

It Will Only Happen Once

Poems by R. Salvador Reyes

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I. Interiors

II. Things I'd Tell My Mom If She'd Survived Dying

Interiors

Should I start
With yesterday's laundry? Or go
All the way back to coaxing toddlers into night
Reveries with Alexi Murdoch melodies

In the dark except
For a naked closet lightbulb & the door cracked open. We've
Talked about everything else
Already. We've clocked

All the icebergs
Melting & how the world will
End. The only way

To face the abyss is
Cutting hiding
Behind the apocolypses.

In The Beginning

Here I am, all
Naked for view when nobody
Should want to look. Be warned—
These are the parts

Under the skin, pulled
Away to let out
My insides. And I'll be honest:
It feels *hack*, emerging

All confessional, meta. I probably
Shouldn't have even
Asked you here, but that's
The thing, I just want
To pretend
Someone's listening. I know
You do too.

In The Flesh

The reservoirs on Tam are heading
Toward full. It's January & since
The last drought I've made a habit
Of checking cumulative annual
Rainfall, plus reservoir levels, and the comparison
Of such to historic
Averages for that day
Of the year. Two wet winters
Now are the latest
Tiny victory. Counting water
Finally outlasted
Tallying COVID—my daily
Pair of doom-gauges for those
Early 2020s. I used to feel

The world was primarily unseeable, now feel I
See everything too much. We were
Better in the corners of our places, mostly
Sequestered. Believe this: once
It was a thing happened on a day, and if you
Missed the evening
News you might not even know
Until the next. You had to go
Find something somewhere if you were going
To know it. And it wasn't

In your pocket. Nearly everything
Was away from us. And you could long. And so much
Of the time was longing
For a thing you could only
Imagine knowing. Unequivocally, this was
Better that way. I won't even give you
The benefit of the doubt. There are
Now everywhere too many
Of all of us, and some of us
Were better kept dispersed.
Call me old because I am, but the 21st century ate
Us dead while we stroked
Its parts and still
Don't know we've been eaten. Now about
Me, inside the terror makes louder
Noises than it used to. But the well
That's filled with getting
This far without calamity and the cumulative
Disfiguring joy of living
This time with my girls as now
Our sand dwindles.

In Night

What was I saying? I could
Look at the page before to know, but want
To resist, to make the next thing
Get born by the moment, and not
In response. So what is it?
There are two other dark rooms
In this small barely-lit
House where both my girls & wife sleep, a cat
In one bed, a dog in another, and a second
Cat waiting for me at the edge
Of the light that reaches the couch.

In The Glow

Funny to think this is how
All unshortened lives have gone, will go. The young part—
Which you kept
Telling yourself wouldn't last
Forever, but couldn't help feeling
It would—happens, and its rubber
Band stretches so much that when
You are actually in the middle
It keeps feeling like the young
Part. And when the after
Middle arrives & you are in slow motion

Snapped back & flung
Fathoms the other way it feels
Like a sudden landing on a once-it-seemed
Far-off planet. Here are
The square kindergarten picture
Magnets that they moved every day to the "Present"
Box outlined in dry-erase for attendance at the front
Of the classroom, then relocated

Permanently to our refrigerator after
The school year ended and now've been
There so long they radiate with evidence
Of a previous life. If you are past
The middle with me, you don't need to hear
This—even if you ignore it, you know
How the old things glow. But if you are
Young or still in the middle, look
Closer: the light
Is all around you.

In This Body

Regret is its own pile that I can't stop
Reaching into. What other lives
Were there
For the taking from it? What sharp
Yester-sticks are available today
For impaling? I ran across
Clark Street in Chicago on an icy, electric Saturday night
Holding her hand—we were
In bold orbit. Then spent
The next week succumbing
Meekly to the gravity
Of my previous destination. And it's

More than just the hinged
Passages, there are whole cloths
Of time colored in
Wrong, even long sequences
I'd keep unchanged, but wish had lived
Through the mirror
Of *if-I-had-known*. Each can take the breath
Out of you.

But all the while nonetheless
I cannot dislodge the anchor
Of who I am here, and the superseding fear
Of it not being. Could I bear
To let what I know go? What if
The dog was different? What if I'd never
Written that? What if I thought
I was someone else? It's why
I can't do reincarnation—I live
Only in this body now,
Outside it all pleasures belong to a stranger.

Fine, here's the real nut:
I'm 53 & have no idea yet
What this life has
Become. I've sunk the decades
Into assembling an intricate assemblage
Of the universe, then kept it

Into Monuments

In a shoebox shoved into a cubby
In the dark part of the closet. Who does
That? The answer keeps making me
Want to find another: the timid. My work
Is easier loved in a vacuum—
Where no transient particles might lead
To its decay. The singular

Thrill is inking it out & carving it
Into idolatry. Like Pupkin, imagined accolade
Is my weapon. The whole mechanic
Is pathetic—all the gears
That reconfigure
The fears into monuments.
Can self-loathing mean
Loathing how much thou
Loves thy conjured
Self?

I lost
My mind once.
Migraine. Seizure. Unconsciousness.
Amnesia. I was a thing
That knew names, but barely any stories
To attach them to—a shape
Suggesting a garment almost
Threadless. Can I tell
You? It was
Immense in its strangeness, a monolith

Unscribbled by my life. I could smooth
My hand across it, but felt
Only the missings. In place
Of old stories, I possessed a new
Secret: I was no longer
Him. My story began
Here, as an empty
Replica waiting to be told

In Place Of

What life I occupy. And I did
Not slowly regain
My memories, I haphazardly
Downloaded his. My memories
Are the ones
Of the downloading. And even after
I was completed & owned again
All his thoughts, the replica
Remained.

