The Book of Failed Descriptions

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TOD MARSHALL

The Book of Failed Descriptions

—Close your eyes and count to ten.

I.
“In language, there are always two.”

The Iliad
stolen from Thoreau’s cabin,
the only thing taken
during those years.
Remember, too, The Aeneid
(we all have lived
through times of war)
and that passage
a friend said to know well,
“Learn fortitude and toil from me, my son,
Ache of true toil. Good fortune learn from others.”

II.
Ultrasound images of my heart.
That it moves and moves
and then moves again,
plump muscle
shuddering, laboring
to make up for one bad valve.

Spots in the ocean
where nothing lives
and yet there is movement,
water moving.

I stand in the river
watching an osprey
slide through the air
ten feet above the water.

I hear those wings.

III.
Eleven years of loving
can't just vanish. I have photographs.
I have facts. “Hapy Birthday
Dady” scribbled on a card.

How easy to sit at a desk
and not see the full moon
through the window.

IV.
Trout with a slashed back,
slipped from the osprey's talon
and fell to that lucky landing
in the creek's waiting water
where it thrashed about,
calmed, lingered beneath
the deep cut bank,
and rose for the evening hatches
a few days after,
and weeks later,
took my orange woolly bugger
and leaped
completely out of the water.

On the far bank, a muskrat
struggles and does a forties-flick-gangster's fall,
some Bogart
pirouette into the creek where it splashes
and sinks. “Rattlesnake,”
my friend says, and I nod
and stare at where the ripple
swirls into the current

and think about sinking bones.

V.
The court acknowledges the petitioner's long involvement with ________'s life and sincerely hopes that the parties involved will have the generosity and wisdom to honor that relationship.

Do not blame the wind
that scatters apple blossoms
ruthlessly. Allow that flowers
desire farewell blessings
before their time has come.

VI.
The children in the bouncy castle
fly through the air
when I throw them
and don't get hurt
because they do not fear
their landing.

VII.
I carry a lock of his hair for months,
a scrap of T-shirt, a baby tooth,
the tiny cushioned spoon he ate from,
a diaper pin with a blue plastic stork,
the quilted blanket he slept with, his first steps,
hand clutching my fingers, the long hours
when his fever spiked through the night,
the first shoe he ever wore, a locket with a toddler photo,
his first day of school, his first baseball game,
his first broken bone, his dreams.

VIII.
“There is no fear in love: but perfect love casteth out fear.”

There is no bell
to end the hours
when cedars and peaks
scratch the sky’s belly.
No garden,
but sometimes, wildflowers.
Sometimes, fish holding against
the river’s current.
Sometimes, deer
on the other shore
stand still
for a moment,
then hunch to their grazing.

IX.
Fishing in the desert creek,
a few days after the hearing,
I find bones, steer skulls
with round sockets for horns,
and step on three rattlesnakes,
nearly grab a fourth
when climbing a steep bank.
The snakes were sluggish, though,
late spring when the temperatures
in the desert dipped into the thirties
at night. Only one rattled,
and the rain of the previous days
made the fishing terrible, water brown
and swift. I didn't get a bite
and drove to the empty house,
his clothes still hanging in a closet.

X.

Ready or not
here I come—

There was a boy there was a father
There is a rib cage
There is a heart
There is a boy
There is
an afternoon in Memphis, playing chase, a tag-like game where I
growl and laugh and run around the playground, his giggling, then
both of us giggling and roaring, and I catch him and then he gets
away and climbs to the top of the jungle gym where he looks at me
with worry, and I know that the game is on break, that this is real,
and I walk beneath him and he doesn't pause: he jumps into my
arms, did you hear me, he jumps, and I catch him—