

Cuttings

A Collection of Poems

By Sally Stewart

Section 1

Case #207 Ring Neck Pheasant, Female, Hit by Car

Black clawed feet kick, grab my leather-sheathed
hand while I pin its back to the exam table,

cover the iridescent fury of the blue-green
head and neck, the raging red eyes with a towel.

The rehab supervisor snaps on latex gloves,
begins to probe: swollen eye, dried blood

on its beak reparable damage from the collision,
but its shattered shoulder draws the death sentence.

Supervisor asks if I'm okay with this.
I nod yes. Part of the job, I should

get used to it. She plucks a few wing feathers,
exposes a thin vein. The needle tunnels, pale

blue liquid plunges in. Seconds later
the feet go limp, the hooded head slumps.

I remove my leather gloves,
stroke the bird's cooling chest.

An opalescent feather loosed,
arcs gently to the floor.

The Stream

At the bend, protected
by a circle of rocks a small,
quiet pool, surface
unblemished by current.
I perch on two stones, gaze
in. On the surface,
a watery photo –
my perched form.

On the bottom, the only
movement:
a crayfish the color
of mud and water,
his long antenna sway like willow
branches in a light breeze.

My foot slips
from the rock, stirs
silt into frenzy.
The crayfish scurries
into hiding. Even after
the dirt settles,
when I am patient and wait –
he is gone.

The Language of Dogs

In the darkness of a wet November morning
my oblivious dogs run and crap
while I shiver in pink checked pajamas.
Like my frozen breath in my cupped hands,
ghosts of their barks linger in front of their mouths
annoy the half-sleeping neighbors
Shaddup! rolls out through a cracked window.

Oh spirits of language, what can you tell us?
Is there anything left to be said?

When my dogs die I will keep them
in urns on the mantle, collars draped.
This is a poem without words.
Sit! Speak!

Squirrels

They scabbled up the tree
in circles, chittering,
tails twitching as light breaks
across their backs in minute
flickers, sun through the limbs.

I won't tell you again, so please don't ask.

Common as street signs, squirrels
undulate through our private and public
spaces, steal seed from bird feeders.
Their flat carcasses litter our streets.
We don't often notice the flash of tail,
the round gray haunch, until
the desperate search for food
draws them from cover, makes
them criminals.

I once lived life as a squirrel, searching for seed
in a hostile place. I saw the heaping
bushels of walnuts and almonds, fruit
and fresh, wet meat just out of reach. My baby
cried; my milk was dry. The ashes of a guardian
angel swept from the pyre of poverty.

In some countries, punishment for stealing is to lose
a hand. In some countries, punishment for losing
is to have to steal.

I am no longer a squirrel. I watch them
in my yard hanging like Walendas pilfering peanuts
and sunflower seeds from a wire basket.
Something about their fat bellies says don't show
it to me if you don't want me to take it.

Section 2

After the Vows: Marriage #1

When I was a ghost

I had a hopeless mouth,
a soundless knot.

I did not talk about love
or sing about respect. I did not rock
boats. My hands, tethered
by flimsy arms, were no
help, no defense. No one feared
me. I did not bleed or leave a mess.

Wore the same old dress,
learned to like it. Rattled empty
pans for entertainment.

When I was a ghost, I knew nothing.

I ate, slept, and drank nothing. I was
fat with nothing.

How do I ask you not to hang in my dreams

like a dark bat
scrabbling
on black cave walls
head down
wings folded
mouth closed

It's the thought

My last day, the whole class gathered,
bon-voyage of pink frosted

cupcakes, cartons of orangeade.
You walked up to me, into the maelstrom

of shiny colored paper and ribbon strewn,
and handed me a small, white box,

unwrapped. Long as a bracelet, deep
as a large rhinestone, it lay airy in my hand.

Inside, a nest of cotton fluff, and one small
figure, cloaked in a tissue shroud. Delicate

gift tumbled out when I tugged the corner:
a stiff angel fish, dried and lacquered. A joke

or not? Two sheets of good paper towels, a light
book for gentle pressing, several weeks of drying,

then you painted the lacquer by hand.
The fish's scales lifted slightly, like pale sequins.

