

STEFANI
TRAN



Proof That You're
Not Living Here

PROOF THAT YOU'RE
NOT LIVING HERE

Stefani Tran



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*For Donald Shimoda—
long may you walk the earth*

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Take the light inside you like a blessing, like a knee in the chest, holding onto it and not letting it go. Now let it go.

— Richard Siken

I

THE DAY I ASKED IF YOU WERE AFRAID OF DYING

You put your mouth to my ear and said *come on,*
let's go flip some tables.

I had no choice but to follow. Parting the crowds
with your body, you marched up
to the huddle of unwashed team jackets
and two-toned blowouts;
palms out to the snickers, nodding left
and right—*excuse me*
—and with all
your strength, let loose.

I got the whole thing on tape: every single
soda can and smartphone; the airbrushed faces
in the yearbooks, the achievements
on the college applications—freed into the air.
The noise when they hit the floor,
crumpled together like an apocalypse. The losing
in their eyes, their round, laughable mouths.

It was only when we were running that I noticed
my hands were shaking
with want—for things to be neat, or a chance to tell someone

I was sorry. But you grinned at me like naked gold.
Your face glowing with mischief
as though you'd invented it.
Saying, *Didn't I?*

GIRLS OVERHEARD PASSING BY THE MALL CRECHE
after Mary Szybist

I wonder if she really has a belly
or if they just stuffed her with newspaper.
There's a book in the manger instead of a baby.
It's symbolic, or something. The word
belly sounds gross, like the squishy stuff
that washes up on the beach after a storm.
I always thought it sounded like
the shape of a buttercup. Was it snowing
even if they were in the desert? I wish it snowed
here so we could wear winter coats.
When I was little I thought *Hail* was
her first name and *Mary* was her last. If she
was blessed among women, did she still
throw up? I wonder if she was allowed to
think about kissing someone. My mom told me
if you're having a boy you get bitchy
but if it's a girl, you *bloom*. I watched a movie
about it once and the girl they got to play her
was even younger than us. They never show
any good movies this time of year. They all have
families with both parents, and dogs that get lost
and come home wearing Santa hats. Can you imagine
doing that? What, being holy or having
a person growing inside you? I think
having a whole person inside you automatically
makes you holy. I think it feels
like the sound of a bell. Yeah,
she's definitely in bloom. Just look at her eyes.

EVE

The garden stars are on, and ice
is dripping off the counter. Silver clinks,
the teeth of laughing people. Curling bare
toes, the maids set down plates, uniforms
tablecloth-crisp. The children rub off powdery
kisses and crowd around the creche, palming
baby Jesus. They try to peel off
His resin swaddling cloth. We tell stories
about the ones who cannot be here:
wasted jobs, spendthrift wives. An uncle wanders
to the piano and plunks out half
something remembered. Coconuts zigzag across the floor
to *Here We Come A-wassailing*, not touching
the sacred lighted tree encased in haloes
of neon and Hallmark paper. The most
solemn part is the grandparents sitting in
a line, a mug in each of
their map-lined hands. The coins scatter
into the air and everyone is again
a child, tumbling on the dark ground.
Four chairs where once there were five.
How we keep at bay that sour
light of morning that illuminates ribbon amongst
dead leaves, stray glint in the grass.

EVERYTHING YOU TAUGHT ME ABOUT BEING GOOD

Own nothing but a week's worth of clean clothes,
a few paperbacks with dangling covers,
and one green mug, a crack snaking from the lip

to the handle. Everything else is unnecessary.
Walk backwards, hands in the air. Whistle.
Stuff your pockets with Band-Aids, just in case today

you meet someone who needs one. At lunchtime
sit with the kids who stumble over their consonants,
who have sweaty feet and zits on their noses,

who put Star Trek stickers on their binders and punch
each other not because their mothers left them, but *because*
I felt like it, or he was in my way. Then cross the field

to the playground and crouch down beside
the preschoolers who are poking holes in the sand
with sticks, and talk to them about their pets and how someday

they will fight fires, or drive spaceships into
the neverending sky. When a teacher asks you a question
about how the planets spin, ask her about the last time

she smiled at someone she didn't know. And if
she kicks you out, shrug and say you can learn
pretty much anywhere, and if you're lucky one

or two others will stand up, glancing around nervously,
before scurrying after. When someone invites you
to a party, bring extra beer even if they don't ask.

When a storm comes to rattle the windows, howl into it.
Every time you go through a door, leave
it open behind you, no matter who screams *where are*

your manners? Were you born in a barn?

