

WATERSHED



ABBY MINOR

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petrichor
:word: // :image:

petrichor chapbook series

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petrichor chapbook series #2

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WATERSHED

*Towards whom am I floating? I'll tie a rope round your waist if you say who you are.
Remember we are traveling as relations.*

SUSAN HOWE

*Why do we talk of conquering fear, as if there would be no price to pay
for such brutal inner defacement?*

JACQUELINE ROSE

AN INTRODUCTION BY WAY OF FOUR LISTS

objects

One blue perfume bottle shaped like a bird, several buttons, a roll of black electrical tape. A long thin crystal, half purple/half clear. Three faux jade stones. An empty prescription bottle for Misoprostol dated 7/13/13, a magnet, a bit of iron shaped like a leaf. Copper wire wound round a seed pod. One Kodak video camera and unused film roll of the type used to tape JFK's death. Self-speculum exam instructions, illustrated. A square of paper with the Lonnie Holley quote that begins, "There are so many rocks and so many broken stones...". A string of paper dolls with crotch hair scribbled in.

Sometimes when I look at these things I think of the earth getting consumed by the sun. As a kid I used to propose that either everything matters or nothing matters, and I'd challenge myself to choose one. Keeping numinous objects around in boxes and baskets, I guess that's a vote. Is it foolhardier to wish to be accompanied than to suppose that we are not?

subjects

Last year I planned four rituals to correspond with four full moons. I wanted to polish off the world as we know it. Or I wanted to write a love song to Appalachian autumns and early winter, to spend time with chilly creeks, trees, seed heads, light. To sift through the stack of rags I keep, cotton stained with blood, and to think of them as leaves. Here's one leaf of grass we haven't heard much about: the one that folds together moving water, the menstruant, and the lunar mysteries. To some North Americans who have named the full moons, September's is the Fruit Moon, followed by the Hunter Moon, the Cold Moon, and the moon called Long Winter. Four is the elementary number of the so-called new world: four directions, four winds. And this world's elementary shape is a square. From where I go to access the creek I can see a variety of squares and rectangles flying in the village, a picture of pastel kittens in a basket, American stripes, Confederate stars. A few turquoise flags with the symbol of peace. Also the national flag in black and white, with a blue stripe down the middle representing fealty to the police, the thin blue line which apparently separates order from chaos. I myself often try to separate order from chaos, though I part company with my neighbors when it comes to thinking one or the other must win. More than winning I admire lines that scribble and dip, Elk Creek joining Pine Creek and then both joining Penns, before all three flow on as Penns Creek to the Susquehanna River.

occasions

Years ago I began to look up the name of each body of water adjacent to each abortion clinic in my watershed. I planned to write a poem using the names of the lakes, runs, rivers, ponds—a protection, a blessing, a thank-you card, a nature poem. I had the wide, shallow body of the Susquehanna in mind, most supremely unnavigable river, river which lassos in the mid-Atlantic waterways to become the headwaters of the great shellfish bay. It's the river that's right there, it flows in front of the clinic I went to in Harrisburg on the day after I turned twenty-eight. In fact the clinic website advertised "river-front views," and there would have been, only they had to keep the windows covered so we couldn't see the picketers between us and the water. I really wanted to see the water. And because I couldn't, I wanted to even more; and soon wanted to see and name the water that could be seen from every clinic window, the water moving freely night and day, the waters not divided, not parted, but converging in tonnage, inexorable marble colors. Unfortunately, when it came to finding all those water names, I ran out of steam. I had already finished a whole book of poems on the subject, and I couldn't stomach spending that much time

on internet maps. So I went to the creeks and took notes; I did rituals as a substitute for writing the poem I didn't have the energy to write. And then wrote poems, anyway. Basically I watched leaves fall into the water, gold-on-gold. I saw blue herons and clouds the color of cold vaporized fuel. And then at night, when I could see the heavy light in the black sky, I put the rags on my body and the crystal on the floor, sometimes in the bath. Are the poems themselves spells? Do they make something happen? Mary Ruefle: "The moon *making a poem possible*... what can we say about that?"

images And what can I say about the stone face, the woman's shadow, the cactus, the rose? The desert, the parking lot, the lake shore. The photographer, my friend the great artist Harriet Rosenberg, taking these photos all over North America: "Home Girl—Frida's House"; "Home Girl—Zócalo"; "Home Girl—Rainy Lake, Ontario"; "Home Girl—Wal-Mart Flowers." These titles written in pencil below each photo, developed cheaply and glued to ready-made blank greeting cards. In these images her shadow always appears, archaic across a wall or Jurassic on the ground. I have one enlarged and framed over my tub; untitled, the shadow against something prickly with red flowers, thorns like darning needles thick in a row. I also had a stack of the cards lying around as I took creek notes and conducted the rituals and wrote the poems. Harriet died a month after I finished the rituals and so she became, slowly, more and more powerful each season. I bathe in her shadow I place rudimentary cut paper artworks next to the gray ribbon of incense smoke.

