



WHAT
REMAINS
AT DAWN

a collection of 2019 escapril poems

BY LISKA PLEINES

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these poems were written as part of a project started by savannah brown. she published a prompt for every day in april and whoever participated sought to create a piece that related to that prompt. each prompt simultaneously serves as the title for the corresponding poem.

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www.twitter.com/lisk_ah

www.lisk-ah.tumblr.com

www.instagram.com/chewingmemories

*for a while i was so afraid i would run out of words.
that someday there wouldn't be any words left for me to use.
but april showed me that there will always be more words
if you give them the time to come to you.*

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THE FIRST WEEK

a fresh start

on this infinitely confusing journey remember three things:

1. each morning is a promise
a fresh start waking you with gentle fingertips,
the sun's light softly combing through your hair
and it loves you.

2. your body is a wild thing that cannot be tamed.
that will not rest inside itself.
that is not a tiger but a thunderstorm
your voice a warning bell
traveling up from the pit of your stomach
to meet you in your throat
and it loves you.

3. there is light all around and within you and the two
are so desperate to touch hands.
let the osmosis heal you
let the brilliance pour out of you
and trust in the breaking of light.
trust in your fluorescence. trust,
that if there is good in everything
there must also be good in you
and it loves you.

*so tomorrow take a deep breath
brush the dust from under your eyes
collect all the things about you that you cannot love
and try again.*

april showers

i think about april and how the temperatures
climb up to twenty-five degrees sometimes.
about how last week i wore a skirt out and then
within the blink of an eye
it was cold again.

i think about you.
about the soft humming of your voice that i still hear.
about how april was the last month
where i felt like i could ever really reach you
even though i told no one this.

there is shame
in everything we do.

in how for example everyone complains
about the sticky april heat
and yet
sighs at a suddenly overcast sky
cranes their neck in anticipation of rain
begging it to lay off for just one more moment.

or in how i undressed you like a sweet thing
when we both knew you weren't that at all.
when we both knew sometimes
you had claws for words.
maybe the only thing you ever really were like
was that sticky, sticky heat
in april.

i can conjure up the smell and feeling
just before an april shower
within seconds.

the stillness of the air.
the expectant murmur of flowers
opening their arms toward the sky.
you feel like you can't breathe or
you'll miss it

that's what your sweetness always felt like:

one blink and it was over.
one breath and
it was like it never even
happened.

incorporate music

(after *greek tragedy* by the wombats)

We're late but
our
sense of
landing better Darling you're tired
We'll build a home
Here

anxiety

muscle memory

think: i know nothing else. this is muscle memory.

think: breathing is the only thing everyone knows how to do
without having to think about it.

think: breathe

breathe

breathe.

back to nature

today
my lungs hang from the sky like a lonely cloud
my skin stripped off like a heavy coat that i draped over a branch to dry
my exhales the air
my sweat
the water
something else needs to exist.

i crack my ribs and scatter them
across the seas
watch them sink
to feed the fishes.

fill my belly with soil
make myself entrails turned garden
body turned home as i lay
fingers rooted in the wet grass
like buds.

i think:
take me back
take me back
take me back.

because this is
how everything i know of is made:
from rubble, from ash
from dirt.

nostalgia

we kiss
on the doorstep of my parents' house
messy tongues and wet
teeth chattering with desperation
she says something like *remember when*—
then stops as if remembering herself

wraps her
warm fingers around the nape of my neck instead and
pulls me
close

she stays
because the bed without her
is cold and the house empty
and i fill myself with her
with the smell
of nivea cream on cracked skin
the sea on a wind still day
and eucalyptus

we part
in the morning when day breaks and i say
breaks
because there is nothing gentle about it
i miss her
in five different languages
but never as much
as when she's here

in the evening hours when i am all guts
when my insides are out
she calls
after all
her voice the sound of seagulls
distantly screaming their loneliness
into the wind

start with a time of day

midnight
is when the moon starts pulling you
from inside yourself
like all the water
you are
has suddenly become the tides.

you get up
stumble
on your way to your bedroom window
and lean out over its frame
like you will be able to touch her
like this.

you think how much you'd rather it
was summer now.

you think
there must be thousands of poems
written about the way
the night drapes over you sometimes
and makes everything sink
but how nothing so far could ever quite
describe the way that feels.

you think: *my god,*
however much drowning
there is always the moon.