You were not my boy friend or even
my best friend. I buried it in my coat pocket, hid

it from my mother who might mistake it for trash.
As I kick out my ex-best friend, soon to be ex-

husband, I tell him never darken my
eyes again, so he gives me a monstrous

microwave. A last ditch white metal box, big enough
for a turkey. I trade it for a vacuum and some beans.

Deep in my drawer, stashed under cover
of thin cotton and elastic, the angel fish beds,

same old box and tissue. So delicate
I don't dare touch it.

Camp Follower, 1758

A thin ghost of smoke twists up out of the first to catch.
She adds fresh split logs, well-crafted, practiced
fire building. As the flame shrinks into the blackened wood,
she readies the pots. Cumbersome cast iron cauldrons,
dutch ovens burdened with simmering potatoes, beans,

fatback. Enough for the whole unit. She wipes
her coarse fingers on her apron, shifts her skirts,
avoids a stray spark. The wind changes, her eyes
cloud with woodsmoke. Sulfer of gunpowder
drifts in after an exchange like far-off thunder.

She wants to trade her tent for solid wood walls,
a hearth for this campfire. Her husband killed
in the second battle, she follows still.
It is all she has. She desires the spark,
the ravenous flame. She can taste the ashes.

Chiaroscuro

1.

Not the rubber hose filled with sand
bruising and battering your flesh
Not the cattle prod applied
to your delicate tissues
Not the laughing Chinese guards,
the torment, the shame
Could coax your tongues to move.
You would not sing their songs.
Silent souls bend the bars
on these prisons of dust.
Five saffron-winged birds
fly over the Himalayas.

2.

It hid in your bones.
 Snuggled deep in marrow
 small, jagged seeds sprouted
tendrils, crept up femur
 to pelvis to womb where they bloom
 red and thorny.

3.

House bright
flames like an angry shock of hair
replace the roof, crawl out
each orifice, up the bricks, burn
them black. Someone is gone
from cinder to drifting flecks of light,
fleeting competition for the stars.

4.

Mother, you are barely there
pastel behind yellow mist:
Boxy rose suit,
Jackie O coif,
white pocketbook and shoes.
It is well past Labor Day.

5.

*My chest
twisting
in on itself.
Falling...
I always thought
I'd see
flickering
home
movies,
my life
swift
review,
unreeled.
No,
only
bitter bite
of grass,
one
last
bright
dandelion.*

Settling Nana's Estate

Through the kitchen window,
the mountain ash is brown sticks
jabbing a gray sky. Remnants
of leaves, burnt orange bits
flit like sale tags tied on castoffs,
leftovers from June's yard sale.
The drawers and cabinets still full:

Whisks. The fifteen rubber spatulas.
Dented steel bowls with patina
of thousands of spoon
scrapings. A bag of bags. Years
of twist ties kept from the trash.
Cards spilled from a rusty tin box,
the scrawl and slant of your *one cup*

butter, two well beaten eggs. Smidgen
of pie spice, shaken loose, wafts
cinnamon and clove past the blank
walls. The platter with the big turkey,
the shimmering cross made of blue
butterfly wings, the white swan swimming
on a black velvet pond, all now stuffed

in thin white plastic. Quiet stacks
of boxes wait. Vacant china cabinet.
Red vinyl ottoman. Dust thick and floury,
so thick you could write
your name in it, write *I was*

here across the dark TV screen
finger crackling, breaking the static
electricity that binds dust to form.

Bonesweat

The diagnosis: the owl flies past your door
the shadow of its wing crosses, your eyes
widen into the momentary darkness.

This is not the word you wanted
now curled in your ear, wrapping
its long tail around your left lung.

Palm presses glass and the damp
July air glues your hair to neck.
You step onto the concrete

want its solid punch on your soles,
your feet are so distant.
Sun's glare off passing cars

is washed and polished in your eyes.
Your head hovers above your body,
colors dissolve, drift into shades of silver.

A siren howls past,
the leaden sky presses down.
In the distance, a church bell marks time.

