

MOORINGS

poetry

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CAITLIN PRESS 2023

*As always, for Oonagh
and in memory of Kieran Egan*

Lost and Found: A Sequence

1

A single sock, bus tickets, a quarter
swaddled in lint in a back pocket,
a rosary of phone calls that peters out
in sorry apologies, treks to a dusty office
in airport or concert hall—forget the trivia
and troves of things not so easily
replaced—prescription glasses, watches,
credit cards, even a wedding ring.
There's no end to what is lost. Focus instead
on a best friend struck down in his prime,
a lost chance of making good on a promise,
a love that did not work out.
Above all, know when to give up.

2

Mudlarks scour the City's riverbanks, hoping to find
discarded coins, Roman amphorae, pottery shards
as if to establish continuity. Once hit-and-miss,
nowadays radar and metal detectors make
tracking things easier—finders keepers,
not only treasure, also
hidden mass graves, missing persons,
alternate histories.

3

After the loss of life, a jury's findings
or a cenotaph, mass remembrance
or the profit and loss, there's the collateral damage
of sweatshops, factories
that furnish our plenitude

beside dark streams in lands
 we never think of and have not visited,
 corpses covered up by a balance sheet.

4

Old age makes room for loss, the price of survival.
 What anesthesia for best friends dying too soon
 and too far away? The scars, the wounds persist.
 And sometimes lost friends are found again by chance,
 surfacing after fifty years. (But what shall I do
 with my love for a whole country that no longer exists?)

5

The chiropractor adjusts my neck and spine
 to release built up tensions, the psychiatrist
 wants me to let go of suicidal grief.
 Likewise, insurance agents calculate loss,
 put a dollar value on a child's life.
 We settle, come to terms,
 try despite failing eyes to see things in perspective.

6

Though I once had
 a photographic memory,
 those negatives are lost
 and will not develop in
 the dark room of the future.
 With language it's the same:
 halfway through a conversation,
 I am lost for words, lose the thread, hear
 the whole story unravel.
 With time, language disintegrates,
 not just the words themselves

10

are lost to dementia, the power
of speech is taken over
by corporate empires, unique
ways of feeling lost
as languages disappear.

7

The same with friends, after a while
with Christmas letters, phone calls unanswered,
I learn to suspect the worst.
But to remove their names
from diaries and calendars
can bring no resolution, no closure.

8

At a loss, briefly we find ourselves
in things noticed in passing.
So many times we are taken
out of ourselves, stumble upon
an organist practicing
at dusk in an empty chapel,
the slant of sunlight thwarted by cloud,
the evening stillness of reeds
at attention by the river's edge;
wind-flickered wild yellow poppies,
peripheral, by the roadside,
in a meadow a single voice
singing but unaware
of any listeners. This is our reward
for what will endure, what is given.

Ordnance Survey

Obsolete now except as collectibles, thanks to
Google Earth's 24-7 intrusion
into our streets and gardens.

Nothing is strange anymore; we are all Peeping Toms
in the furthest corners of New Zealand or Equador.

Though these maps in my childhood, one inch to the mile,
seemed to reveal everything—
chapels, streams, level crossings, footpaths, churches with spires—
they still left us space to explore on foot, to feel our own way.

On kitchen tables before setting out, I imagined contours,
saw a cliff face rear up, pictured the farm by the marsh.
And they were durable: tucked into our rucksacks
along with a picnic lunch and a compass, even when folded
they did not fray. They gave us connection,
security and scale. It was a tangible world.

Insects

An avid gardener, my father was firm on some things, like
“Centipedes good, millipedes bad.” I took his word for it
and became a righteous god for woodlouse and cockroach.
Now when I read
of half a million insect species at risk of extinction
in the coming decades because of climate change,
pesticides, destruction of habitat,
I can’t play favourites anymore—snow leopards, polar bears—
or bemoan the dearth of monarch butterflies
while scorning hyenas and hagfish.
There are no bad animals, so reluctantly I am
learning to suffer even the most obnoxious
of insects, mosquitoes, hornets, a plethora
of tiny creatures, almost invisible
or like maggots, scrolling cadavers,
ugly crawlers I would once happily
have squashed underfoot, I finally see their place
in the whole great scheme of things,
how it connects, how they all have work to do
in wetlands, wilderness, desert
as prey or predator, sustaining a commonwealth.

Marmalade

A childhood ritual. Handling the cut fruit,
extracting pips, slicing boiled peel in thick wedges,
my mother, alchemist, hovers
over a seething cauldron to transform
magma of Seville oranges, brown sugar, pith
into a chloroform sweetness
that mists the kitchen windows.

An hour or so later she conjures the residue
into a tempered bitterness, drains off the ooze
in clamped mason jars while I with a wooden spoon
cannot wait, dredge heavy steel saucepans
for vestiges of fruit.