THE SECOND WEEK

a love poem

loving you meant
breaking my body apart
and putting it back together around where you lay.

meant spending nights awake
just looking and looking
at you and the dent your head made in the pillow.

thinking bodies always feel heavier when they sleep.

thinking this must be
what love feels like.

focus on the colour

the first time you touched me
i exploded into a colour
i had never seen.

it was something like the sky in spring
when the sun has just set.
lavender blending into pigeon blue
and indigo at my tips
but not quite.

maybe it was more the colour of that last light in summer
that touches everything
and paints the air all shades of salmon and thulian pink.
that makes every bird bow its head
in awe and with their last breath sing the sky to sleep.

*or maybe it went like this:
you touch me
and i become
the north star at dusk.
glistening, flickering in her wake.
always lonely
but always brilliant.*

femininity

she nurtures, builds
pours herself out over
all the aching of this earth.
has to hollow out her stomach with both fists
to be whole.

has to portion herself bite sized
be luscious, drip sweetness from all fingertips
so soft that everyone can suck the pulp right out of her
and she has to want this. hold still. say:

*why don't you take a little more
if you're still hungry.*

until there is only
the pit left to clatter
against her hip joint.

and maybe this is only thing you know
how to be a sweet empty thing
to invite the hurt to make itself comfortable in your bones
to rattle inside yourself.

but to give this up
(to let the world give you up and to
let it brace all this pain without your hands
pressing its mouth against your beating heart)
will be the bravest thing
you ever have to do
to survive.

not from your perspective

i wonder what it's like
to only ever see part of me
to never know me whole

i wonder if that is why so many eyes
look up to me and cry

if their voices could travel
the distance to reach me
would i understand what they say?

would i hear of love
of songs
of wind
and wonder
but never know them whole?

here it is always still
always quiet
here it is only darkness
and occasionally
the sun bravely smiling
into an endless dawn

spring cleaning

you know how once you really live somewhere
it can never be fully tidied?
how something is always out of place how
your heart is a messy bedroom, all doors wide open
to invite remembering to settle on your arteries like dust

spring clean is just another word for the attempt to
– all at once
get rid of the dirt and grime that has built up
on our irises over the course of a whole year

did you hear that? a year

my yellow curtain stirs in a breeze and i blink
turn back to work
think: *scrub*
until your fingers are bleeding
or else
it won't
count

celestial bodies

the moon hangs heavy in the pale
blue afternoon sky like a white grape
or a lightbulb.
in the wake of her radiance as
wispy clouds stretch their tired arms around her
i remember

that even though all the moon does
is reflect the sun's light
she is still a thing of grace
and still loved
and still something.

make it rhyme

you flick, i kick
until my legs come loose
say fast: how vast
 the extent of our truce?

you shake, i break
the sky rips open wide
say fast: who's passed
 your thoughts since i have died?

you turn, i burn
but only after dark
say fast, at last:
 what am i sans your spark?

THE THIRD WEEK

describe a smell

do you ever think about the smell of dust
and how it clings to every unmoving thing?

how some mornings are so long they stretch like brittle rubber bands
and you think your body, too, must be collecting dust?

your chest so heavy

you smell that old box in the back of the closet

- that stack of paper
- that
bag of clothes or
- bodies under the bed
- and mothballs

every time you breathe.

when you lie like this

and pieces of dust flicker through the early sun's light

and they turn and spin with every exhale despite how shallow

think about how it is almost like

the sunlight is breathing alongside you.

when you inhale, sneeze

all of the glimmering particles

will in unison sigh

and twirl in an upwards spiral toward the

ceiling of your room as if to say:

come, rise, dance.

it takes so little to move dust

so far.

any dreams?

in my dream
there is a tower. there is
always a mouthful
of stairwells fighting
to swallow me
tarish silence
filled only with
the cacophony of my steps
echoing into eternity.
so i tiptoe into the maw
and dare not breathe.
i climb and i climb
but when reach the top
there is nothing there:
no air no sound no light.