AKM
Aaronsburg, Pennsylvania
December 2019

1. FRUIT

September, the brown waters go
electric, they overtake
evening, overtake air ::::::::::

September is a gridded month
crossed by the crystal, horizontal
weight of bullets and the vertical, silver
weight of pears. Interstitial in the tiny blaze of white
aster light ::::::::::

I go to where the creek is cut
like a lamp from the dusk,
I fill a narrow-necked bottle :::::::::: I harried
imagine the white plugs of my fingertips
seen from below. The earth spits
sharpness of autumn
olive, then gunshots

:::::::::: and gunshots across the fields.

In the first few premonitory hours of menstruation
In underbrush what glints the color of an old tinged
red marvelous deep rage go ragged

the waters are sturdy not formless,
one deer ::::::::::
crosses slenderly in the diffuse beam. Two others

shuffle in the roughcast waiting
rooms of golden-
rod by the side of the road. In the felt
::::::::: shoehorns of their listening trucks
haul limestone and saintly white chickens,
rocks and feathers ferried through the dark.

In the vapor of my own beam
dissolving down the mountain
from work, dark provisional, on the way home this

is not a careful ritual though bodies cross

as blue legs
in hide. Poem collapses in the big floods,
in the high fields. So home to medicine with
water made mystic by force of design.

: :: :: :: : 9/25/18

September's kitchen is full of dishes, dark
as a little leaf laid in thorns
the plain hour, the hour forms
a mark where I heat
my measure of creek water with rose.

Traveling towards the urgency of cloth
stained with my long-
ago stains, such cotton
soaked in taciturn delicacy of creek
and dried petals of rose, laid on like a skin
and covering my eyes
to see through
to see into the stains
using the stains to see
by candlelight, laying them on
to transmit patterns and plant gold,
though rituals have technical difficulties (cloths
cool off too fast and I get cold) still there is
the smell of recovery, recovery & not
to delay, this single fox bone
placed above my head, above
my eyes closed beneath stains & night
the beloved conditional getting
ready to bleed
ready to see
through
ready to bleed through Hi
moon, I see you

*As I myself bear the mercy I cleave silver
through picketers and barricades
to the face of a great benevolence carved in stone
her chinstrap of shadow and brightened with moss
I declare that I am one of them
one of the spotlight shufflers
in color gels, in hiding clothes*

falling into other trees
 I come to the creek
 to stop writing about children
 a new man of
 a new man of
 Although I believe every war
 have ever written about
 holding
 my
 Mind upon
 the red tattered
 cloth
 My third eye
 the water
 shed
 in the
 cemeteries we sell cheese fries
 to raise \$ to maw.

2. HUNTER

Gladness of leaf color
in the water like flat jewels :::::::::: autumn
equinox and its aftermaths,

instigated by the crash of a tree pole
 falling into other trees I come to the creek to stop writing
about abortion, to don a new mantle of Nature
Poet!—Although I believe
every word I have ever written
about a blood stain in the shape of a wolf whipping
 dry on the line qualifies me
 as a poet of nature, no matter
how many editors do not agree.

So I include the most aglow yellow
 leaves the mosquito who
needles me the depths ::::::::::
and humors of history the men
who once rode high on these waters
in spring, on rough-hewn rafts
down to the Susquehanna selling
flour, selling wheat, who now
compose some of the earth in
 the cemeteries we
sell cheese fries to raise
money to mow.
 ::::::::: And I compose:

Light sticks to the rhododendron leaves
like thin ovals of metal, hammered slips
that move hip to hip
with each leaf to which
they're wed. I would like to go
on a very long journey
away, increasingly away, not even
glancing toward what *toward*. Or,
if I had to say, I don't know, toward faces

carved in stone, lined up in one
recession, one quickening boxcar of comets run
backwards through the sand.

