Nothing Fatal
Nothing Fatal
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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting You: A Definitive Plan</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porch with No Swing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poem in Which I Fail to Appear</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Manner of Folklore</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dog, the Yard, the Water, the Problem</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance in Two Parts</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Queen of Snakes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rattle Bones</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Not to Sleep Around</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Bête Noire</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aubade: Easy Mistake</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listless</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexy French Underwear</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Fortress of Solitude</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Augury: Haiku at the Dragon Wok</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on First Kisses</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Darn Hot</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesser Beasts</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carnivalesque</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the Principle of Pairing in Nature • 31
Dark Ride • 32
The Apprenticeship • 33
Water Speaks to Our Subconscious Selves • 34
Academic Affairs • 35
Sweet Nothings • 36
By the Time This Poem Is Over • 37
Near Misses • 38
Welcome • 39
Domestic Bliss • 40
Texas • 41
Translation • 42
Ass • 43
Personal Poem • 45
Proper Care and Feeding • 46
Partial Still Life with Ottoman • 48
The Empty Seat • 49
Patience • 50
Wanted • 51
Pitch the Woo • 53

Notes • 54
Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.

—Frankenstein, Mary Shelley
Meeting You: A Definitive Plan

I will not buy two goldfish and name them both Elizabeth Taylor because there is no telling them apart. I will not decide they are both Scorpios simply because I am, and because I think they are mysterious for their distracted way of pouting around their bowl, turning the curves smoother each time. Their wet world will not tip like a steaming teapot into a cup. No cat will lap up its tragic good fortune. You will not sell me two new fish at a dollar apiece plus ten more for a new bowl to replace the one gravity got, and you will not miscalculate the sales tax, and I will not not get my change back. Chances are, you will not even work at Bud's Sea and Sky Shop. So in case that’s you shopping the family planning aisle out of wedlock, don’t let our white-haired family pharmacist with the spooky, walleyed stare catch me smirking as he assures the woman (who I pray is not your girlfriend) all the merchandise is “fresh.” And since you probably aren’t her supportive older brother checking the date on every box of every brand, don’t think to think about some grand plan passing you by. Tonight I am as simple as the world’s last love poem: I pay for multivitamins, shoplift a pack of Freshen-Up, leave the door behind me swinging in front of you.
Porch with No Swing

—after Edward Hopper’s Summer Evening

Her clothes are more bare
than the light, and I am sure
the young man is glad.
Late, on a porch with no swing,
his request seems more daring.

He’d like to taste her,
but she’s a ripe slice of sour
fruit, pucker and frown
set as the breezeless curtains:
she still hasn’t caught his drift.

Her clothes are more bare
than the light. Her lean body
planks against the rail.
With one hand, he asks again.
He still hasn’t caught her drift.
Poem in Which I Fail to Appear

I'm not in there, or if I am you cannot see me. I'm hidden behind the cowboy whose swagger suggests he's all hat, no cattle. The boozy banker in the brown pinstripe has taken my chair, and the server has swept away all trace of the glass I sipped my whiskey from. Look for me pinned beneath the bar-chord callused hands of some young thing or in the single stray hair knotted through his rough, shadowed attitude—a two-day beard and the unlit cigarette he blames for his stagy smokers' growl. Ask him where he found me, or try to remember yourself where you lost the last lover you found—under your thumb, behind your back, back together again with the cook who kept the kitchen hotly ticking. Send a waitress to check under the stall doors in the Ladies', keep one eye on the lonely curb-parked cabbie who closed his book and winked when you jumped at the flash of his FOR HIRE sign.

Catch him if you can. Look for me on his last dog-eared page. Then you'll see what happened and when. He did what I said; I slipped away while he read, and now I am gone, baby, gone.
In the Manner of Folklore

Take a milkweed tea twice yearly to prevent the onset of anything you’re better off without, though more often is best for rickets, weedy gardens, or children. Stroke a cat’s fur backward and see if sparks rise in the shape of lost loved ones. Fleas cannot be helped, though some claim their bites add heat when love begins to cool and can urge the cows to breed, come spring. Don’t be cruel with the potatoes you bury beside the raspberry bramble, even if the neighbor’s dog is sure to dig them up. Don’t curse your cure or those warts will grow back twice the size and black to boot. Unmarried women, as a point of etiquette, please don’t snuff a stranger’s candle, or handle an axe blade, even in gloves.

Carry your wits in whatever basket you have, and if a man asks, tell him you have been hunting for simples. An itch will tell you what you have found.
The Dog, the Yard, the Water, the Problem

Imagine that you and your dog are in the front yard. The dog must be wet and possibly has soap still sudsing his fur because you’re eight, and even though I’m telling you what to do, you’re going to get part of it wrong. Good. Very good.

Feel the sharp small slap of the dog’s wet tail against your thigh. Accidentally spill half the bucket of water you’re carrying on yourself. Miss the dog entirely with the other half of the water. Now hesitate, as if you are trying to figure out what to do next.

You are trying to be helpful—and that’s good—but now you must stop helping for a moment. Your dog is shaking himself off. His head and body seem to twist in opposite directions at the same time. Now your dog is tossing himself in the grass, sending loose blades into the air. His tail and paws fly upward like a seizure.

You would like to try this, I know. You have watched your parents practice this at night in their bed. Go ahead, you’re eight and you are eager to grow up. Notice how damp the lawn is.

