

# Skin's Dark Night



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A 2 R I V E R C H A P B O O K B Y

**Amy Pence**



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## Contents

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Naked Bulb

Bifurcated Iris

Blazing Star

Spiked Dahlia

Potted Lily

Purpled Clematis

Sweet Peas

Planting the Bulbs

Eclipse, or Small River Stones

Anonymous Emmanuel

Prana

Expedient Means

Sentence

Armless

Damage

For my Mother

Metonymy

Take Back

Absent Presence

House with Windows

One Shallow in the Body

Inescapable

On Waking

The Illuminated Blake

***Skin's Dark Night***

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## Naked Bulb

---

Tight bud—bulb  
from socket,

Blake's angels  
arrayed inside  
the burnished tree.  
For that visitation,  
he received  
a beating.

For this: images  
fill our heads  
with secrets.

## Bifurcated Iris

---

The dissolution  
of happiness. The soul's  
petals: a veined  
and ripped  
pigment.

Our bodies toss  
in separate beds.  
Far from each  
other.

The dead  
peer down

loathe  
to us.

## Blazing Star

---

God, the barbarian,  
tuft-like, transient  
bracing—

trails beside  
this evening's shattered  
plate glass window.

Merciless, the scattered  
shootings—

ever, ever  
in your hands.

## Spiked Dahlia

---

A trick of light:  
    feasting moths  
across the open  
body.

    Certainly, the soul  
feeds its own: velvet  
and rapturous.

    Certainly, the young  
girls closed down  
their essentials.

Hair  
tangled with semen,  
the death instinct—  
faceted,  
thick.

## Potted Lily

---

Vanity, not for  
her own aging hands—but  
for all the delicate  
roots earth  
left in her.

                  The earth, left.  
My grandmother's  
solitude stolen  
from her: how

                  exacting—regret.  
Clatter of flatware  
thrown down  
on long tables  
all around.

## Purpled Clematis

---

Why does this soft text  
so resemble a body?

Lift the cover—  
let it  
saturate

steeped as we are  
in guilt,

memory, dream.

The skin's dark night  
fitful, knotted  
with wings.

## Sweet Peas

---

Not one season  
did a general need

sway me  
from planting the seeds:  
    some pearled,  
hunkered, some  
browned  
like teeth.

    Not once  
did I see  
those blooms  
as other  
than they were:

cloven ghosts,  
emptiness,

lips tangling  
across  
our arched  
and wounded  
bodies.

## Planting the Bulbs

---

Twelve open graves:  
                                  heads  
swollen and fat like  
greed, mistrust,  
anger.

                          I humanize  
you:  
bury each death.

All winter  
feel them  
transfigure.

Roots ease  
deep into my body  
unlock

red tulips that open  
ablaze.

## Eclipse, Or Small River Stones

---

There is no time to catch up to the moment  
when the girl will lose her luster.

No time like the present where we sit  
on the eve of the solar eclipse,

when we are confused by a profusion  
of dream-time lifting us

across the water, across the water.  
We are in the pall of a smog-soaked day,

sometime in the future when I eclipse the dream  
of the accident over the accident of the dream:

the car passes us on the curve of the Interstate  
and I think it might explode. It's that moment

when the poor approach the chain-link fence  
and extend their swollen palms, a dream

transposed to the wet surface of time.  
I am standing still in the desert, near

a waterfall, when the girl plunges fifteen feet,  
hitting the boulders, and I cannot change it.

A man stumbles from the rocks with blood  
on his hands and I've eaten the shadow

from the moment, because I cannot  
change. But see myself as a child bending

to pale stones in the creek-bed, smooth  
as if tumbled—only the earth is raw.

Across the water, the sad shapes: a girl falling,  
a girl raped, a girl touched with knives,

the poverty of their faces, hungry  
when they approach me.

## Anonymous Emmanuel

---

*(postcard, 1911: Laura Nelson and her son  
hanged by a mob from bridge, Oklahoma)*

All morning fog  
along the hillside  
flinty, trailed by white

figments: obsession, redemption,  
source, our sickness. What god  
lights up the sphere in

these freakish trees?  
Christ breaks from my mouth—  
dry as chalk.

Oh Anonymous Emmanuel,  
my gingham dress rusty  
with barbed wire—my soul

just lingering—fluted,  
watching my body swing  
so near me.

Pines, their barbarous spires,  
leave shadows creased  
in folds—

First noon, evening, then daybreak—  
a murderous red earth  
I cannot enter

that the men, their jeering  
have defiled. Still, the air's  
unstill. I'm spun like

a plum broken open. How  
to reconcile earth with  
the stain, my death,

my breasts still wet  
with the sap of milk  
for my Sara, my mouth

still with the unutterable—what  
I did not say, could not  
as they beat and hanged me

was *Lord, Lord*.  
Scent where honeysuckle stifles  
white with pink tongues:

laughter and the rape  
of their picture-taking, how  
they posed alongside me

my neck snapped:  
spent. Dark hats  
across their hearts.