Hesitantly or as though vanquished I admit that subjects are perennial, they leaf out larger than before. My shadows are urgent and politics continue to bewitch me as a black stocking would. Captivating are processes of healing / processes of documentation / and processes of near revelation, even though as a woman and as an aborter I feel a sense of shame over continuing to be wounded and continuing to speak. Minnie Bruce Pratt: "I find myself repeating, in a way that seems strange and obsessed even to me at times, things we are supposed to hide."

There is a double meaning here for me, thinking of that which is hidden and also of that which is skinned. To *hide*, or not to hide, I do not wish to separate the body from its covering. Rather to retreat into October's bug-chewed tapestry, brown tattered to scarlet tattered to blue. The intention to swim through. To send tattered feelings out through the water with a suitcase of paper and a reappearing rose. To protect those who walk through, who verily wear bullet-proof vests beneath their clothes. To whom I say: We the one moon. We the monadic water. We the recurring pose. And Chögyam Trungpa: "Gold manifests itself as gold, not because of its audience, but simply because it is gold."

Repetition is curative but is also a sign of madness; do I have any enthusiasm left in this lifetime for wondering if I am mad? There are many others whose turn it is to take that question on, to ask themselves whether their own instruments of perception still function, or whether they ever did.

I don't think it's imprecise to say that what's revealed cannot surpass that which is hidden.

:::::::::: 10/25/18

By little hunter-light I drop
into the water what
cleaves and cleaves, into what's
clinging and leaving, receiving
leaves. All arguments, all invitations,
incantations, I drop them I place them
to the green candle again ::::::: I place my blood
rags upon my eyes. I cannot consent
to place my mind upon what injures
me; instead I wed the downstream
beech which was at dusk entirely
the color of an egg yolk.

For a thought the size of a blink the blazing
tree comforts me, I think of orderly curbside fires
and not of gravity's declension. In writing
school the boys said creative writing isn't
healing, it's cabinetmaking. Their wolfish
smirks come leaking through my crystal, I swim
through, I swim up into the stand of white
pines. Now the black light leans green and high
up one great horned owl speaks to another
in the upper corridors of my healing
cabinet, of my water
shed.

*Soundly I sift the border fires
through my shawl
her musical hand points down over my right breast
the dead artist protects me she has left me
with photographs to read as tarot
to touch the pearl at rest within the arbor vitae's green*

*To see the world was never a great composer
her hand make-shifting the ladder, the pasture
the stranger, the student
saying, I don't mean
to hurt your feelings, but when you write a poem
are you just making it up?*

Jan 9 118

7

~~The water coverage~~ [and of easy

There's white flowers again & again
battered down just

erased like
blue silk i
thought

[I] small green candle
with nose OK i thought

of orderly
forces to bleed

through
rose

recovery + rose
cotton crystal + bore

All the new
I claim for my own

(Fall asleep fully at the end)

3. COLD

At 8:34 a.m. today the moon
was full, about thirteen minutes ago.
I saw it huge and liquid copper quivering
above Little Rock from a cold oval
window, and then take off, rising
high above the Arkansas River
and the snow. Here in Chicago
it's seven degrees. Before me a machine
says Order Here, Pay Here, but I can't
tell what it sells. Two shadows
fly up from the ground outside and pass
across sunlit scrims. All that fuel
un-humans me, that white finger on repeat
over there poking a hamburger
on a screen. Nearly all the light
skinned people are dressed in wool,
in leather, as always the nicest things come
from other animals, and plainly the darker
people selling bagels and pushing carts. How
many of us wish to be the shapes flying
up, covet not the yellow sun but

the mouth behind clear silk,
the word to rule the wound?

We don't get energy from nowhere
says a mathematician on the radio.

Back home ::::::::::: I go to the creek
one small dandelion darkens
in the grass. Poems darken
in last night's vase of red flowers. Wantingly

I suck my mind through a straw
like a sommelier ::::::::::: the sun appears
thin, a paper wafer perfect slim
white disk and then the clouds clear,
the disk blazes and tears

away the impression of itself
as a circle. Now I count

red, copper, musk, sage. Palest
purple-gray. Star, dapple, black,
blink. Aster, jay. Big men
on the radio cry and say, *I am*
an amazing man who went
to Yale. Do my spells
work? Hold on; turn around.
Okay, now turn back around.

