

Visitations

(a collection of poems)

by

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**Dedicated to Erika Berglund Hamstrom
my great-grandmother**

1877 Born: Arvika, Sweden

1894 Arrived: Roseville, Minnesota

1902 Moved: Ballard, Washington

**1917 Involuntarily Committed: Western State Mental Hospital
Steilacoom, Washington**

1955 Died: Steilacoom, Washington

Unwound

1937

*"Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"*

Yeats

I have learned the glassy eyes,
the deadpan expression,
the sluggish mouth.

nobody home

I neatened all the respective
female parts: hair,
body, leg...

We learn the comportment
all too well...

*was there ever anything but
this world of little things?*

"Their madness
is represented by untidy hair,
their return to sanity
by the wearing of matronly
bonnet, a nice
paisley shawl.

It is not natural
to neglect
the dress of head."

I mouth each doctor's
words, shape my lips,
mirror
so faithfully,
docile,
dim as cardboard.

*Father father
why art thou so far
from the words of my roaring?*

"This avoidance
of company, the solitary
habits, the withdrawal
from society into morbid
introspection as evidenced
by these women,

is the most distinctive
feature of their insanity."

Preston, you leave
each time, for twenty years,
you never bring my children!

Ralph, Walter, Floyd, Amy

I am your last oath, the nagging
obligation.

For yea though i walk through the valley

Each visit, I arrange
my face, wear the bright
red of smiles, fold
each hand in my lap.

I'm supposed to be content..

to lie and wait for eternity

My fingers curl up,
crippled, dumb.

I sit, as left,
wait out this life of "nots."

*And if thy right hand offend thee,
cut it off,
and cast it from thee*

At some point the blank-faced ones,
the tension will be reduced
they'll return
to take me.

"The goal is to isolate
the patient, unmask
her deceits,
coerce
her into surrender."

*quotes taken from doctors's writings on female
patients, early 19th century

Weathering

Arvika, Sweden 1883

Pappa, white as bone,
you holler "get down!" in a slow-soft
voice, and I crouch, splayed to the hull
like a starfish. The boat snaps up,
falls away, hurls
its nose north, southwest.

I flip over, trembling, stomach
open to sky, the tumult
around, above, sprays
of water off coat, hat, face,
the wind beating the graying
water and sky. The gulls' brass caws
vibrate the air,
we shy from the echoes,
we slide the sheer
liquid sides, lurch,
hover the rise,
breathless before each fall.

A crack of thunder hums my bones,
a din of clanging
echoes: a zinging rope whacking
the pole, the thrum and fizz
of waves, the sails, my raincoat
rippling. Everything shivers
and you rear up, duck,
steer, pull everything in,
the sails fierce rustle
collapsing around us. Your hands
dart, undisturbed,
as the boat flinches,
skitters.
Waves haul over the side,
cool-soft, baptizing.

*they dunked us all the way,
full immersion, i remember the shapes
above filtered by seaweed, bubbles,*

*a clear green light, the voices
dulling, the preacher's legs
spearing up, the huge hands
reaching down*

The fish alone are motionless
anchors. Silver, dead, they steady
my eye: flounder, forell,
helge flundra, sill, lax,
a water litany
I roll off tongue
to still this giddy stomach.
A rough, irregular rocking
sounds the sides,

slows.

I pull breath deep
from this belly, as you said,
ease these flicks of heart,
turn my cold chin towards you,

your lips shaping familiar
runes I mime, both
soundless to the empty
boom of wind,
your hands reeling in the last
lines.

*Then he arose and rebuked the winds and the sea
and there was a great calm*

I count each loop
of oars, one, two,
Pappa, I know
like anything I know,
like all I see -- sand,
logs, the crush of firs
against the hill, the wash
of salt air, the crook
of my own fingers-- that you
will get us home
to the gentling crack of flames,
the rustle of known voices,

like waves, tugging

me into sleep.

Soon, soon, you'll ease this yellowed

old boat through blackness,

water or sky, past

the Sound's hollows.

Visible and Invisible

1886

I brush light
colors across pages: lilac,
rose, cornflower,
ripple the strands
of water from corner to corner.
reams of light flicker my face
my hand mutters to catch them

I make the perspective
point at the far corner, swirl
the smoke around us,
trace our ten outlines
like our shadow plays at Christmas
against the planks Pappa built
tight to one another.

I tint the darker greens
for the smells of fir and pine
rising from the walls
and floor when it rains.
Blue thick lines mark off my space.
blue for the limpet,
for begging the water's favor

Here, the thrum
of voices by the stove's
fire; here, my corner
of silence, the bed
pushed far from the others.
allowing the shapes of night
to come and go

Here is the boundary of blue,
the sky reeling out from the cabin.
I draw it in spirals
looping off the page.