My god eats in these  
bestial trees, my soul flees.  
Only when a weeping comes

with my people, boots  
thick with red clay, only  
when I'm cut free

do I fly, tunneling  
to earth, to heaven inside  
this soil and source.

## Prana

---

Collapsing ashes, moan, elastic the music that rose  
from the model ghetto that was Theresienstadt. A theater goes past,  
a toy animal carved and birdlike. How the appetite expands, diminishes  
until it is hollow like a flute in the cavernous maw of the body.  
Beautiful arrangement, soiling wind. In metal filings sound reflects  
all the patterns nature intends: honeycomb, coral, the shell's grave  
new underworld. I am tiny breath and hunger: grandmother, grand  
father, great uncle and aunt. Notes creation etched: not numeral,

but symphony, not gold fillings piled, but design.

Not even skin—for there is no metaphor—just sound that rises  
from throats open. Sound rises, rises, rises. In this century, sin  
will not wash free. A sin we cannot begin to enter until you listen,  
listen, listen—until your body takes it in: collapsing ashes, moan,  
the sounds that rose from Terežín.

## Expedient Means

---

She looks like a saucy ripening bean, the girl in her faded fatigues. Traffic blades beyond the bricked marketplace, festooned with flags and banners, past the open ruddy throats in the hibiscus, the twisting of some vine I don't know. She looks like creature comfort—just a little buxom and buttoned at the center with a red rhinestone, an array of rings. So the body becomes a vessel for this emptiness, expedient, open—underneath the tight soul enclosed—dreamlike in its little amphora, its tortoise shell.

She looks indelible, her blackened eye undramatic, factual. A drone as simple as the locust goes up, the poor lantana shoved out of place by cigarette butts—the alleyway flocked by tourists relegated to their last bastion of picture-taking, a phosphorescent decay. There's the clatter of the vacuous: the batterer overly familiar to us, his sloe-eyed din, his fingers in the rungs of her. These expedient means, bitten blessings, her young face smudged and iconic as any downtown billboard.

## Sentence

---

Two girls play with cards / too  
big for their palms / one  
wears a silver ring at the joint  
that rubs thumb / All  
over Vietnam water puppets  
blow and pump: manic /

triumphant. Venus de Milo:  
romance pared of excess  
How I can't let go: late 70s  
near Henderson, Nevada—  
a hitchhiker walks dazed  
her forearms severed away.

## Armless

---

Who has time for the sodden agony of angels?  
They fall, like dimes, fattened gnats  
from the heavens—

Notice the architecture of their wings?  
Easy and hinge-less they open,  
already plied by too many hands.

Who has time for their keening?

Like dying rabbits, they leave  
trails of sound you recognize:  
that old aching pressed up against the bedroom wall.

*Don't cry*, someone might be saying,  
don't cry.

Who will catch these tufted, fleshy creatures  
their beautiful dark hair floating  
past us?

Who among you  
will help me hold them?

## Damage

---

Cinematic: the gardenias  
as they brown.  
Plucking the heads / my hand  
going again and again  
to them.

These pictures  
burn steadily:  
a brazen badge like the Virgin's  
heart aflame  
or my scalp cut  
razor-thin.

My mother's glass-shorn sheets.  
Drunks: obsessive and cutting.

Draw closer: this poem speaks in tongues,  
draws its mouth across your body.

For the body is not safe.  
Never was.

## For My Mother

---

The spiral, the meander, helix vine  
to trumpet flower,  
a center of itself—small blooming embryo—  
your hands coming to my body's side  
with some fear  
we both shared,  
arranging the blankets into rungs—  
a delicate ladder, all the way up.

Salt, cell, flower, the infinite branching  
apart, the word  
wanting to have you right.  
But can't have you right, can't hold you still—  
the dim blue veins under the skin,  
the radial trumpet heart.

## Metonymy

---

Her small hands give me each puzzle piece  
the crocodile, the owl, the porpoise—  
a freight of angels. The thick  
presence in our house  
chips away at the dirty porcelain sink.  
God making his rounds or  
my dead father's hands working  
to show us the black wings  
underneath

## Take Back

---

My knees, my joints, my ligaments  
stretched in a foul midnight air, these  
insects rubbing their legs,  
the folded bodies so close  
in us. Take  
back, regret

that I did not touch  
my father's slumber, did not  
regard the dying man, did  
what I shouldn't have done,  
said, droned, my brute knowledge  
disembodied. Take  
back the beast, my  
mouth, the heat, my  
silence suffocating  
that wends,  
winds, that flies  
in every face  
to find you.

