

THE ODDS AGAINST A STARRY COSMOS

Abby Bland

**The Odds Against a Starry
Cosmos
Abby Bland**

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For Bear and my Poetic Underground family

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Something I Need to Say

How Are You

“How are you?” is only one letter rearranged
from “Who are you?”
and lately, I’ve felt the need to start from the beginning.

My middle name roots me to my mother’s family
in the dry dust of Texas,
but means “protector of sea”—or some shit—
which is some shit because I’m afraid of water.

My first name means “my father’s joy” in Hebrew,
and while I have always been a daddy’s girl,
my namesake can actually be found smack in the middle
of the story of David before he was king:

Abigail was beautiful, intelligent,
and also knew her husband was an idiot—
with these three things she saved her entire household
from certain destruction at the hands of David.
No, that is not my favorite part of the Bible.

I love the book of Job, in which a bunch of men sit around
getting progressively angrier
as they try to figure out why bad things happen to good people
because it doesn’t make sense that they do.

They go on getting angry, until God shows up
and basically says “Y’all simmer down!”
I am more than religious jargon and explanations.
I send rain on desert wastelands.
I know where darkness dwells.
I built the walls that hold the ocean in place.”

Some days I find this comforting;
most days, I think Job's best quality is that he was angry.

Because it's okay to be angry
when grace seems capricious,
unplanned, and not meant for you.
It's okay to not be okay—

Hey did you know your heart stops
when you sneeze?

Or did you know that the lips are 100 times
more sensitive than the fingertips
and even that place down low...
that no two lip impressions are the same,
so when I kiss you,
I'm using the most unique, vulnerable part of me?

Oops, too much!
Moving on!

Did you know butterflies taste through their feet?
What a life that must be!
Imagine if that were our fate:
Would we wear shoes?
Would we also want wings to escape to the sky?
Or would we simply learn to savor
the flavor of the soil we rose from?

Someone once told me that when you pop your knuckles
you're burning tiny gas bubbles
so did you know you're burning on the inside?
Did you know I am—

“I am” is the shortest complete sentence
in the English language?
But there’s nothing short about being:
the brain contains 86 billion nerve cells
joined by 100 trillion connections,
more than the number of stars in the Milky Way.

You, yes you, outnumber a galaxy!

If we took your blood vessels
and stretched them out into a straight line
they could wrap the world twice.
Do you understand your magnitude now?

Speaking of the word “blood,” it comes from the root “bhlo”
which means “that which bursts out;”
like a gunshot, like startled bats from a cave
but the word is also related to “bloma,” meaning blossom,
see: springtime or a river growing into an ocean.

Life often feels like a choice
between that which sounds violent
and that which sounds beautiful.
I don’t think it’s always that simple.
Be sure not to confuse the two.

Sometimes our bodies know more than we do,
sometimes our words say more than we mean to,
sometimes the roots tell us
all we need to know about the plant,
sometimes, I think most times,
you need to let it bloom.

Pink

My mother wanted a doll in satin dresses
but birthed a tomboy in muddied muscle shirts.
Maybe it was Daddy's bourbon, or too many Elvis records.
Whatever it was, the way she tells it I was born
hating the color pink; a known fact with an unknown origin.
I came from the womb in the darkness of a winter solstice
already determined to love the night sky or ocean depths,
but not pink, not its tenderfoot, doughy sweetness.
Femininity was always a crushed flower
I was reticent to claim so I don't remember
when softness began to bloom in my chest;
but wherever it is rooted, I want to give it to your lips
pressing like petals on my belly and shoulders,
and I want to give it to your hands;
to that late summer morning:
your fingers pressing the pomegranate open,
the seeds wet & plunging into the bowl,
the way they tasted on my blushing tongue.

Ecology

While we often picture
the snow-draped mountain range
or autumn forests, ocean deltas,
vistas worthy of the cover
of National Geographic,
it is also the fungus creeping
over the compost heap, the spiders
scampering into the house
away from the crisp winter chill,
the balcony garden blooming
towards the springtime sun,
the mix of our saliva when we kiss,
your fingers glossed with traces of me.

The Lie

sits in the back of your throat wrapped around your tongue
insists the only story is hiding, most likely in the closet
of a childhood room somehow missing
somehow not in these bones.

I wake up, walk into the bathroom
open my mouth
find Grandpa's bourbon bottle
shattered, every shard a memory Mom drops
into conversation casually
like she doesn't expect to see blood in the water.

