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YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW

Tomorrow

MY FACE LOSES STRUCTURE; MY BODY IS SWEEPED and reshaped as if from water, bones have the weight of rocks. I'm not sure I'm complaining; it's more of a rebuilding. While the earth is turning, gravity keeps everything from flying apart. Some of my words form more intricately and slowly and spin further away. I'm compiling my life, moment by moment.

The future continues rushing by even though I haven't arrived at the present. I often say what I mean, for better or worse. Yes, I'm a bit fragile, with a heart that resembles a fistful of red fish swishing long, red tails. I believe I need less sleep, but I sometimes feel exhausted. I like the way people, usually younger people, look through me. I can do what I want.

I have lost people's names in Seattle, this city of stray rain and bodies of water. I will be 63 soon and my mother will be 90. My mother is losing her teeth. She pockets her disorders, generally making them manageable. She tells me in her gravelly voice that she knows everything about dating, men, politics, and money, although she clings to many old-fashioned ideas about these subjects. I, on the other hand, recall and retain less as I grow older. I place my coffee cup somewhere and it is hard to find. My father died in 2001 but claimed to know very little about most things, even things that he had done.

What I can't do anymore sometimes surprises me. I'm a woman whose body is drying out and soon I'll borrow some bird's wings and collapse into myself, fly anywhere I want.

I could go to: *China*. Because of the Confucian tradition of "filial piety," elders are revered. But since industrialization, an "Elderly Rights Law" has been instituted where adult children are required to visit their parents or face a fine or jail sentence. Or *Korea*, where a 60th and 70th birthday are enormous celebrations. Or *Japan*, where 7.2% of the population will be over 80 in 2020 (compared to 4.1% in the U.S.), which may create new problems (From *The Week*). Or *Greece*, where "old man" or "geronda" is not derogatory. Or *Montana (Native American)*, where older people

have wisdom and life experiences, passed down to younger family members. Or *India*, where elders run the household and often care for their grandchildren. Or *France*, which passed an Elderly Rights Law in 2004 because of so many geriatric suicides and 15,000 people lost in a heat wave whose bodies weren't discovered for weeks (*The Week*).

My mother can't hear well and she sees men made of smoke. Some resemble flowers. She'll have cataract surgery soon but is too vain to wear eyeglasses.

A Part of Me Speaks

Strip off your skin, put on another. I want a tattoo but it's complicated for Jews. I want an exotic flower, wave, or animal in an exotic spot. My body doesn't behave. It's too late.

I want to be funny, to apologize, and to swallow a few stars. I want my recently dead cat back. I want all the hardware of my body and mind to keep on working. If this, then that. You should listen to me. We want a perfect place inside our heads.

I don't have the answers. It's hard to be yourself when you are a large animal in the world. Try another shape. As a child my sister believed in "Lillitoes," toes that spoke and made her cry, asking her to get down on her knees in sorrow. I believe our bodies speak to us, tell us what hurts.

It would be fun to dance in the air, even if I am asleep. I like going to the abandoned room within me, a dark, ruffled one with a small window, an old bed, a worn desk and chair, unnecessary objects fading in and out. This is where I write.

You, Too, Can Do This to Yourself

My ex-husband used another name when he was gambling, Jack Glaze. Before I discovered this, I would occasionally call a few poker places in Missoula, Montana, and ask if my husband was there. Describing him was his undoing but I needed to see proof. I went to the poker room, inserted myself, stood back, and stared at him. His face turned the color of aspirin. He hissed, "Get out of here. What's the matter with you?"

My first boyfriend's father died, crumpling onto a busy New York street, everyone stepping over him.

Today

I'm learning the difference between death and life, between a cat's lungs drowning

with liquid and champagne in my mouth. I have gathered pieces of a dress I'm trying to sew together, but I have forgotten the order of the steps. Old mountains wheel themselves in front of me, changing the way they look every day, so I won't recognize them. My headaches signify something. I consider replacements for everything because they are so much confetti, ideas I must let go. My dead cat purrs as though I could make him out of anything. There are adjustments.

Open, I say to their teeth.

All the ghosts arrive.

Yesterday

My mother's boyfriend had a face full of sad longing and whitening, curly hair down to his shoulders. I was a teenager and he was much older. He was animatedly, aggressively, talking about his new watch, showing me the bright flashing numbers that changed every second as he backed me into a corner of our curtained New York City apartment living room. His body pressed against mine. No one was there that afternoon when he wrapped his arms around me.