People will want to be kissed so kiss them hard, like
you mean it, because you do. Ask for all your money

in small change, and when someone asks
whether it's to make it easier
to give away, say *no*, and laugh, *it's because*

I like the sound, and toss a coin onto the asphalt
where it will chime sharply, once, and spin.

FAMILIAR

A window against which
your shape is pressed by a slim

trace of light. Words you take
from my head before

I know them in my mouth. That
which grows in tender slow-motion.

If only none of it were real.
If only we were not so acquainted

with touch, so distanced,
so terrible so near.

THE NIGHT YOU PROJECTED THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD
ONTO MY LIVING ROOM WALL

You wound the blanket around us like a shroud,
flicked the switch. *Let there be
one hell of a show.* And we were traveling
into your stop-motion masterpiece,
watching the darkness flood

with miracles. Before our eyes, water rushed
into the dusty crater of the kitchen sink; layer
upon layer of green clay made an island.
Origami creatures clawed their way
onto the table, unfolded into animals
with volcano hearts.

You filmed the inside of the freezer,

dressed your Lego people in fur and blood
and stuck them into the smoke.

One by one, impossible kingdoms came
to pass. Styrofoam towers crumpled
reluctantly, skipping frames. Boats sailed into the bath

and were never seen again. The camera
dipped in and out of focus. Toothpicks like
telephone poles like trees, glitter on the ceiling
spread out like the sky.

Then the credits—your name
and your name again, and I looked up at you
to tell you what I thought. But for you
the movie was still going on,
you were seeing something—a climax,

some final battle—I couldn't. *What is it*, I asked,
reaching for you
but you only sat there, hands
clenched quietly in your lap, the darkness
flickering in front of your eyes.

SYNONYMS

This is the thing I haven't told you:
Ever since I learned to read
I've weighed words against each other
like pieces of fruit. Consider for instance
the spore-riddled skin of *bucolic*,
and how *country* is cruder
but kinder, brimming with seed.
Or where they hang, the *bough*—
hollow, wet-black—
but how *limb* with its tendon-strung letter
reminds us all trees are alive.

It started as a game but now
it happens all the time. The window above my desk
needs *suds*, practical and telegram-stopped
but still I search for *foam*. The phone
rings or *jingles* or *shrills*, I haven't decided.
Document versus *letter*. Ghost against spirit.

Kilometer or mile.
I don't know how to stop. Sometimes
I'll look across the room at you and think,
Friend and—what? It's different for you:
the thesaurus is for special occasions and *story*
never means *lie*.

Tonight is the first clear night in weeks.
Walking home, we pick out constellations
like stray stitches on a blanket. Orb versus eye.
Body against star. On my doorstep you tell me *Good night*
and I can't help it. Goodbye. So I stand awhile

and watch you walk away.
On either side of you the road is lit,
and spirits are lined up across the miles.

II

NON-DENOMINATIONAL PRAYER

after Joshua Ip

This prayer is all-natural, free from any bias, buzzword or Big Guy; addressed to the trees, and the seas, and the mist and the rocks. All you birds of the air, all you aardvarks of the savannah, all you cheeseburgers on our tables, thanks for exist-

ing! This prayer's got a vocabulary so clean you could eat off it. It's made with words like "care" and "joy" and "peace," easy, single syllables, so smooth you'll barely feel they're there.

This prayer wishes everyone, and we mean *everyone*, a HAPPY YEAR OF RAIN AND SUMMER! It's waterproof and leakproof; no line to jerk a tear here. You'll never need to call a plumber

again. This prayer has no sharp edges, so it's absolutely safe to give to your child. It's slim enough to slip into a pocket or a purse. The volume on this prayer can be dialed

all the way down, so you don't have to worry about it drowning out the bass at your next party. Just plug it in and it will discreetly focus your chi, renew your cells. Here's our big secret: it's all about *oneness*, not about sin.

Trust us—a prayer doesn't need any special mentions when it's this chock-full of good intentions.

THE LOVE STORY

It happens in every
age of the world. He sees her
combing out her hair, or stepping
into a pond or climbing
out of the mud. The white swan
or bull nuzzles up to her
and she, innocent, stretches out
her hand—

And always, he whisks her away
to the underworld, or else leaves her
sitting up in bed, eyes still emptying.

He can be the coyote and think
she is the moon, or the arrow and know
his mark. Sometimes he is the pine needle
humming in her cup of water.