body as a friend (or foe)

your body has loved you
since the beginning of everything
has tried to make peace with you
every day it wakes you up
and softly, tenderly
warms away the cold of the night.

your bones have carried you
for as long as you live and not once
demanded you love them back.
look, how strong. your heart beating,
without anyone asking it to.
without anyone listening.

look, pinch yourself
and see
the bruise blooming
see
how much your body is fighting for you
to stay alive.

a happy place

— *a case study on mermaids*

on average our bodies are sixty percent water and to be honest
i have always felt more dead sea than human.
that i must be
more salt than blood

in waning the moon pulls at my chest and i swim out like i am
pretending to follow the tides
when actually

i am
the tides.

out, out

until we become one again.
until the moon cannot possibly pull me any further from home

or maybe
closer to home.

maybe this is home.
maybe when i can finally touch the reflection of her face in the water

that is home.

without your name, who are you

with a flick of the tongue
a stutter of lips
my jaw clenches
around a mouthful of petals

this apathy
this soil in my belly
was not meant to nurture
has never done anything but
drown out all light

but still
a bouquet of peonies
reaches up from my throat
wanting out
garishly pink and sweet

and
beckoned by the sugary smell
a single bee
flits around my head
crawls behind my locked teeth
and builds a home there while
humming
the loneliest song

a liminal space

liminal space | noun

lim-i-nal | li-mə-nəl

1. also: waiting space¹, an intermediate state²
2. *lat. root*: limen (*eng.*: threshold³)
3. space where you have left something behind,
but you have not yet found something else⁴

¹ you've bled your resilience dry to its riverbed
your breath moves every word
across the desert basin of your belly like tumbleweed
i know
but there is something wonderful
just waiting to be found by you

² waiting on the brink of tomorrow
in the damp corners of your eyes
watching as you sleep and dream
of purple oceans
and a turquoise sun

³ it has always been there just not
its time
you had to feel hollow
for a while
to make sure you're all dry
with not a drop
of before left in you.

⁴ and how good it will feel
to pass over that ridge
to see the other side of this dune
to finally do the thing you are meant to do
at exactly the right time.

it's the end of the world

– *the gospel according to judas*

today it's the end
of the smallest of worlds
as we stand shaded
only by mulberry trees and it's summer
real summer.

and he says *you must*
kiss me with all that is in you
and don't make them believe for one second
you love me.

and i say *love*
echo it back into him
love
and he cups my face like the gentlest of winds
and it feels like he is already gone when he does this.

love is everywhere
he says
you need just look
and his words collapse into my palms and i want to eat them
like a ripe fruit and bruise my lips.

he says *don't wait for me*
speaks with the certainty he will be back
as if the knife is not already in his side
and i say *but i will*
but i will, but i will.

they penetrate the sanctuary of this love silently
and i kiss him and do not linger
step back and watch as they take him
and i know he will die.

but when he looks at me then
with so much grace and he smiles
the sun doubles over itself and
it feels as if not he but i must die
and all regret bleeds out of me and
tints the grass and my feet red.

THE FOURTH WEEK

nourishment

don't starve people of the things
you are certain they can't stomach
instead
plate all your organs carefully
even the ones
that aren't
pretty and sprinkle an extra pinch
of ache on top

marinate your flesh in all that you are
place
a knife and a fork and have them
recline at the table and come and
wait on them

let them take a bite
chew, swallow
feast and then
just wait
you will see
they will want to drink up
every last bit
of juice
too

when the party's over

when the party is over
this is
just another year that will make us
too afraid to do anything about it.

that will sit between our shoulder blades
like a lonely firecracker
and whisper of new beginnings
whisper of all the tomorrows there will be
sing of the sun and crawl into our ears in
summer where it will eventually
die.

we will knock on each other's clavicles
like wishbones and imagine us birds
revel in the hollow sound we make
when we close our eyes
and we will dream
of hands and winter and flying and think about
how good everything will be
once we finally get to start all over
again.

liar, liar

untrue things that i tell myself

as we share a bottle of wine in the searing afternoon heat:

- i never think about
my teeth swimming around in my mouth like fish or how long it would take to
pluck every single hair off my body one
by one or what it would be like
to kiss you

- at night there is silence in my head and my room alike and i dream of nothing. not
your hands not your eyes
not the hum of your voice echoing out of my subconscious mind. never,
never that.