Later my new twenty-year-old boyfriend occupied the same redesigned living room. Now Plexiglas boxes, glass, and steel dominated the room. I left my mother and him sitting on a sofa, whose color I can't remember, to fetch a glass of water for her in the kitchen. They were sitting side by side, pillows with modern designs curled into their backs. Their conversation was awkward, stilted, and my mother laughed wholeheartedly at odd moments. When I returned my mother's hand was rubbing my boyfriend's leg.

Gender Instructions

My heart is not violent.

Dig a hole and fill it with a body of water.

I speak to myself during dance class.

Carve a man's body that spills everywhere.

I was created long ago as a sentence. Bone and skin.

Move your genitals this way, then the other way.

I'm disappearing into a soft body.

I'm still here.

Yesterday

Can part suffice when the rest is absent? A shadow through light could be my dead

cat, encroaching, falling. I watch a friend, who had a stroke, turn something over and over in her bad hand, objects skittering, names hovering, descriptions darting away. A fog suddenly lifts and words are glimpsed as if the brain is playing a game.

Letter to My Future Self

Dear F.S.,

I imagine being old in an empty room. A large window is occupied with fresh green speckled tree branches. Books are tucked around other books. So many selves are extracted or condensed and sifted into the person that remains.

Place a key and a monocle next to each other on a table. Step back. You see one perspective about what the key opens. People hurt. Maybe it's the key to the just-lit room in which you are old. Put on that silly monocle. Enter. You are a stranger. You peer out the window at a garden where tentative raindrops begin to fall. One eye is blurry. The eye with the monocle sees a blue hydrangea with ashen birds alighting. You like both views, tell yourself two stories that, with enough practice, will sound true.

Today

As I grow older, bones gnarl, muscles form knots. When I speak, it often feels like a monologue. The distance between my skin and brain is shortening. I bleed differently. I could be a broken radio. I could be a television webbed with cracks. I could be a peeling raincoat that spills forth you-name-it.

The first recorded prosthesis was Indian Queen Vishpala, a woman warrior in Rigveda (approximately 3500-1800 B.C.) who lost her leg in a night skirmish called "Khela's Battle." Her fellow fighters fashioned an iron leg so she could continue. (*Institute for Preventive Foot Health*).

- In a Seattle park I watch the face of a child digesting information from a computer tablet. Or is the tablet patiently devouring her?
- I am signaling my refrigerator for more and better food.
- I am ready for new inventions but not the new selves we create for them.
- I have too many opinions. Humans as representations of words and ideas that will outlive us.

I've already learned the types of prostheses: hip or knee, arm or leg, tooth or eye, joint or palate, breast or penis. Many of my friends have had replacements. One of my stepfathers had a penile implant. Inside their bodies are artificial hearts and lungs. In

2007, 1.7 million people lost a limb in the U.S. (unpublished paper from Johns Hopkins and *Disabled World*). Cosmesis refers to prosthetics that look real, with appropriate age spots, freckles, veins, tattoos.

Tomorrow

Time arrives like a familiar relative wearing that terrible scarf you hate. You don't know what gift or curse it will bring, gratitude, regrets, disappointment. I want to abandon most of my belongings. We are all mundane and miraculous and everything passes.

Some dinosaurs evolved until their enormous bodies outweighed their brains and every gesture became too difficult. Birds shrank and were distilled from other species, reptiles, or flightless, featherless, wingless creatures. Elephants evolved from small aquatic animals. They grew larger, their trunks lengthened, limbs grew longer, and their feet shortened. More than 99.9% of all species that have ever existed have become extinct. (Mills, Scott, *Conservation of Wildlife Populations*).

Letter to My Other Future Self

Dear O. F. S.,

I follow you onto a merry-go-round; we talk and I rip up your ghost; I trail clouds, fascinated by their evolving shapes. I can't make anything happen.

It's hard to know when to stop. My head is full of ideas, full of teeth eating everything. Tonight the wind is loud but brings me nothing. I'm older for lost reasons. I look up a little bit later. I don't count years anymore. Point, shake, then pour the rest. I believe in the theory of making yourself clear in the world. But I'm not sure I'm really here. ☹