Luffing

Ballard, WA 1915

Hair tucked to scarf, eyes
leaning into the ground,
I carry another load
of wash to the clothesline.

Close to earth in this thick-slow step,
touched now by the dry swirl of leaves,
now by the cold,
I lift my arms to pin the sky,
the cloth, the twine
to one another, all
with a tight stitch of hands.

The empty wings shimmy,
shaping the air, the wind
a whistle in sleeve.
The clothes sway free of the gray shade
left scarecrow by the sun.

I bring these shadows to the line,
white face slipping out and back
from the darkness of empty rooms.
The gaunt flap startles the birds.
Their wings twitch and falter,
flee, the black shapes
tacking across the lawn.

The clothes are scarecrows for the fields
where I'm left chilled by distances,
that whisper of voices, of faces,
a stiff darkness and stain,
my voice kneading the air,
lillivon lillivon
the world a void of time to fill.

Involuntarily Committed

1917

White tightens and shrinks around me,
constant night or day.

It nullifies.

They want to see us at all times,
these orderlies of order, to watch
watch watch. The fat one, there, her jowls
shaking, gives us the pills and nothing
can be done. We line up.

If we refuse, they hold you down.

no one refuses

They all eye us. The women
eye me, the new one,
the odd one.

and why are you committing your wife?

The cool sweet darkness
splashed here, there, in strips
too slight for comfort
or retreat
is to remind, tease,
of shadows, silence,
soft corners.

and never feel my children's hair

The sound of my words hollows
these nuthouse walls.

what are the rules? how do I learn them?

Kan Du Visa,

Kan Du Visa mig vagen?

It is the clicking of doctors'
teeth as they chatter,
loose babble floating away, the rustle
of whispers naming me,
the buzz of lights flicking,

the dull, low shuffle
of feet pushing the floor, the sprays
of water that drill our heads
in the moss-cool shower,
all we incorrigible sixth-floor women
clustered and drooping.

The High Jump

1927

"Women often received ECT treatment because they were judged to have less need of brains."

Dr. Breggin

These people shadow me, hover
like giant insects, wait
for the first misstep--
if one of us looks too sharp,
fara fara
too quick, too wild of hair,
oh, they grab you quick, strap you in.
"You will change
and the tension will be reduced."
Metal clasps attach to my temples.
Soon, the sear of electricity, the cool tapping
of light against skull,
increasing, warming,

the seconds waiting

to be lit

And his face did shine as the sun

and his raiment was white as the light

The surge pours in,

its icy sizzle

sluices all these bones.

i lose everything

The currents yank my limbs

and I'm gone. *nerves*

shiver for hours - everything

electric

i buzz with sound

the way music vibrates water

My body hollows itself, my hands

fist around metal.

nothing invades me

I name the ceiling
furious with colors --azalea red,
dusk-green,
limpet blues, rages
of blacks --*holding my breath*
i rise, open the window,
slip out, the moon's umbra
glows, conceals

Quilting

1893

All of the women of Arvika are in the circle,
quilting, all this incremental stitching
things together that don't belong,
poking needles in, out, voices
rising to fall
and then we'll prepare lutefisk, dried herring,
embroidered linens, knitted woolens, all
to store in bins, everything
for the future.

And this gray, spare stranger, moustache
tight to lip, will take me.

i touched his hand, his palm damp, cold,

like water,

his fingers limp on mine

Pappa accepted,
the words parading
around me.

Clouds hover, I feel them brush the air
around our cabin. All these women
are canning now, my fingers
stab, miss, sting
from the needle. The sun lolls
and sifts outside, the firs--
I hear them shiver their green hands -- the rustle
and flocking of gulls, circling.
I rush out, pulling in all air,
the hill tugging
where none will follow.

Ice

Roseville, Minnesota

1894

Preston and I have been in America six months,
our cabins finally built, propped
against this smooth

*like water without the wind
deadened, the stillness of glass
and nothing to ease us along*

endless land

nothing moves or responds

so absent of color. We
four families, twelve, the only ones here.
Preston helped all the others, pressed
wood frames up, pushing
against the winter.

*men plant us here
without roots*

We few, how little I recognize,
this cold worries my bones
even my Swedish words
untouched.

Our homeland is all that connects us.
I watch the colors dwindle, erase
themselves each night. The blackness
cups us in its hollow,
bears down.