It is true, what undoes can also somehow
loom and weave together a story.
It's all in how you hold it,
or in how you let it go:
pluck one strand on the web,
set the rest to vibrating.

The Lie is that you have to tell the story to get it right.
You need to open your mouth.
You have to tell the story right.
The bottle needs to shatter.
The Lie is that there is only one story, only one telling.
There must always be blood in the water
for everything to make sense.

Sometimes you find a key before you know there is a lock.
Look in the mirror.
Sometimes the lock goes missing.
Bottle shatters.

Sometimes the key and the lock are the same thing.
Blood in the water.

Everything
 unravels
 eventually.

Supposedly every story has an ending;
but all I know of endings
is how often they fall into beginnings
like a river into an ocean
before the sky pulls it back up,
thundering.

Water falls into soil:
 something begins to grow:
 roots stretching into darkness:
 seeds making their way to the light.

In the beginning
a root never looks like trunk into branch
into flower blossoming.

It just grows.

And it is never too early to call it grace.

Broken Window

A midnight thunder snapped
a branch off the hackberry
tree and we shot
awake to the shatter
of glass.

A cosmic metaphor,
probably an act of God,
for our own fracture.

To apologize
would be too easy,
there are too many hooks
to be let off,
when I decided to run,
the window broke.

Alright, maybe it wasn't God,
but if you keep a plant
in too small of a pot
it will die.

I didn't want to die,
so I broke the pot,
I mean the window,
I mean your heart.

I Take Back

the lilies unwilted, the whiskey and chocolate, the old hide-away, the wide sky fading to dusk, the road yawning across the prairie, and then the river, the deep canyon, the sparse stars witnessing, the aspen tree roots growing together in the dark earth, becoming one tree, becoming enough to cover a mountainside, the subtle whispers, and the campfire acoustic guitar, of course, the smoke in my hair, the blanket, the morning dew, the disbelief the sun had risen so soon

Leave Taking

Living with you was living
with someone who wanted me to be the house.
But I'm not made to be lived in. I don't want to be haunted.

I've never known a home without at least one spirit
hanging about the rafters
or whispering across the floorboards

and ghost stories are always
about someone's freedom, aren't they?
I'm still not sure what this story is about,
breaking free or being trapped.
You bought the house anyway.

"I want roots," you said, but only if they could be contained
in the designated spaces:
the flower beds with white picket lattice.

"I want to surround myself with beautiful things," you said.
Small things is what you meant.
You were never a fan of mountain ranges
or ocean waves or the night sky.

Now there is a sycamore tree in your attic;
you still won't open the windows;
floorboards moan
with the weight of roots searching in darkness;
leaves begin to tremble and freeze like fingertips.
You need to bundle up.

I'm not saying I'm the tree.

I'm not saying I'm not.
I'm not saying I tore the house down,
I'm saying—

I will remain a forest.
Mountain river running through it
to the place where the ocean and sky are seamless.

I Will Write Odes

For the young tomato plants on my porch
and their eventual imperfect harvest,
gathered from the garden into the kitchen sink;
to the wet hands washing them,
as I remember my grandmother,
and the way she told me to eat until I was full.

I will write odes to the city street lights and yes, even the traffic
on the many nights I've taken myself out to dinner.
To the waiter's humble humor and happy eyes;
to the empty plates dusted in crumbs and
the way they have made my body full again.

Ode to the sunshine of early morning hikes,
the soft earthen trail, the chitter of chipmunks,
the rain-slicked Colorado red rocks
and springtime concerts with thick bass lines
and thumping bodies.

An ode to this body. Ode upon ode to that quiet Sunday
I unrolled my yoga mat and asked my body what it remembered,
and for the first time since you left, it didn't say you.

Transplanting

The chickens ate the marigolds out of Nancy's garden
as if they had a particular vendetta against the blossoms.

She said she originally planted yellow ones, but orange
would do for the replacement. She sent me out, trowel in hand.

After a vigorous yank, bits of earth cascaded
from the soft roots tangled in my fingers.

It occurred to me to ask how we knew the small uprooted
plant wouldn't die by my untrained hand or to a similar fowl
end.

"We don't," she smiled, "but make sure you plant them deep
enough; remember to water them."

Altar Body

This body has so often been called empty.
Called womb; made vessel;
called half; assumed incomplete;
in perpetual need; only a space to fill;
itself as whole only with another inside.

As if existing only for another's pleasure,
comments about this body spread
like gruesome constellation on this heart
in a predictable pattern of obliging the male-gaze
disguised as self-care.

