

Darkness in the Tent

naomi buck palagi



two by two in the ark of
the ache of it

-Denise Levertov
"The Ache of Marriage"

I. the ark

the bile is close to my throat and I know
(now) I am angry. that pressure point on
the ball of my foot and this ongoing
cough, the lack
of any sex drive and now, the bile.
I know (now) I am angry but what
to do I don't. It is the dark underbelly
of a marriage. two by two in the ark of the
ache of it, she said, she was chronicling
their demise, didn't know it.

the trouble is you
are angry too, and tired, and we are
expected both to survive (food,
shelter, clothing, daycare), and to love. the
dishes, the plumbing, the groceries, the
kids, the cooking, the kids, the rearing, the
laundry piles wet with pee and food wiped
off tables and floors, chins, the drain still
clogged even after we tried (both of us) to
fix it and oh, the money,
the career, the careers, the time,
the MONEY, the TIME, the fold into each
other the kiss, the loving, the warmth, the
dark sweet folding the lack
of any thrill. The wish for a camera on our
lives to prove our points. laughing as we
can't remember the same thing
to save our lives. but what
am I supposed to do? did I mention trust?
did I mention fear? did I mention
anger and justification and self-
righteousness, self-doubt?
did I mention I still want it to be you
I wake up dreaming about, your hand, your
warmth, your eyes
that meet silently with mine, undercurrent
pulling us along, our little boat, rocking on
the sea, our little boat,
grown to the size of an ark, so many
aboard, and all of us, aching
with love and

fear
that it will never get easier, that it never has
been easier, that it is this,
(this grueling pace, this tightness, this
climb on the slippery rocks) that is
marriage
and it's time to deal, to toughen up and
take it, or you want me to deal
with my issues about you without
addressing you. work em all out, be angry,
let it out just don't
ask you to do.
this is a love song,
in case you couldn't tell.
a mating cry mixed with battle lust.
those few particulars I ask of you,
do them.
I know you feel there are more,
but there are few
(if the camera were there it might
tell my story)
those few particulars
are a part, and for the rest I don't know.
we are in the ache of it and we will wait
our forty days
our forty nights,

the clouds outside are ripples, thick,
and rippling
and though our hairs keep dropping,
washing down and clogging
the drain it is good
that we hold each other's hand with
warmth,
angry or not.

II.

weight

this doesn't mean that anyone loves me.
square in the eye.
*no, he agreed, it doesn't mean that anyone
loves you.*
square in the eye.
*what did you have in mind, I want
to ask, but this is a dream, and in
my dreams I am careful. We can
allow a silent filling, and no more.*
once,
I wrote this down.

and breath

(around the corner we stop,
caught, the few feet between us
unbreatheable cotton. After this,
there is no more dream because history
opens up, synapses all alive
and firing. nano-second possibilities
switching, multiplying, testing their
roots and tossing
their long tethers, their life boats)

every second, square in the eye.

III. the mirror does not reflect

climb up close to myself in the mirror
I have been here before

there is red in my eyes and tiny
flakes around my mouth. it is
winter and my skin

is getting thinner. I have been
this close to myself before

tall, and skinny, in a dark room
watching my body breathe night air

or once, hair shorn, clothes ill-fitting and
body thick when even the light

couldn't break though and
the mirror did not reflect

climb up close to myself
in the mirror and wonder
what lies behind these pores

this close to myself I miss
myself

my skin is getting thinner and
these tiny flakes on my face

holding the organs inside which pump
and beat, extract, contract, and somehow

make all these sad thoughts, squeezed
between aortas and wet

bones, egg-makers and grey matter, blood
and tubes of shit. make desires and love

all functions of flesh, make ambition
and despair and laughter

I Am Here.

IV. the shape of gone desire

my boots striding forward on the crisp fall
day there is sun, and color in the trees, it
is election day and for a few more hours
some hope that the country will improve
itself. my boots striding forward on the
crisp fall day, and I am missing a body
part. lighter now, but too light. afraid of
floating away. a wisp brushed to the
clouds. twisting my neck upside down
trying to see the world without the weight
of physical desire. periscope view from
my tall eyes. if I'd had a surgery, would
it be like this? if I hit fifty, will it be like
this? I have seen it, flying
overhead, like a bird migrating for winter.
once or twice even, I thought I heard it
calling down to me, but it didn't stop. I
have set up the pool, the gentle nest,
buffet of favored foods, but it has not
come back. it is a beautiful autumn.
I can examine the world under frost and
snow, and when spring returns, I will look
for the bird, or something equally heavy
to swallow and hold in my gullet. I think
of adding weight to my boots, as a
temporary measure but it is my pelvis that
is lacking gravity, and walking light for a
while with periscope hope may actually
lengthen my spine.

V. press

last night my husband dreamed, again,
that I was unfaithful. and worse, matter-
of-fact.

awake, I do not mean to hurt him.

from time to time he tells me he trusts me
implicitly, but I am offended. this is
work, I want the credit. recently I've had
dreams, both waking and sleeping, of
other men, three of them, whom I can
remember only one at a time. in these
dreams I am careful. on my chest is a
piece of plywood.

I daydream about being clever. I know
how to send a line. to answer only with
eyes, or a turn of the head (away and
down) with no smile.