*all this sheer
whiteness falling out,
the ground, the stripped trees, the sky
smothering in*

Ice shivers and falls,
i'm suspended in crystals of blue
the sound of splinters.

white empties the horizon
my eye finds no reference point
no frame for perspective

Only I moved freely
that ocean journey, the rolling
of deck and air, my walks in storm and calm,
all space my own
all ill below.

i wove my words with the sea's
talked to Pappa through the sky
home

Long before, with Pappa, I learned
the pacing of steps
and breath.

but not this stifling of space
this closing in

I lie under Swedish quilts --
patches of Pappa, Mama, pants,
pieced and woven long before
skirts, I dream of colors,
streams, sounds
filling this thin room.

My hands move slow circles
round, around my belly.

The Visitations

1934

This is the place of midnight
lines for all beds,
these are not the spirits!
the heavy shoving of parts, the stench of sweat,
the clammy skin.
they flatten the breath from my body
Equality for all!
take, eat, this is my body
We are easy prey -- trapped, beached,
Forbjuden! Forbjuden!
we are large pale fish. Sometimes
we are lucky, men deflate,
slap us away.
Bring me your meek,
your humble, your ugly,
for i am the Father....

And afterwards the cleansing of skin.

washes of sea

Purification. We all
herd together, slump

flesh of flesh

body of body

stand for hours, shivering. Water
clothes, smooths me.

we are the chronics, we live

too close to our skin

I baptize myself anew, plunge

it clothes me iridescent

everything under the water,

the water of gods, pure and holy

the stain of men slides away.

Birth

1895

One day I feel a hard ball
growing, I loom outward,
*cloud storms building on the edge
of sky*

huge.

*glistening, i bend
with my own weight*

I lie for long, slow hours,
live fully in my skin
watch light through windows,
*dream myself curled
gentled in water warmth*

quilts heavy, thick upon me,
the only rest

Preston allowed me
rubbing my hand across
this pale dome.

*i longed for each inevitable
rising, the soft silence,
drawing pictures with my breath*

The ring of light breathed
around me, the deep long
stabbing eased,
moved out like the waters,
melted my bones.

House-Broken

Ballard, Washington 1903

There is laundry every day, endless
discarded selves -- the legs,
sleeves, empty.
It squishes and pummels,
shuddering old Olga's machine.
She'd crippled her hand. It caught, yanked
through this wringer, smashed.
Soon, the aching
and bending, wet cold slacks,
shirts, pulled hand over hand
from the wringer. Like a lever,
I swing between basket and line,
the skins and outers
of my family spread
to the wind.

just like in Roseville

The working blurs together, now,
then, continuous chores, the moving
house to tent, an itinerant
carpenter's wife,
our old selves scattered
across the towns.

Too many winters, I had to get out
of Roseville. We caught a long
cold train to Seattle, chugged
and clanked across mountains
higher than anything in Sweden,
through plains, more mountains,
Ralph and Walter scurrying to windows,
scrounging for food. I nursed Amy,
stayed up all night with the lone
whistles waiting out Edna's
fever, drawing her sketches
to keep her still.

Everything emerged -- descending
the pass into deepening forests,
the pure glint of rivers, the hills
crowding around us, at last
the long stretches of water and sky,
this place of fir, beach, of wood
the closest thing to home.

The scrubbing of walls
and floors, white-dark pine, hand-cut
and rough: Preston tells me
to smooth it all down.

I kneel against these floors
each day, tracing the grooves, the knots,
the lines of age circling in,

*feeling the splash of wave against hull
or the boards cool under foot, the ruffle
and scent of firs surrounding
darkening green with the afternoon's peculiar
light, as Pappa speaks of the sea,*

*chants its runes as he smooths
his long tan arms along the frame, building
the first boat from memory,
shaping each board, cutting, sanding,
the sun plumbing our backs
to test our strength*

Tonight Preston and I lie here again,
exhausted, pale-skinned, ponderous.
The twitching of muscles
keeps me awake.

*the flicker of his breath
snakes the air*

I twist my hair between finger
and thumb.

All these chores dull
my eye for the right color, the light
feel of the brush, the feeling
of knowing the place to touch.

he is worrying it all away

The Kitchen

Ballard, Washington 1905

I have to bake -- Preston checks--
the havrekake, shaping each print
of dough with my fingers, as mother did,
until each fingertip itches,
rye bread, limpa, potatiskorv,
these thin tubes of pig intestine
I stuff with beef, onion, pork,
long snakes set to roast.
I pickle herring, work the garden, can
the vegetables, bone fish
until my fingers bleed
cook Preston's favorite, lutefisk,
for required Sunday dinners, five o'clock sharp.
the house stinking for days
The lutefisk soaks for weeks in lye.
It blackens my only silver.