I have been found with blood on my hands
from those who made me their altar,
made me their oracle, splayed for their own divination,
ribs cracked open.
I've learned to lay my needs down as sacrifice so often,
to pick them up at all feels unholy.

No one ever asks what their altar needs,
only ask it to point to some unknown,
some silent god they can't get to by themselves.
No one ever asks if she wants to hold these bloody bones;
this is what she's made for right?
So why would she ever complain?

So the altar tries to write a poem
without a body spread on top of it
and doesn't know how.
She tries to write a poem without blood or bones
but that's all they've ever wanted before:

a place to leave their brokenness
so they can walk away whole,
or at least pretend to be
because that's what love is right?

But the altar wants a love in which no body
is used as a coping mechanism.
One with better metaphors than drugs or alcohol or religion
or consumptive pleasure.

Love that remembers how many times in the sacred pages
God bypasses the polished altar
for the honey and musk of the untamed wilderness.

On Healing

The first magnolia trees bloomed
beneath the feet of dinosaurs.
The dinosaurs are decomposed and gone
but the magnolia tree still blooms every spring
outside my parents' house,
beside the driveway,
where, without asking,
the first boy took something that wasn't his
and decided he didn't want it after.

Sometimes the world implodes,
feels like a comet struck it.
Or at least it feels like that when you're fifteen
and you wish everything
had already been fossilized in volcanic ash.

Sometimes Midwest winter can feel so long and lonely
because we spend so long uncertain if it has actually ended.

The magnolia tree always seems to be jumping the gun
the way I might want to —
its buds pushing into chilly March morning.
I've never known a winter
where the flowers didn't seem too early,
leaving some of the buds brown and frozen on the ground,

but the tree begins to bloom anyway,
looks imperfect, but is right on time,
even if the Midwest winter is not ready for it.
Even if the seasons themselves have a hard time letting go.

I wonder if trees can feel their history every spring.
The way we do when love tries to touch the heart again
after a harsh, perhaps unexpected, hibernation.

Babe, when you reach for me and I hesitate or shrink
please remember
I'm still learning how not to fear the cold snap.
Learning how to let buds bloom and fall if they need to.

Still learning how to live in season.

On Scale

We've only existed for a fraction of a second.

At the front of the room: my professor is talking about
shrinking
the history of the world into a single hour
and I'm not sure why
geological time is shaping this
particular
moment.

He says *Sure you're going north of the river, but in fact*
you must account for the rotation
of the earth.

(We're part of a solar system after all.)
(You must remember we're orbiting the sun.)

How many of you have actually seen The Milky Way?
The first time I did, I thought the sky might swallow me.

There are (an estimated)
100 to 300 billion stars in the galaxy, our galaxy.

(The difference between "the" and "our" is an unexpected
intimacy.)

There are (again, an estimated)
500 billion galaxies—
Do you see where this is going?

This is what I mean when I talk about scale, he says.

After class, I drive toward the spangled skyline,
develop a new fondness for the curve of the interstate
as it bends
towards the apartment,
our apartment.

The Odds Against a Starry Cosmos

Refer to Q , the degree of non-uniformity
in the cocktail of elements in the big bang.

A ratio smaller than 0.0001
and the universe would have been rendered
too smooth, stillborn
without atoms and elements, trapped
in sterile homogeneity.

If Q had been a fraction
larger than 0.0001,
the violence and turbulence
would have rendered unrecognizable
lumps of matter that could never
fragment into stars.

The fundamental mystery:
the precision of the early universe,

0.0001 led to you, my love,
here with your green sweater,
unraveling slightly at the waist,
mitten hands holding your mug
as we watch the snow fall,
flakes disappearing into the cluster
of mallows caught in the swirl
of dark chocolate.

Something I Need to Say

It's always I love you / it's always good morning / did you see
the moon last night? I thought about you when the sun set /
I am always thinking about you and I know you don't know
/ (or maybe you do, maybe you have more faith than I do) /
still I feel the need to remind you / open my mouth, let my
tongue be a bird, or planet in orbit / worry less about mak-
ing sense / the stars don't make sense and we still call them
beautiful / still use them to make sense of our world, turn to
them for navigation / if you are the ocean and I am the shore
and this love is the delta—the place of settling / you know
the earth doesn't disappear into the sea, they just become one
where they meet? / the way it all used to all be one, like the
universe, until the big bang, until the moment when what ex-
isted before ceased, in order to become something new, at last

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About the Author

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