

A close-up photograph of a ceramic bowl. The bowl has a dark brown, almost black, rim and a deep blue body. The surface of the blue part has a subtle, concentric pattern. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture and color of the ceramic.

Penny Harter
One Bowl



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One Bowl

Estell Manor State Park

turkey buzzard—
red beak into its own
black wing

That gray day, wind souged in the pines, and oaks arced
full over trails that faded into green or snaked into a density
of swamp and lichened trunks.

We walked a narrow road around the wooded heart,
wondering which trail would claim us first until the wind
caught a dead limb and tossed that full weight down before
us—the loud crack fused with its swift descent.

We said the usual things: what if we'd been a few yards
further along . . . or if a car . . . then cautiously pressed on,
although we stopped to drag the heavy branch aside before
we left the loop road for a trail.

night thoughts—
my heartbeat quickens
in this dark

After the Blizzard

They say when one is dying, one's whole life runs through the mind, a kind of rapid transit time-travel. But this can happen anytime. Having lost my husband, I stare out at drifting snow while memories slip through my fingers like rosary beads.

back-yard clothesline—
diaper by diaper she grasps
the weathered pins

Now locks of all the hair I've ever cut are falling around me—snippets from the album of my past. Baby bits my mother trimmed held traces of my first birthday cake. The full-length strands my scalp lets go each day chart months of me. The two most recent inches held the sad chemistry of a year ago. I watched a young girl sweep them away.

we count the rings
in a fallen tree trunk—
how green the lichen

Tonight, as deep snow presses against my windows, I remember slow-dancing, my head leaning on my love's

shoulder, our arms wrapped around each other. I want to
dance that way again.

mating, the monarchs
seem one butterfly—
wings upon wings

Winter Stars

My neighbor fills her winter garden with oaktag cut-outs of red and yellow stars—hangs them from her bird feeder or glues them atop the planting sticks she’s left in the dirt between withered blooms. Yesterday, she knocked on my door, and I opened it to find her hands overflowing with stars—each hole-punched and threaded with yarn—a new constellation for these days of early dark.

“These are for you to hang places,” she said simply, knowing of my need for joy this Christmas season. As we smiled and hugged one another, I received them in my cupped hands. Now stars dangle from my doorknobs and brighten shadowed corners—an unexpected gift of light.

moon splinters
on the river—the glint
of ice floes

Against the Cold

This March night, a halo of haze dims the moon, and clouds hide the stars. In the grief support group, one man counts one-hundred-and-six days since his wife died, his words torn from his pain. One-hundred-and-six days. Six months. Two years. Four years. A lifetime. We circle our chairs around sorrow, share the hard work of grieving—then move into the kitchen for blueberry and cherry pie. As we leave, we hug one another against the cold. A damp wind is rising, and the road home seems a tunnel through dark stretches of pine.

someone's eyes
are staring into mine from
my baby picture

The Meaning of Life

I sit in my stalled car by the side of the icy road, hazard lights blinking and all the doors locked. I am savoring the meaning of life that burst behind my eyes as I drove down the highway into the setting winter sun. My pulse beats in time with the red warning flashes. I have not tied a soiled white handkerchief to my door handle. I deliberately let my hands leave the steering wheel, allowed the car to skate sideways across black ice.

convenience store—
half the letters dark
on the neon sign

On the Way

I'm on a train, somewhere in the middle of Virginia. Its mournful whistle floats back to me, carrying memories from long ago. Earlier, I watched the sun set over the Potomac River, ripples of red and violet caught between marshy banks.

husband dead two years—
below the graffiti, winter
weeds hanging on

Now I stare out a black window at my own reflected face, punctuated now and then by the neon of a small town, a neighborhood's streetlights, or a yellow porch light shining from a solitary house by the tracks.

moonless night—
even my two hands
have gone under

The clatter of the coupling between my car and the next lulls me. Two more hours until I get to my destination, the last stop. Yet it feels like I'm already there—on an almost empty train, hurtling through the dark.

rocking the cradle
with one foot, the mother
hums and hums

Voices in the Rain

Thinned by running water, blown on a thawing wind,
distant voices drift through bare branches, waver like
flickering stars. Between us and those galaxies, someone
slams a window. A dog barks. A faint train whistle rides
the clouds, going somewhere. Riddles rise and spill onto the
blacktop in the parking lot out back. Mother has been dead
five years.

antique store—
the doll carriage holds
costume jewelry

White Goose Dream

Late afternoon. Canada geese wander toward me as they explore a marshy field, their gray feathers mottling the green. Sunlight stoning their backs, they sink into the coarse grasses. At the flock's edge, a white goose, the only white goose, turns her head to stare at me.

Staring back, I enter the field, lie down on my stomach among them, and begin to make the noise one makes between tongue and palate when calling a cat or chattering back at a squirrel.

Tick Tick Tick, I call to this bird who has singled me out. *Come to me*. Holding my gaze, she stands, shifts her weight from leg to leg, then lowers her breast to the rank and fecund Earth again and looks away.

stuck to my face
that strand of gossamer
I didn't notice

Deeper In

This late May morning I gaze into the trees, seeing as if for the first time the way sunlight splashes through the unfurled green, glinting here, dimming there—each leaf a note on a musical staff, each branch a score.

Music fills the spaces between dark trunks, spills into the occasional clearing where sparse undergrowth filters the sky. I would see deeper in, send my vision to the singing heart of this woods.

finding again that stream
I vaulted as a child—trusting
the other side

I drive home still humming this morning's hymn, *Shall We Gather at the River*, my voice rising to join the rest.

years behind me—
what bird just flew across
the road ahead?

Adagio Sostenuto

in music, a tempo meaning “slow and sustained”

Adagio Sostenuto—tempo for the first movement of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, a piece I remember playing in my early teens before I abandoned piano lessons. My fingers caressed the keys, the sensual rhythm of the notes rolling up my wrists into my arms, shimmering with a fantasy of moonlight on the water, cool sand on my feet, and someone special holding me on some shore.

Decades older now, I live by the sea, sift sand through my fingers and lower my hands into the rippling surf, searching for the perfect shell that shows itself briefly before going under the next wave.

Now my hands play you, paced to your sleeping breath, lingering on the contours of your face, your cool torso and limbs. And your hands skim my flesh, delicately tracing the shell-like curves of my ears, the slopes of my breasts. Adagio Sostenuto, a tempo for our summer afternoons.

in the old garden
the sundial’s shadow still
measuring

Low Tide

Low tide this late afternoon, and a number of horseshoe crabs have washed up—living fossils, dark mounds whose long tails are arrows on some map, waymarks along the tide line.

breasts and male genitals
drawn side-by-side in wet sand—
a child runs through them

One Bowl

As I load the dishwasher this evening, I think about how it would be to have one bowl, one fork, one spoon, one knife, one cup . . . and one small shelf to keep them on. Washing these by hand after each use, I would raise each piece to the light to contemplate its shining singularity.

One bowl—cupped hands. Which bowl would I choose from the many I possess? A small bowl my late husband bought at a private school crafts fair thirty-five years ago, its form born from a student shaping clay on a wheel. Brown lines criss-cross its white glaze, triangles circling the rim.

One bowl, one spiral on a potter's wheel, one orbit of a planet round its host, pulling the spectra of a star's gaseous fire from red to blue, and back. One bowl, one arm of the Milky Way slowly wheeling through the unfinished round of the sky in the iris of your eye. One . . .

winter hive—
the cluster of bees
vibrating

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