My boys poke and prod its inert form,
its pale slimy touch
slippery in my throat, while Preston
needlessly chews and chews,
splinters of fish hanging
from his moustache. Tonight,
he kisses me, oddly,
wanting like long before.

*buttons burn into me, calluses rough, slap
of skin, he bruised me with his touch,
everything fast, wet,
inert, i anchor, still,
i dream of white fish swimming in moonlight,
their blue shadows slippery
with light*

Raising the Bones

1910

*to Edna*1. ***Descent***

wisps curl and slide
smoke-light and gray
fingering beckoning
this eerie nightly weave
at windows, doors glinting
with moonlight i steer around them
each passage to door
unwind the sheets uncurling
legs feet
stumbling air
pulled by a wraith of smell
i'm stained
that acrid skeletal burning's

corroded me sweat
thick on my skin heart
a familiar jackhammer

shaking my bones
my bones
i'm marked it giddies
my breath
hair
my boy's, any hair
none smells sweet
i pull a strand of mine loose
hold still
the stench consumes me

hair burns first
fizzles like a firecracker
i know
i see the fire and i'm flung

running the earth
 the sting and crack everywhere
 the stones crunch yield
 the ground pummels
 air pressure forces my body
 down
 back

my son's mouth red
 at the window eyes white
 like a horse about to be shot
 the screams and the crackling
 whip my face
 the hill shudders up
 like a live thing

my shaking blurs it
 i don't remember the door
 the smoke the falling
 i don't remember

i roll i roll
scarring the floor into my backbone
these blankets will smother
me once
once more
soon soon
voices are grabbing me
Preston's shout "For God's Sake!"
slaps me asleep

2. *Rising*

My lillivon, my sweet-limbed
daughter, did you rise
in a puff of white smoke? Did the air
swallow you? I look for your shadow,
wait for the tint of your voice on this air.
to wake me

If I stare hard the outlines come,
build, the curve of arm and muscle,
the long loose weave of hair,
the eyelash here,
softer than shadows.

Bones burn last.

I keep two in my wooden chest.

I curl them

twin to mine

bone of bone

body of body

I'll raise you

piece by piece.

Stones

1908

Preston left this morning
at last
to build houses in Colorado.
Around my boys I wind
thick woven cloths strung
from my loom, each strand
of color set in, pressed down, to join
the others, blend, move,
long streams brilliant,
warming. I touch
their skin with my hands. The wind
rustles the off-white
grass-tips, floats
the sky-lit wisps of my boys'
hair, roughs
my skin with its feathering.
am i free?

Our shutters flap in soft blue winds.
The children hoot and holler from the slate
gray beach, the sky
shrill with cries, my hand
a lever, rising, falling,
pulling the colors in.

The boys rush down the bluff's path
playing hide and seek
Seek and ye shall find
and I follow, the air descending on all
sides, the blue rising,
the moon a ghostly circle
balancing the sun, the quiver
of water looms up,
a ceaseless scratching,
the sound of small stones
plunked together,
one following the next,

an even rhythm,
these off-round shapes,

these cut-out pieces of the moon.

Filters

Ballard, 1912

My eyes and face reflect in the windows.

Preston's peer out, nag me.

Stones prod into my feet, I move

to the logs, pace their length,

one, two, three,

a span across,

forty lengths of board.

these darkening grays, browns, i'll mix

with black to shape the barn, green

to lighten for leaves, reed-thin

silvers for the stream in Arvika

Dusk shadows the air

i'll filter the light for morning

all subdued: beach, logs, sky,

the dim white cut of our house.

a still life

This branch of my apple tree

no flowering

its cut-out fingers hook the mist,
hold it down.

a shroud of air

i can't breathe

"Erika."

The willow dims
like a puff of smoke.

loosens all identity

"Erika. Come here!"

olly olly oxen free

I count the scrape of waves
fumbling stones, again,

"Erika"

move toward the house. The line
of windows and door
grins quite eerily.

"Where have you been?"

Where is the children's dinner?"
Preston's hand looms,
hurls my drawings against this pine wall.
"Nothing you do is right!"
My hand startles me,
like a white rat furrowing Walter's
dust-brown hair.
I let that hand fall.

Umbra

1914

The sunlight holds wakes
in the corners of these walls.
I am drawing
luminous things: grass,
sky, child.
The light entrances
everything,
stuns.

like animals caught in the glare

My elbow grows sore, numb
from focusing.

breathing more deeply

My brush holds the shadows,

i tease the shades

*unnerve them with a glance
of brush*

illumines the darker whites.