- there is not a single day
that i have spent regretting what i made you believe was true:
that there are universes in which i do not know how to spell your name. that i do not
love you in any other way than this. that there will be someone who will hold your
heart like a new-born bird and that this someone won't be me.

- i never loved you
- i never loved you
- i never loved you

pick an animal

when i was fourteen my cat brought home a small bird
crawled under the sofa and nestled in between the balls of
dust and dirt and let its neck go.
not fully
just enough
for it to scream.

there is something bone chilling
teeth rotting spine cracking about
the cry of an animal that knows it is about to die
and wants its last exhale to be remembered.

like when
my stepfather called me one day and it was morning
and his voice broke as if his throat was trying to
become its own separate thing
and i thought of the bird
because i think i made the same sound then.

that night
i watched him take a half dead bird outside
for the second time.
snap its neck to end the crying
leaving only a small spot of blood behind on his white shirt
in remembrance of an ache
of an existence
as large
as my thumb.

girlhood / boyhood

darling, remember that time you lay on your stomach
in the living room and counted the crumbs
of your innocence all over the floor?
you did smell the smoke didn't you, baby?
were you the one who started the fire?

don't think arsonist, sweetie
think
girl who remembers that time she left a soft pink
chicken breast in the pan for too long and
watched it turn hard bitter black

because that's what you want, honey, isn't it?
to turn all of your pink parts black
your soft parts hard
make yourself bitter so no one
will dare take a bite again

i'm sorry sweetheart, my mistake, didn't mean to
assume
your hands ever smelled of gasoline
just because your hips didn't know
they were born into a world
that was already burning
for your flesh

the state of it all

you are. deserving of your place in this world.
you. are exactly where you need to be.

reflection

i stare down the well of coffee in front of me
and a sob claws
at the insides of my cheeks while a slow
streak of chalk swirls around in the tarry liquid
without ever touching the rim.

i think:

your reflection in water
is never truly you
when my breath ripples her face and it moves
in ways i did not teach it.

there is no metaphor to this
just me and my coffee

and her face in the mug.

i take a hasty sip, burn my tongue
and swallow
until she is gone.

think: *this is not me*
this is not me this is not
me

THE FIFTH WEEK

may flowers

some flowers grow from the same bulb
every year
their sealed lips forcing the ground to spit them out
like cherry pits
stretching toward may's morning sun over
and over and over.

and this is what it looks like
to be born again
no recollection of your before
no way to know that there is warmth now
and blooming
but that soon
there will only be autumn's teeth
and one last breath
before your head folds back
into the cold wet soil.

catharsis

i've been getting into the habit of
breaking every plate in my kitchen cabinet
and calling it catharsis
calling it dead freight
calling it whatever i need to do to survive.

at night i can feel the energy rushing out of me
into the darkness legs twitching
thinking *yes. it must always get worse before the sun.*
this is what it feels like to become.

but what if this time after worse there is only vacancy?
what if all the plates have already moved out of me?
what if after my trembling and burning there is nothing left?

maybe tomorrow once i run out of plates
i will break a cup or a bowl
glue the pieces to the soles of my feet
and call it redemption
because, really
isn't catharsis this:

the sigh of forgiveness in the morning,
allowing your limbs to be just bones wrapped in soft meat,
treating your heart like a flower or
a lightbulb,

and breathing in
without thinking about where all this air is going to go
when you are already
this
full.

acknowledgements

i want to send warmth and strength and light

to everyone who wrote alongside me. you know who you are: those who reached out and said impossibly kind words, those who encouraged me through their presence alone, those who only took my words up in their hearts to sit with them in silence, those who never read or said anything at all but were somewhere out there doing the same thing for a myriad of reasons. thank you.

to savannah for enabling me to actually finish something for once. thank you.

to everyone who put up with me locking myself in a room for half an hour to write something in the middle of our hangout. who supported me; threw kindness straight into my face, because it just hits differently when people you know quote your poems back to you. thank you.

and to you. whoever you are, however, you got here. it means the world to know you have read this. to know you wanted to take the time to see what's inside. thank you.