Post-Op

Sixteen hours later. Conversation exhausted,
we doze on cramped vinyl couches,
purses for pillows. A twilight of murmuring voices,
muffled TV, feet padding by, slight rustle of fabric.
One more agonizing hour beyond when we expected
to see you. Dad is hiding in a newspaper. Charlotte is
counting dots in the ceiling tiles. Finally the family
name is called out in metallic monotone and
we are sent to recovery, to you. Your face is
colorless; even your lips are drained and lie
like two pale eels across your slack teeth. Tubes of
clear liquids plunge into your arms, legs
tying you to sleep. If you had only taken care of
yourself, if you only cared enough, we wouldn't be
here right now. I want to reach my hands
to grasp your cold white shoulders and shake you till
your head rattles into consciousness, want
to scream at you and slap your face until it is
ripe with pink finger marks. My knees shaking
and I bite blood from my lip trying to look strong,
for them. I always had to be strong for them:
you were too busy being weak, the golden sherry
gleaming in the never-empty juice glass. Me, the protector
who shielded Charlotte from your rages. Me, the mother
who peeled you from the toilet where you dozed to march
you off to a loveless bed. Me, the one who decided to quit
at seventeen. You came, took away the blade waiting
at my wrist, locked me in a blanket with your arms,
rocked me and said: *Don't. Because I love you.*
Those words stuck in me, harpoons dragging
the carcass along with the boat.

Uninvited

The thing is, it's wrong
on so many levels:
this small, dark bird
sitting in the middle
of our dining room table,
squawking and flapping,
staring us down with his
polished jet eyes.
What's that doing here? you ask,
lifting a forkful of peas.
I don't know, I tell you
I certainly didn't invite it.
But I watched him in our yard
riding a swaying tree branch
like a sleek, black cowboy
on a rowdy bronco. The spread
of his wings calling to me
come in here, nobody
has to know.
And the truth is
I left the window open,
just a crack.
Now he's here,
puffing out his chest feathers,
making a show of being cock
of the walk across the table
from the small knotted rolls
to the meatloaf, pressing
one clawed foot
into the mashed potatoes.
Well, you say.
This just ruins everything.

Comet

Spectacle of travel and flame:

 hurling through the black silk sky
 trailing a luminous veil, like a woman running to
 or from the altar.

How long will it last,

 this wildfire passing?
 Boomerang orbit, long between
 visits, yet the path deeply worn.

His fingers laced behind her back
she tipped her chin toward the moon
birds flushed from the marsh
his lips on her throat
a soft brushing of wings

 These are only traces
 of stardust. Even the speed of light
can't make this right
here, now.

On Eating a Peach, Mid-Winter

Soft, fully ripe, you split it open.
Fragrant juice pours out --
you daub it with your finger, press
it behind each of my ears, between
my breasts. I shiver,
January drafts dancing
with the heat inside.

Insomnia

Each breath in and each breath out
brings a rumbling that would rival
a gang of Harleys revving in the drive.

I stare at the faint stripes of light
cast by the streetlamp through
the blinds. Amazing

that it doesn't wake you.
I think about chin straps, nose
strips, herbal remedies, all

useless.

I consider separate
bedrooms, stare at the back
of your head. Small hairs jut from your nape

like a row of soft teeth. You left that bowl
on the end table, the pistachio ice cream
leavings will be disgusting green concrete

in the morning.

How many times has
your knee curled into the back of mine just
like that, hair on the front of your thigh

painting the back of mine with
little shivers? How many more
will I get?

I study the rhythm

of your chest as you grind
your breath past your sluggish tongue.
I could elbow you. Push

you on your side
until you hush. Instead,
I enjoy this music of your breathing.

Golden Anniversary

We strolled through the field of shoulder-high
grass, thin green fingers tickled our bare arms, lush
tassles released seed as we brushed
past. We stumbled into a flat space, blades
pressed into a neat mat. A deer bed,

and we curled down into it like roots,
the dense, tangled shoots cool against
our skin. You placed a small blue egg
in my palm. Words we scattered there,
took hold, grew - thick woody vines
that now bind us. What the light reveals

at dusk: two smooth green snakes
entwined on a slice of sun-warmed slate.