Sometimes he is the one telling the fishermen
to leave their wives at home
so he will not have to look at them.

Sometimes he is her husband, or looks like him.

And sometimes he is only mist
but he is, still. Thunder of the drum, tight
inside the animal skin. This is what
the god knows of desire: the body cannot be
held accountable. The body
cannot be held.

WHAT YOU SAID WHEN I ASKED WHERE YOU WERE GOING

The first portable film camera was
the *cinématographe*, patented
by the *Lumière brothers* in 1895.
*It had a built-in projector and weighed
about sixteen pounds: roughly
the weight of a sperm whale's brain,
or a six-month-old child.*
It was what allowed George Méliès, a year later,
to discover the first special effect.
While filming the street one morning,
an accidental camera jam—and things
changed, as they do. Suddenly
he was a magician, flicking through time
like cards in a deck. People
appearing and disappearing; time, the oldest

trick in the book. See,
it's only fun if you choose to believe
that behind that wall, the truck
really elongates into a hearse;
that the gentleman sheds his coat and hat,
steps into a pair of satin heels and slashes
lipstick across his mouth, before
stepping back out onto the street and sauntering
round the corner, doing
a little shimmy as she goes.
All faster than you can blink.

This is the magic of the world we live in—
where a boy can cross the street and be
a man by the time he reaches

the sidewalk; where funeral cars
are really moving vans, and where
someone else's name is just another word
for light. Here, take the crank yourself;
turn it and see. Disappear. Appear. How easy
it is to work. This is not how I will leave you.

PIETA

Listen now. There were twelve stones lying in a field. They were scattered like loaves of bread. One by one, they were pulled out of the ground, rolled together, built into a tower. So the earth began to drink the wheat, and thunder curled into the blue that opened the sky. The girls ran laughing back into their houses; the sun pulled the shadows back over the hill.

Then all the fishermen opened their nets, and silver poured out into the sea, and the veil was drawn over the temple. In her kitchen, the woman moved back from her oven of bread. The broom rolled out of her hand and now she slaps the dust from her feet, tucks in her knees to listen. Somewhere another woman's child is closing his mouth. His voice streaming back into his throat, his mother pulling him into herself, open. The doves circle the courtyard and come in to land. In the streets they lower their palms, pick their cloaks up from the stones. And close the gates—now.

The shards of clay fuse back into jars. Now. The darkness pulls the flames from the torches, the silence into the horns the song. Now. Bread is nothing more than bread, is not heavy in the hands that take it. Now open. Locusts are flying out of Egypt; eldest sons sit up in bed, the breath drawn back through their chests. Open. The light in the bush in the eye of the shepherd. The veil of the water drawn over the earth. In the undergrowth, the snakes find that they have legs, get up, and walk. Now open your eyes.

SATURDAY

So I went home to set everything in order,
but when I got there I saw

you had already done it before you left. All the chairs
were pushed back against the wall, the table was dry;

the floor clear of dust and the bed stripped bare.
Everything in order. But there was a wind moving

inside the house, and I did not know
where it had come from,
and I could not let it back out.

THE DREAM

Young you are, and full and naked.
Dripping with swallowy death
but undark—only sweet,
slow tongue
of a river. Thickly night and blue

body gleaming—skin
there, but only bare-
ly so. Beneath, the bulb of each

perfect organ
stoplight-glowing, hard scarlet,
raging and true.

Every eye a whole quiver,
your milk and honey chin.

I am stone-graced, I am. What words?
—flutters of nothing. The room is
a lamp, and prayer comes
to the spine, the knee. Wet wings
between the blades.

Yes, it is winter. The universalcoldest.
The sky blinks and the moon passes

through your hand. And all
empties out,
out! Oh, but how

to hold it. Am I bearing
the after, this now.

III

AND THEN

*...They are things
I would not, have learned, if he, had lived,
but I cannot, be glad, he died...
— Sharon Olds*

They come with words that they ask me to
swallow and spit back out like a child.
I open my mouth because I am too
tired to fight. While the sky out the window
remains painfully sky, every inch of blue.
I sit at the table and am spoon-fed.
Hands cover my hands and I cover the bed.

No one has been able to decide what to do
with the desk. Some days they leave it alone
and some days they start to carry it out to the hall
and then at the last minute, change their minds

and set it down again. Now it sits at a slight
angle, jutting out into the aisle like a

dislocated rib. Most people don't want
to go near it so they leave
by the back door instead of the front.
Yesterday I saw one girl start to reach
out to touch it, but then she started crying

and her friends huddled around her, patting
her back saying *It's okay, shhh,*
it's okay, and ushered her out.

