

The Language of Leaves

Fall tipped and balanced and then tipped again and the aspens made holes in the dark pines and we all fell in together and didn't come out until the snow fell and even then we only climbed up to the very rim to make sure it was still there before sliding back down again into a giant bowl of nothing—a vacuum when Fall breathes out and out like a death rattle—the dried up leaves blow off and down and across the roads and gutters and sidewalks sounding like a sigh—a last whisper in the ear—some secret that I had waited for all my life—some word some sign that now came in the sound of the dried leaves and not human words but saying the same thing—the same no-thing—the same leaving and breathing out that I had always heard my whole life at my leaving mother's side—trying and trying to make out the meaning like a language of leaves that I had once understood but *no longer...no longer* and yet *something* remained and I listened and heard and some part of me understood—*that what had always been—was going to be again—was right now*—that nothing had changed or ever would change and yet I tried for change—tried to talk to my leaving mother using the human words that I loved so much—and I gave her my new poetry collection—just published—gave it like a small child bringing home her first drawing from kindergarten—and in just the same way my mother held it upside down and said, *How nice!* and *Are trees really purple?*

Purple trees held the secret—and I tried to share that with her—even upside down you could say the roots were the same as branches and can't you see how it doesn't matter how you look at it—just that you *listen* and wait for the language of leaves and the silence of paintings and the imagination of hope and all will be clear for *just a moment*...like a mirage in the desert and then gone...when all you wanted was water every day...but the mirage stays with you longer than *any* glass of water and comes back in different ways and forms and *never* dies even after you die—as dreams told me every night when I dreamed I was being asked to make a choice—the light...or...the dark—and I always chose the dark—but when it came time to *go* there I turned away and walked back into the light—and my mother walked the other way into the dark and I called and called and said, *Where do you find the courage to go into the dark?* She said nothing but turned her back on me yet again and just kept walking.

Fall tipped us over and then we caught ourselves and did not fall and yet we walked as though always trying to regain our balance—like in a heeling sailboat—never quite succeeding—never quite failing—and so we kept going while the leaves fell and silence...took over where they had once whispered and sighed and my mother no longer told stories about her parents and the Depression when they ate fake chicken legs made up of ground pork since there were no chickens left and how her family all went out to stay on her

aunt's farm where there was food enough for everyone and her mother was happy since she had always loved her sister and had gotten so sick after the sister first married that she almost died and the family finally sent her out to live with her sister so she could recover...and I wondered how my mother could have missed out on all those strong feelings...but then she never had a sister but I had two and the feelings were not strong but not weak either—they were not unlike the candle aspens flickering and flickering in the wind but taking a long time to go all the way out—even when I eventually tried to douse them with my great-grandmother's silver candel snuffer they came back to life like trick birthday candles and I had to face the fact that they would be there forever and even my feelings for my mother would flicker on and on long after she was ash—like the stars so far away they were dead and alive at the same time—and that's how it was with my mother when I looked at her—she was dead and alive at the same time. When had she died? Had she ever been alive? Did it matter if all I had in my firmament was the memory of a dead star? It was my star—it was all I had—all I had ever had.

Holes

Full of holes... Fall is the beautiful time as death is the beautiful time and my sisters opened and fell into their own holes that grew and grew the more they fed them and were never full—always bigger and emptier until I began to dream of mouths—a world full of mouths instead of people and always eating as my mother always ate—always had an empty plate by her electronic chair that was capable of launching her into outer space with the touch of a button.

Full of holes were the mountains where the yellow fires had burned out and left swathes of grey—full of holes were we where the monster-dreams had eaten pieces of our flesh away—like lepers we lurched about—and the Fall full of holes—and my yes now husband full of holes—and my own lovely middle-aged body full of holes exhausted and wounded and torn with pushing and lifting and hauling the freight of my mother and the weight of her things...were *all* full of holes—and yet—full as Fall is full—when it empties itself into winter and fills the air with a crisp taste of apples and wet.

We were full of holes—full of ceramic sky and tiles of leaves underfoot on the river path where the mountain lion denned in spring and the woods were full of holes where some trees posed naked and some shed a last lace of leaves while others still wore silk robes that winked in the full Fall light and through the

holes we could see and see and see hills we could never see in summer and birds on bare branches and rose hips like abandoned kisses amongst the thorns until our eyes filled with emptiness and like the lips of pitchers began to fill us up and up with holes and air and a kind of colorless glimmer like a lake in the distance just a taste of silvery breeze on the tongue that changed us from wound to window...and my yes now husband looked *through* me...and I looked *through* him...and our house for the first time made sense.

Sisters Seven

Sisters—seven sisters coming up in the east at the beginning of winter when the wind begins to blow after the long monsoon and everything dries out and is clean and sharp and the stars rise and billow in the sky and the world is a windy liquid place all push and tide in air and sky and even the hills seem like huge waves and my seven sisters rise and fall down the night sky like the foaming crest of a wave *and what do they say?...what do they say?...these sisters rising and hanging and waiting and falling down the billowing sky—pushing like a birth—like a hand—like a song that rises from inside and pushes itself out into the world where it can be heard—whose song is it? Is it the song of winter?...or the song of planet or galaxy the sisters sing? It is for me and not for me—it is larger than that—the pushing of wind and water and stars but I hear it anyway and when I hear it I too sing and then I am a sister and not a daughter to a dying mother—although maybe I’m that too—daughter to the dying mother earth and the dying real and crazy mother in her wheel chair humming around the old folks home and getting lost in all the long halls and having to be searched for and led back to her cave of TV and phones and I am a daughter and not a daughter—I am a sister—one of seven...or seven trillion...rising in the evening in winter—the beginning of winter—they herald it these sisters and I shed my flesh and send my words out for me into the sea of billowing space and we sing together the music of the spheres...and you really*

can hear it if you close your eyes and listen and then the real and crazy sisters are not so loud with their cement and elephant flesh and the repetition of old curses and spells that they chant and chant and chant turning the turning of the year into a grotesque burlesque of holiday sticky tinsel—strangling garlands—and the ever present threat of a visit.

Sisters...my sisters...meet me in the billowing place the black and spangled space that falls all the way down to the ground where we stand *so close* we can touch the stars one by one and feel their electric tingle and close our eyes and breathe them in—the tingle and the glitter and the singing that is a white and silver singing that you too can do if you close your eyes and go into the billow and sing with me *just this once* forgetting the flesh and the curse of father and mother—*just once* let's sing a round together—the one about the bells—the one we used to sing in the choir—the polyrhythms...*hear...hear* them sing until nothing exists but the singing—and the dying mother is neither dead nor alive but somehow singing too and even the paper father is tapping to the beat and you are of the seven as am I and we billow with song and sail across the winter night and nothing and no one is dying or dead—all is turning with the turning of the year and the big song that breathes us in and out—and does not know our names.