## Absent Presence

---

Inside death—the lived world  
    its immense unfixed fixity  
    green shoots of grass  
angry thrust of the amaryllis  
    its painful branching underground

Silence in a dark farmhouse  
    far from the road  
Or looming headlights  
    to illumine suburbia

There's a pathway, genealogical  
creeping below the hard and broken  
stones father, father, father  
whatever you're missing

its silence  
its oceanic quiet  
    fills the body  
inside death

There inside the body, room  
    for small creatures, room  
    for immensities, room  
    for numerous folds, unfolding  
    like O'Keeffe's *Dark Iris III*: an internal suffusion  
    pungent nautilus of gray inside death

In suburbs, in cities, in the illicit creeping heat:  
death, that machine that guts & bends  
    waking the sleepers inside  
        the sleeping  
    waking the dreams  
        inside the sleepers

The sift & visible conscious  
like a giant lidded eye dreaming, then wakeful  
    ruminating  
    nestled and nestling.  
    a lathe that runs and churns on emptiness  
    the lack  
    what we want and want  
    inside the very skin in the body  
an easeful repetition  
mother, mother, mother  
the cellist woos us, bending—  
sullen throb, into those infinite tines  
as if nothing stops,  
ever—

## House With Windows

---

The inevitable texture:  
My daughter's hand  
in my palm soothing

the various rooms  
in our bodies. How flesh  
folds, freckles like paint

on a Lucian Freud—  
a feast as her sighs ignite,  
vault our ceilings.

Each night she nurses dusk  
from sky—corridors burn  
with delicious light.

Early, the sun throws down  
its slick aegis and we grow weedy,  
soft sprockets in our hair lifting

to seed. What house within  
my house—what soul, bright  
and fluted, travels the veins'

dangerous hallways? Too soon  
to think of parting, we grow  
tufted with pink flesh—

immense, minute again—  
spiraled in skin's time—  
our ribbed and only cavern.

## One Shallow in the Body

---

As Stein tells it, our memory of the loved one occludes  
the whole. And so, I loved the back of E's neck  
for its innocence, for what remains young in a man  
though age should carry things away from him.  
Like the pale, sleek boy who appeared in our courtyard—  
moist with light, while my sister and I  
slid naked in and out  
of an old bathtub.  
He becomes sweet now, years away,  
when I touch him—his eyelashes so white  
they are frost.

But whom do I really miss, among such resemblances?  
Like stills of large animals pacing  
I can only preserve the gesture, not the source.  
Can only recall the drowsy providence of touch,  
the tender leaves of abandonment:  
how each petal curls away from the center,  
a loosening—like hair from a braid.

There was a time when I was so good  
I saw the one eye, the one curvature,  
one shallow in the body.  
Just a fragment of touch  
gave me false promise—  
that we could reside forever, there,  
in the breadth of our offerings.

## Inescapable

---

The night before an early  
morning flight, I  
can never sleep, but obsess  
on my angry tethers to earth.

Night eases its tongues—  
such remorse for the body's lost  
wings, a white lily burns  
its delicious fabric on the inside  
of my eye.

I try to excise regret  
with a scaling knife: too much love  
spent on cowards. Where are  
the dead  
I could not face?

Look for clues, always  
the angel whispers,  
holding me fast  
to him. His wings, milk-blue,  
flutter and quake  
against me  
until dawn.

## On Waking

---

(After Duane Michaels' *Spirit Leaves the Body*, 1968)

The body rises whole and complete  
    goes to the doorless  
door, passes through the houseless house.

The body hears a signal  
forthcoming, wakes intrepid,  
rimless, does not  
cling to what it had:  
    staged canopies of sleep,  
    sweet lozenges: the eyes that once  
    beheld it.

The past breaks like bread.  
The body needs not.  
Odor is not.  
No tearing betwixt, between.

Watch the body's heliotrope  
turn towards light  
enter  
the exposure—  
less, less.

## The Illuminated Blake

---

*(uses phrases from the book of the same title)*

The father's hair shows wild centrifugal terror.  
He stares not at us, but at the shear of the open hand.

And I thought you monstrous, April evenings  
when my soul grew blacker than a raisin.

Notice the frail, interlinear foliage, how  
the waxen blades of her thighs meet like graven

images—the indignity of my body, how it  
shuddered from the assault of every dying thing.

But after his embrace of pity, see how she rises  
from the word pity—face turned inward

from the perversity of separation. I wanted  
to live without seeing myself in it, naked

pollen-colored sun, split from the vast masculine  
body, contorting under the weight

of brilliance, our creation—the mistake  
of the word I gave you so easily.

See how she slips from the mastery of Urizen  
beyond the cutting fields, flaming—



## End Matter

---

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### About the Author

A professor at DeVry University, Amy Pence has published poetry and non-fiction in a number of journals including *American Letters & Commentary*, *The Antioch Review*, *New American Writing*, *Pennsylvania English* and *Sonora Review*. Several of her poems have also appeared in online journals, including *Mudlark* and *Red Booth Review*. Her interviews with Barbara Kingsolver and Li-Young Lee appeared in *Poets & Writers*. She has completed two manuscripts of poetry, one of which was a Walt Whitman Award finalist, and has begun a sequence of non-fiction essays. Pence lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her daughter Ada.



### About the Artist

Edgar Solis, with degrees from the University of Puerto Rico and The Art Institute of Atlanta, shows his fine art photography on the southeast arts-and-crafts show-circuit. For the last seven years, he has been perfecting Polaroid Image and Emulsion Transfer. This process allows him to show images in a way that often blurs the line between photography and painting. He also does black and white sepia and selenium toned prints.

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Richard Long  
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