The flare of water submerges me

full immersion

again and again,

for who would not be struck

dumb

pillar of salt

no eyes

by all this shifting of light?

My eye steadies for this watching,

dazed, head lighter,

lighter, filled with air,

intoxicating!

hiding my face from bright things

Godsunmoon

clouds of light

Preston, you stand

beyond glass outside,

immobile, like a guard

waiting, waiting.

there is no time for explaining, you see

words hang looser each time

"Preston," I say.

do you notice?

the air alters in seconds if i watch closely

hand, hold steady, hand

fill memory

"Preston."

my own skin peels away, raw

to this air,

everything shivers my bones

"Preston," I say, I say again, a breath
of wind

brush of something i once knew

whistles of light mixing

with voice, eye

rushing to see....Edna?

Preston, grim husband,

your not-speaking

you never even look

collects in tight fists

along my spine.

Your tongue, huge, I know, is sliding
nervous between your teeth,
the comfort of hard things
thrusting one, two, three, space
here we go round the mulberry bush
all through church
face like a skull
that hissing and suck of air.
Your fingers rest on the spade
endless chores, we must do
endless..ahh..."resting
is for the evil", yes,
here we go down the road
here we go to hell and damnation
a long time white and thin,
a wooden anchor you grip,
tightening,
wrinkled fingers
shoving the blade further
crisp into ground.

Release

1916

i've pared myself thin

like the string of a kite the wind
 could take me trailing

nothing

behind i am

this bodiless floating

*my voice still taps its shape
 knocking from one side to the other
 reminds me of my skin bones
 there is a resonance
 still bone to bone*

swing like the slightest string
as restless with the stillness
 between the beach and house.

it is what matters now
 that my children are gone
 where where
 gulls cry nothings my cry
 boomerangs
 bluff point lighthouse

ahh, they've been removed it seems
 yankedtornuntangled
 gone "for safety"
 slitted mouth "it is the right thing"
 oh
 devil's hair Preston
 Preston
 i am the fear
 that falters your iron step

yet
 i'm still safe
 i lighten myself to bend the wind

dwindles and wanes as i move
 toward the water raise my hands
 to it again *yes, i'm coming*
 wave to the women the wailers
 draw them in.....

we'll shuffle our feet for the moon
 move with sorrow rhythms
 circle the fires
 shine faces back these feet
 thrum the sand feel its give
 we spin and spin
 voices eddy roll
 keening lulls the spirits.
 warmth taps my forehead
 the briefest gust
 Pappa *where*
 glimmers gone

i try to move full circle.

The Cures

1930

Every five years they try a new treatment.
We all earn it. If it doesn't work
the first time,
they try it again. In between,
all of us tagged and charted,
my arm is deadened
we crochet, knit, sew,
sit. We remember
what the blank ones like, remind
each other: clothes, nails, hair.

"Connolly found his patient's
wasting despair oddly
attractive; he was moved by her
pallor and sensitivity, and noted
especially her womanly figure,
the ample chest and pelvis."

One year they made us eat, snacks,
meals, suddenly made appetizing.

i was being smothered to death

Food subsumed me, the most delicious
thing, the soft warm
wet things sliding
over tongue. Eating
was what they wanted.

at least i was not empty

"The rest cure consists of forced
isolation; the patient can't sit
up, read, write, or see visitors.
She is fed excessively--
sometimes gaining over fifty
pounds."

This time they came at me
with the needles. I'd seen them before.

i will not panic

Some women held on to the bed,
fought, kicked. It didn't help.

the tension will be reduced

They beat you.

It made up your mind.

"For some, the worst part was waiting for the several days it might take for the insulin reaction, listening to the hoarse cries of the other comatose women, knowing they too would slobber, grunt, or wet the bed, become ugly and grotesque, and seeing afterwards each chalky face stamped with a sort of nullity."

This cold scars into you, deepens.

like falling into snow

You rub your hands, body, you move.

It won't let go,

all the whiteness
i am the color of bones
 you fall away.

"After insulin injection, the patient goes into a coma or convulsions. After 1-2 hours they are given intravenous glucose to revive them. They can lose their memory as a result."

I awake and pull out the needles,
 place my feet on the square tiles,
 hard, like the ribbons of sand,
following Pappa through the mists
he calls out "Lillivon,
little one, where are you?"
here, Pappa, here
 those tideflats
 long and damp, the cut of the water channels
 that smoothed my feet...
He leadeth me beside the still waters
 I walk past the door,
 down the pale hallway.
i will find the water