Private Pool

gravity conquered

I am a feather

a leaf

graceful

I dream of fins

iridescent scales

gills

My Sister Takes Care of Me After Surgery

After a week and a half
of broth - two ounces three
times a day, I am finally
allowed to eat.

You bring me hummus
in a small bowl
with a silver spoon.

Eat, you say.

I eat, bites the size
of Japanese beetles
like the ones that climbed
on the raspberry canes. We'd pick
them off and drop them
in the bucket - soapy water
to do them in, preserve the crop.

One got preserved
in some jam, and you
got the lucky jar, the only one
with a beetle.

You always win the prize

I joked as you threw
away the jar. And now
you bring me hummus
in a small bowl with a silver spoon.

Lemon awakens my tongue
as the soft grit of chickpeas
smooths across my teeth
my throat opens to the weight of it.

I scrape and lift until
the small bowl is empty,
lick the spoon clean.

I tell you the truth:

I've never had better.

Emergence

After my belly was cut, rearranged,
it comes to this: Solid ground rises
from receding tide.

My fingers map new land: outcropping of jaw,
long smooth descent

down neck, brief stop

along the bowed ridge of collarbone. Peninsula breastbone juts
from ribcage shore. Here the terrain falls
into gentle waves,
a soft ocean.

In the distance, small island of hip rises,
reveals only a fraction
of itself.

My body a fraction of itself.

Gravity losing hold.

Narcissus

As luminous blades of fresh grass wave in the spring air,
trees shake out a new mop of green. I waver

on a narrow stalk, uncertain of my size or place
testing new boundaries in old spaces. Does the crocus

still perceive itself a round bulb, hiding in the dark loam
or does it revel in the slender stem and flower it has become?

I take stock of my roots to see if they still hold me
fast enough so I don't drift away, deep enough so I don't fall.

Section 3

Matins

How, out of shadow,
the drunken sun
staggers home,
tips his glass
spills sky
over the Earth's
dark carpet,
stains it light.

How we expect this.

Vespers

What is the force that forms
dust to bones, to blood
to skin? What keeps us from sailing

to bits that cling, haphazard, to lampshades
old shoes, and dresser tops?

Dog, Anagram

We believe God
made us in his image. God
believes He made Dog
in his image. I know this because God
told me so. He came dressed as a god-
damned hairy ape and I said God!
that is ridiculous! He said, I know. I hardly feel god-
ly like this. Time to get out of this god-
forsaken suit and back to some good old Dog-
giness: howling at the moon, chasing cats with dog-
ged determination, taking a good nap in a sunny spot.
He came to his senses. Thank Dog!

Genesis

The Queen of one-liners reclines on sheets
stained with the scent of sweat and boredom.
The King of hearts and tobacco sees her tight jeans
raises her one shirt open to the navel.
She reveals a hint of thigh, a silver
word caught between her yellowed teeth: *more*.

In this hand, a crisp, red apple. In the other
a limp serpent. She shakes it awake and tells
it the truth about whiskey, lies, and the big bang.

Pour her another and maybe she'll dance, or maybe
she'll turn slowly, arms hinging from pale shoulders
head draped to one side, dirty blond strands limp
on her forehead, beery eyes rolling, knowing
it's last call and she's still far too sober.

Apostate

Sunday morning
walking in the sanctuary
of Fifth Avenue
the wind quietly
asks for my attention.
I think of what it means
animated dust
and the breath of god
and I think
it has little to do
with heaven and more to do
with first human
suddenly walking
upright, stretching
toward an empty pool
of sky, seeing in it
reflections: wild angels,
beautiful devils.
Whirlwind of leaves
bursts up,
in it the voice
of god:
It is a sin.
And I know
it already,
I am sin, you
made me that way.
I poke my finger
at the leaves
they fall into a small pile. I
crush them to dust
under my heel.

Om

There is nothing but the breath /
the breath / there is nothing
but / there is / nothing but
the breath / the breath
is nothing but / there is
the breath / there is nothing
but the breath / the breath /
there is nothing