: :: :: :: :: 11/23/18

Waver & whistle
drum & chipped snow
what washes, what soaps my shadow so
it's blacker than before?

There's a gold circle above me / I burned
the curtain's hem / my breasts like dishes
in the bath / I float suspended between the brief
unstitchings, luminous bands of dusk
and dawn bookending
the most minimal winter light laid
like gauze on the grass.

This is the politics of taking
baths to claim all the roses of poetry
as abortion, and all the roses
of poetry for my own : :: :: :: ::

Now I listen to a whistle duet
cold reeds in a blowy place

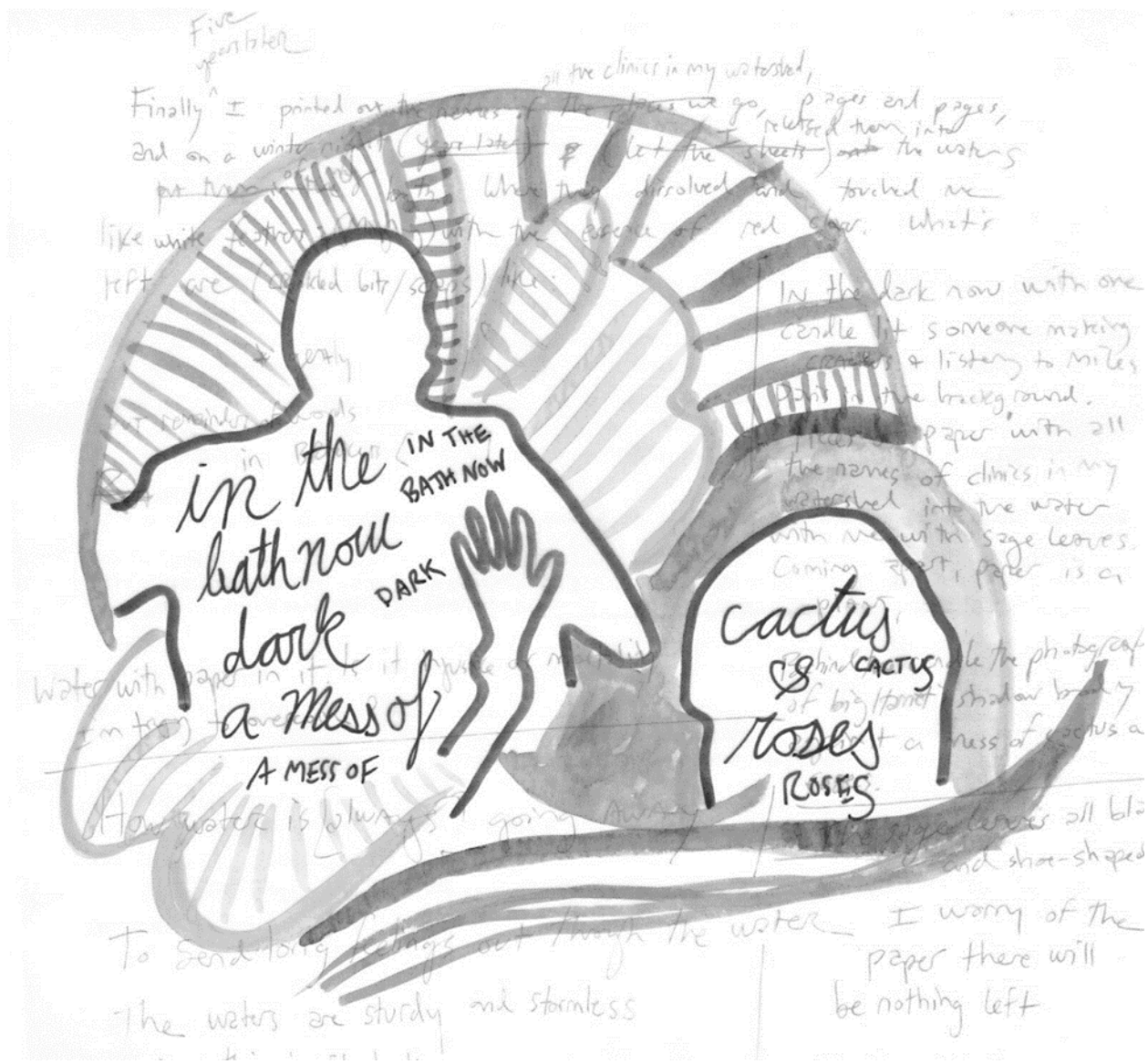
in darkness

in the gold of darkness one
candle at the window, one cell,

the night ripples, swells, is drawn
into the silver cervix of the moon.