Because I love you I know you can never die.
I can walk into the kitchen and find you sitting

on the counter—the morning in your hair, your fingers
in the mixing bowl. You are taking the long route as usual so

you wave from the other side of the street.
You're sprawled across a bleacher and singing off-key.

You're in the passenger seat and fast asleep.
Your mouth is to my ear and you're saying

you passed the test, love.

Now I'm really here.

I know. I believe.

Sometimes when it's cold I slip my hands into my pockets
and touch a stray ticket stub. I throw the coat away.

The angels tell me there, there is no more war, or weeping, or pain.

The angels are many, and their hair is white like the sun.

The angels follow me to the convenience store. They wait in line behind me at the ATM.

The angels say the trees that grow by the river of life bear twelve kinds of fruit.

The angels attend to me in the shower. They push the rubber mat towards me with their ivory feet. They hold out the towel to dry my face.

The angels say there is no more anger, or greed, or embarrassment.

The angels ask why I am picking flowers.

The angels ask why I look for the living among the dead.

The angels say there is no night. They say the road to the city is made of gold so pure it is like water.

The angels are many and their voices are like the rushing sea.

The angels stand by my bedside and say, *Do not grieve.*

The angels spread their wings over me. The angels beat me with their wings. The angels say *Your grieving is forgiven.*

Once, I suggested that we run away from it.
That we go up into the mountains where it
could never find us, and build a house

on the edge of the world. We could learn
the name of each blade of grass, baptize
each other with rainwater and birdsong,
sleep for years until it forgot

and it took someone else, someone old
or stupid or unkind. *And I suppose
we'd live on locusts and honey,*

you snapped. And I snapped back, *Well
who asked you to do this anyway* and you said
that no one asked, it was just what
you had to do. You told me no one runs

because no one gets saved that way.
I said there is a difference between self-
sacrifice and selfishness. I said *I never asked
to be saved. I just want you to stay.*

You knew it was coming. So
what the fuck were you playing at,
passing the time with me.

What must
be imagined: the way
powder
has changed the
contours
of a face.

Burning
the flowers
writing
a check to
the heavenly choir.

The clink
of glass against
red glass
the shared
utterance
of a name, to mean

it is finished. Then

washing up

afterward

and drying. The things

that happen when

immovable stone

meets unstoppable

decay. Dust

to dirt. To finally

say it—that he

is dead,

and I am here.

And the days pass one
after another, all of them
oblivious with light, until in the middle
of putting a bottle of milk
in the cart, it occurs quietly that
I'm not trying anymore, I'm just doing.
That I can say the phone is dead,
those batteries are dead, the flowers
are dead and I have to buy new ones,
without flinching or saying *I didn't mean it*
to no one in particular. All the clothes
are gone now, all the boxes folded neatly.
The pictures are framed, and in plain sight.

This is my resurrection—muddy river,
crowded willow, plastic bag bobbing by.

The sun hard and hot as crystal. Shucking
down to my body, I lie back

underwater, open to the sky.
A fish bubbles by my ear. The place

where we met—when we were newer
and less afraid. I am thinking that when we die,

we go nowhere. Like a stone dropping
into a well, maybe, or a giant reaching up

and blowing out a star. Or maybe there
is something else, but first we are poured

out of ourselves. And when we wake we won't
remember any of it; all we'll be able to do

is start over again. I don't know, but either way
I can live with that. For now, the river

holds me, and I float between the trees.

IF ANYONE ASKS ME TO MAKE THEM BELIEVE

I'll say you didn't walk on the water
but that you followed it, tripping over

the hem of your robe now and then. I'll say
you smelled like wood, and salt, and the sun

at dusk; that you never could quite wash
the oil from your hands.

I'll say that of everything that was broken,
we can still find pieces to carry. That once, I touched

the tear in your side and felt
the bones of your laughter—

the knife

so sudden and clear
you had to teach me to breathe.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefani Tran is a senior at the Ateneo de Manila University, which she looks forward to graduating from with a BFA in Creative Writing and a Minor in Education.

She was a fellow for English poetry at the 13th IYAS National Writers' Workshop, and a Temasek Foundation LEARN scholar at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her work has been published in *Heights*, *Transit*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *CURA*, and *SOFTBLOW*. When she was seven, she wanted to be a detective; but now she thinks that poetry is mystery enough.

As for what comes next, only heaven knows.