Remember to make soft snuffling sounds. Wait for your mother. (Think how she must be about a million years old in dog years.) Wait for her to bang the door open by throwing her hip against the latch while kicking the sticking spot loose. She never spills a drop of her drink. Get up from the grass and tell her you are sorry. Actually be sorry at this point. As sorry as you were last night, awakened by strange sounds then slapped for being a snoop. Consider again the growing list of your own shortcomings.
Dance in Two Parts

i.
My moves move like jokes
at cocktail parties, like ice
off a glacier’s face.

Tonight I’ll wow you
with broken haikus, the dropped
syllables filled in

by flickering stares
or with a flutter of sleeve,
a fan of eyelash—

bless this semaphore
the body flashes. My blush
and hitched, nervous breath

telegraph feelings
in dots and dashes. Words soak
in the tonicked gin

and love might just run
a little smoother for it.
All over the room

sloppy lines knocked out
one too many times fall down
punch-drunk, past clever.
ii.
Don’t you feel the sting
of my smile down to your thighs?
I’ll give you reason
to press your creases
against mine; ironed and oiled
we steam ahead, mouths
open. Our bodies
release their separate shapes.
Grown cloven, we dance—
a wicked hoof raked
through the grit and hair that sticks
to our joyous skins.
The Queen of Snakes

She must have slithered straight from the root of a cypress tree. No turner could work his lathe to cut her jeans' finely fringed cuffs. She rises from the cracks and mud at the bus stop like the Queen of Snakes rising from a black knot of reptile hide. She never watches her step. The snakes climb higher, wrapping their fat bodies around the slim joint of her ankle so tightly they could snap it with a careless twitch. They twist their bodies into a wriggling braid, they slide over one another, knowing only the pleasure of skin touching skin. She feels nothing for her minion, yet he dreams of his hands drawing up slipknots of her hair. She takes a slow drag of clove smoke, wet winter turns a little more exotic for a block in either direction. Then a flick of ash. Openmouthed, he breathes in her scent and taste, his tongue stabbed clean through with a silver stud.
Rattle Bones

In the lab the mad doctors stitch up the seams that will never heal into scars. Their monster, they know, will be all jigsaw puzzle and skin graft, but they love the craziness of their quilt. Each night a different one sleeps on the slab tucked beside the cold mass of their genius.

Come morning, they pull on their lab coats—worn mostly for looks and for warmth—knowing there is work to be done. Today’s question: where will they put the soul? On this debate the sides seem evenly split: half heart, half brain. A few rogues point lower.

Wrapped in their white coats and gloves, they frown over their progress. One thinks the monster looks a little like him. He blushes with pride when his boss praises the careful way he has chosen each toe; he had hoped his attention to detail would not go unnoticed.

Flexing the left foot again, he checks the tension rising in the line of the Achilles tendon, the loft of the sculpted arch, all along dreaming he will be the one to whisper into their lovely monster’s ear and rattle those three delicate bones for the first time. Speak, he will say, tell them you’re alive.
How Not to Sleep Around

Cats call out their crazy love,
and the amphitheater alley bellows back
their lunatic heat. The creek bed cuts
corners, and its shale banks sag like furniture.
Familiar sheets twist against your own
unmixed sweat. In the other world, lovers carry on,
and someone clutches you like a handbag
in a bad part of town. Someone hollers,  
Keep it down! and summer settles in
while you name its every sound, name the heat
that swells in cycles and waves you on
toward that one last thing you're waiting
to feel: either cooler nights and quiet sleep,
or a hotter way to cool your heels.
Poor Bête Noire

I dream of days I used to bask in vats of tears. I made every morsel—every scrap of bone—I spat a finger I licked clean of someone dear. Now at best I cheat a tip, resist glad wishes for a good new year. Gone are days I ran with the gas man, the tax man, the grocer who skimped, his thumb always on the scale. Instead I prowl a town that howls itself to sleep, no better than a kennel. What use are my thoughts of plunder when every victim’s gone reform? Every road I ruin leads to the same small town stuffed with knives and books of matches set to spark a dangerous torch. The whole town’s barking now, and still no one asks me or my fleas to leave. We’re made proper, civilized right down to these first wondrous, wretched tears.
Aubade: Easy Mistake

No wonder the sun rose and soaked my bed in watery light
better suited to laundry than to love. No wonder dawn
dragged itself up into a full gray sky. I strip the sheets,

and the washer swishes its hips at the first touch
of a button. The coffee maker drips too slowly
to enjoy such a rushing ruckus, but the manufacture

of some fast hot heat is not a mystery to everything
in the kitchen: the tea kettle fairly squeals each time
the microwave completes its calisthenics routine.

Beauty and strength—both are lost on the wobbly fan
that totters all night long like a drunken chanteuse,
more the idea-of-cool than cool itself. Easy, I suppose,

to mistake its cheap squeak for morning birds coming on
two dim hours before the forty-watt sun at last laid bare
the forsythia without its yellow, the world its wonder.
Listless

Let the lioness lie, sleepy, in the shade of one bare tree and dream of small puddles, so the drought may seem less long. And a dream, too, for the baboon, who doesn’t see the lion slip her tongue in one dry loop across her teeth. A flight of featherless wings, wasps and bats like nightmares diving from rooftops to the open spaces below, streaks the sunset with a thousand reasons to panic at the sky’s unlined lanes of traffic. Every set of wings strong-arms the evening into pairs of hungers, pairs of thirsts. Closer, one hand draws its sustenance from the one body it knows best. The moon is inconvenient, it reeks like a stale tooth—the root’s gone rotten, there’s nothing to be done. All that heavenly ether only helps the ache burn brighter. Now, here a candle, here a window, a warped wood door that won’t close true. A wick that smolders, an oiled hinge, and that breath—almost a word—when the hungry world at last lies quiet.