I would be good at this. but I have also
taken a two foot square board to the table
saw and had it kick back, *thwack* me tight
against the hip bone, *crack*, and it is one
of my nightmares to have to learn, again,
trust, again, how to hold a four by eight
sheet of ply to the saw, steady, tight, push,
with no harm. it makes my heart race to
think of it now, sickly fear.

years ago I knew a man who trembled
with the effort to stay faithful to his wife.
who often had to leave a room and sweat,
in the bathroom. it was a great accom-
plishment for him, he said, to have
divorced her for other reasons.

sometimes in the dreams, if a man kisses
me, my fist comes out, *crack*, against his
lips, sorrow. and filling.

my husband dreamed last night that I was
unfaithful, and it hurt him. I dream of
sitting across from him at a dark table,
and touching his warm, his only hands,
and we seeing my eyes to his and the
smooth, shape-shifting face that is him, is
his body, is the well with no bottom and

always, another room in the cave not only down, but up, above-ground, here at this table at this restaurant in the corner of this lot and he sees me and my skin, too, is smooth, it shifts under his gaze.

hammers do not frighten me. nor do circular saws or grinders, safety glasses, nailguns.

the table saw is quick, but it is not the only way.

V]. the red blanket at one a.m.

I am an ant. our house is one of a thousand houses rat's warren of twisted gut-paved streets and stop signs, yield signs, I can't as an ant even fathom how to get the hell out of here to breathe

Lady Life/ Death/ Life I am Persephone down in the earth it is a time to eat, to prepare, to fumble in the dark

I am not an ant. but everything is not on the table and spiral focus on the red blanket to dizziness is actually one of many options like the one in which I am not an ant but a wolf

I am not an ant.

I am lying on my bed like I did as a teenager and time has slowed, to the motion of each task completed, each rising of the sun, rising of the moon, each gust of wind touching my never-hit face, my walk-tall torso, my have-danced legs, it has slowed to the satisfaction of a day and a foot upon the path and the layers upon layers of dirt, good dirt, earth dirt which I have tasted to my satisfaction and upon my back, a pack, with a child, at my side my hearts, carried in these live bodies, time has slowed to the amounting of a life.

V]]. and the rainbow, as it arises

like childbirth, we look back at our time on the ark and say, *it wasn't that bad. I could do that again.* as the child starts to coo, and soon, toddle down the hall. to speak. the forty nights on the hard floor fade in the face of soft bedding. the memory of stale air in the hold leaves our nostrils as we smell warm flesh, clean, with red blood pumping beneath. echoed pounding of anger in a dark, thick heart, the fear of the animals all around and the sound of water, always water, just outside the door, the thick grey skies and ragged doves, the rations of love parceled out so sparingly *will we never find more?* all this pixillating to blurr, to backdrop, to nothing with the first surprised cry of joy at the glimpse of green *Darling, Just wanted to say hello* in her beak,

stroke her feathers and calm her trembling body. offer tempting morsels of food *the short corduroy skirt, a swish of the tail* and touch. a long drink of water. in the sky a hint of color *that's nice* but it's not it's growing BRILLIANT your body come close the glowing colors and soft home skin it is a RAINBOW after all those days of dark we look back at the drifting ark and say, *it wasn't that bad. I could do that again.*

For this.

V]]. walk, with a pack

don't be scared, she said, be (not the fear of twisting an ankle but the)

turn it over (unhh of building strength)

in the heart in the dark gently dislodge the locket (not the gut of anger but)

in the dark only with clipped fingers feel the locket (a single finger pointed sharp in the brain, relax it)

that something so hard could live inside (this skin *is* getting thinner)

there will be one small clasp one small hinge and only in the dark the soft palms of the finger tips fat and clumsy on the tiny locket (answer: leather, with care, is supple and tough)

we do not open (we do not open)

but push so gently the thick of the thumb flesh against metal and melt it out//wards (//wards is the treasured) melt it the heat of a desire mold it (outside in) a spiral of itself confused refreshed (canyon in springtime)

the defiance a mountain hiked before dawn

small hut at the peak rice cakes in hot and sour soup the sun will be rising Soon

IX. Setting up the tent.

I holler for another long stick and he smiles as he brings it over. Bumps my shoulder accidentally-on-purpose.

This flat area is still a bit muddy, but it is sheltered by a curve of low mountains, and the lake here is already clearing. The children are occupied for the moment, watching worms dry out on the rocks. We are still so happy just to see clear skies. A settling has occurred in my bones, a lowering of gravity. If any of the sheep needed wrestling, I would be a good match now.

Pulling the canvas over our rough frame, I am startled by the dark inside this tent. It has not been three days since the dove came back, and the promise, yet already, I am startled by the dark. Whatever our days will be like, it will be here, in the dark, that I will sleep with my family. My husband's pallet I roll out next to mine, far from the slit we have made for a door. I wanted a window but he pointed out, with our slanting walls, we would have no protection when the rains came.

We held each other a long time after he said that. Nonetheless, a window will be something to consider when we start building a more permanent home.

I duck back through the slit to the bright day. My husband is driving stakes solidly into the ground with the butt end of an axe. Our tools were some of the few things we chose to bring from before. The handle of someone else's hammer never feels quite right in the hand. The children are coming over now, mud on their faces, their clothes. My son, speaking also for my daughter, still a baby really, tells me they want to eat supper. It will be a little while, I say. The next time he asks, I will give them bits of saffras stick to chew on, to hold down the hunger. He sits near my feet and sighs. My husband, working now on the fire pit, stops, and walks over to us. My daughter pauses her growly fussings to smile at him.

From where we stand we have a clear view of the old boat, already half-tilted, settling into the mud.

We must work quickly now, to be able to cook the food we have foraged and eat it before dark.

NBP

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