*Part of my ritual is to be bound
away, sucked gently (backward) toward
what we can only call “the cervix
of time” or “the voice which falls
silent at the center of the witch
hazel tree.”*

*I raise my right hand to make shadows
on the water. The blood between
my legs leaves stamped shapes like the things we made
with cut potatoes in kindergarten. Big Shadow
says, what moves, makes. Put your mind
in your waves.*



4. LONG WINTER

I have cut my hair / I have stored it in an evening purse / I have turned my third eye to the pines and
ragged to go unafraid before the rulers :::::::::: yet I am afraid, they are neither animal nor human, I
have only shadow,

candle and shawl, or coin of another realm, that's all.

I wish to make or receive something sovereign,
and immense; come down now, portion of light
shaped like a day, witness with:

Across the creek on the other bank where I never go, tall dead grasses rise from barberry's mauve
stipple. The water is olive and where it holds the sky, bleached pewter. Longest moon, wild apple,
columnar white pine. Now the clouds move fast, the water is dark; the sun bundles up its bit of white
thread.

::::::::: 12/23/18

Big Woman's photograph of her own
shadow on a cactus, cactus blossoms

the color of a winter
dawn :::::::::: the teapot

filled with sage leaves like slender
old black shoes / the names of All
the clinics in my watershed printed
out in 9 pt. font into the bath
with me, I release them into the waters
the travelers
are at odds the travelers
are not speaking yet :::::::::: Is it
injustice or mortality I'm trying
to overcome? The difference
between an ugly oblivion and
a beautiful one.

Paper is a plant

it comes apart in water
behind the candle her outline
watches over as the papers disintegrate
and touch me, they eddy they
tatter :::::::::::

It was to solve/(re)solve. Into the waters. Mentally
in the alchemy of walking hides. It was to actually undo

a knot in the world. It was to put my head inside a yellow ring. I used my shadow
to put it there. The waters are walking backwards

to love us out of history. In the morning all that's left is a pile of torn paper and sage
leaves on a plate, like something made by mice for a nest.

NOTES

“Watershed” is a cycle watched over by the spirit of the artist Harriet M. Rosenberg, and by Appalachian autumn and winter full moons. It interacts with Rosenberg’s series of photographs, *Home Girls*, which I traced and used as foundations for my own watercolor collages. This cycle was also instigated by CAConrad’s ritual poems/poem rituals. It is Octavio Paz who proposes, in the essay “The Art of Mexico: Material and Meaning” (*Essays on Mexican Art*, 1993), that while “The Old World was ruled by the overarching symbol of the triad”, for the European mind “America represented a new dimension [...] governed not by the principle of the triad but by the number four.”

“I declare that I am one of them” riffs on the 1971 French Manifesto of the 343: “I declare that I am one of them. I declare that I have had an abortion.”

Many thanks to Cynthia Clem, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Julie Swarstad Johnson, and Kevin Sims for feedback on these poems. Thanks to The Rensing Center, where I made the images.

This cycle is in memory of Margaret “Peg” Johnston (1948-2023). Peg’s work as a national leader among independent abortion care providers; as an avid experimenter in abortion conversations; and as a book and paper artist, muralist, and anti-violence activist was truly kaleidoscopic. Her papers are housed in the archives at Duke University.

Abby Minor lives in the rural ridges and valleys of central Pennsylvania, where she works on poems, essays, gardens, and public projects exploring regional & reproductive politics. Her first book, [*As I Said: A Dissent*](#) (Ricochet Editions, 2022), is a collection of long documentary poems concerning abortion, justice, and citizenship in U.S. history. Granddaughter of Appalachian tinkers and Yiddish-speaking New Yorkers, she teaches poetry in her region's low-income nursing homes; founded and co-directs an arts & social justice organization called Ridgelines Language Arts; and volunteers with the internationally active non-profit Abortion Conversation Projects. Her poems and essays appear in *Fence*, the *American Poetry Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Cut Bank*, the *Boston Review*, and *Feminist Studies*. In 2018 she was awarded Bitch Media's Writing Fellowship in Sexual Politics.

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