfall that confiscates
a room, I learn of bright, outlying
fields. . . . It will be fine; it will be fine,

to leave this rented consequence
with nothing but our borrowed feet,
to trade this skin—our reach, our dearth—
both sanctuary and residence,

far nearer to our bones than we,
for vacancies in glory.