In Her Absence

My mother has gone.
I am motherless. It will only happen
Once, and then it is
Unchangeable. This all seems
Obvious until it is true. Then

It stuns you like you'd never
Imagined it. But you can
Only arrive here—aghast, agape,
Lonely. Who will I tell
That tragic thing about the person
Who I'd tell it to? There isn't

A loneliness like it, there
Is no other way to lose where
You came from.
It's the only voice
I'll never find a way
To remove from its absence.

for Mom

Things I'd Tell
My Mom If
She'd Survived
Dying

Actors

I watched the season
Finale of “Hacks” on HBO. I know
You don’t watch it, but that guy is on it. He plays
This faux-arrogant casino owner. He was—
Remember “Chances Are”?
Robert Downey Jr. played Cybil Shepard’s reincarnated
Husband, and the other young good-looking guy
With the big smile & curly hair played
The husband in the beginning when he was hit by a car
Crossing the street after picking-up
Something at the jewelry store for their anniversary.
That’s the guy. He had so much charisma—
We both thought he was going to be
A big star. He’s so much older now, but still
Great on “Hacks” & it still feels like
He should’ve been more
Than a character actor, it’s weird that’s not
How it happened. You always
Liked to guess who would be
A hit when they were nobody—pointing
Them out before
They’d gotten real roles. You had
An eye for it. Remember the dancing
Actor from the late 70s Dr. Pepper commercials?
David Naughton—you said something
The first time you saw him. Now
I watch him every October, the perfect
Lead in the perfect
Horror movie. And you called it
With Ray Liotta too, when he was
Joey on “Another World”—now
All the soaps you watched don’t broadcast anymore. We
Talked about that in our last regular
Conversation. When I called you from
Our spring eclipse weekend in Santa Barbara
To say I wanted to find
The Capwell’s house and you didn’t remember
That they were the family
On that short-lived 80s NBC soap
“Santa Barbara”—“Oh my gosh,” you said, “That show is so old
I totally forgot about it.” On that evening
I just called you out of nowhere,
And you answered like it was
Any other night. Can you believe that?
It seems impossible.

Vivienne's License

Vi's been driving two weeks now, and her actual
License came in the mail
Today, her first documented proof of
Adulthood, the capacity to leave
Without accompaniment. I couldn't help thinking of
Your young twentysomething license on the tri-fold
Foamcore filled with artifacts of your existence that Dad
Assembled for the remembrance
Last weekend. You would've loved
What he built—nine panels tracing your whole
Story through a lifetime of
Magnificent detritus, a trail of self-evidence
From lens & letter. Your face
Would've lit with an uncontainable
Smile when you saw it. Anyway, I don't know
How you managed—watching
Me drive away that
First time alone, without even those horrible
Phone trackers that I trace Vi's drives with despite despising
My capacity to do so. But I know you would've
Done it too if you could've. We can't help
Ourselves—when some object of our love
Is relegated to a void, our urge
To locate them
Among the emptiness
Is unbearable.

A Confession

I hate to say this & I don't want
To make you feel bad & I totally
Understand why you chose it, but if I'm being
Honest—I partly wish
You hadn't picked cremation. It's not that I wanted to stand there
While your box was covered
With dirt, or deny
Dad the chance to bring something
Of you with him returning
To those places you'd been
Together once. But now sometimes in the idle spaces I can't help
But flash to that moment
When the fire consumed you. It feels like so much
Violence toward you undeserved. Those flames
On your skin & to know
It was real feels
Untenable. How did I
Let this happen
To you? I'm sorry.

A Whole Season

It's starting
To get weird now—how long
It's been
Since I talked to you.
Three months. A whole
Season already, but one without
A specific designation—its quarter-year
Straddling the end of spring
& Beginning of summer.
An in-between time.
There's too much
To say now after
Telling you nothing for so long.
It still feels like
You're out there, just
Unreachable. But this July
I won't look up from the dune
In Rodanthe to see you
Leaning on the railing of the deck above, peering
Over our spot on the beach. You
Seemed illuminated, and I'd
Wave. What were you thinking? Was it
Something I couldn't have fathomed?

Time Travel

I can't stop going into
The past. Pictures of the girls when
They were younger, videos when you were
With them, messages you left, the collections
Of random receipts
I stash in secret places
So upon rediscovery I can try to conjure
Where they fit in that ancient day's
Story, to reincarnate my inner
State when that paper first slipped
Into my hand. Which makes me
Wonder—I never asked, but did
You ever try to will your way
Into a sliver in the past? I don't remember
If I told you,
But sometimes I use a trick to remind
Myself that today is still
One of *those days*—a day before
Others that will long to return
To now. All nostalgia
Is inevitable. What I do is pretend
I've traveled back to here from
Decades hence, then drink all this
With far off thirst. Did you
Try to travel back in your last hours? When
I first waved to you from the dune years
Ago, was that really you
From the future who found
A way to inhabit an old now? Was that me
Waving goodbye in the past while
My now body packed for a flight
That wouldn't arrive in time? Were you
Thinking *I can't believe*
I'm actually here.

Untethered

Sometimes when I think of something then
Remember I can't
Call you, I stomp
My foot hard into the floor. It's not
An angry stomp, but like I'm trapped
In a box & trying to kick through the bottom
To escape. The box always feels
Grey, like concrete, and invincible.
But you'd probably rather not
Talk about that—it seems
Cruel to remind you
You're not hearing this. Cam & I
Are going camping next
Week—starting
In Sonoma & working up the coast
To the Oregon border. We're taking Little Bug—
Sleeping in a tent with her dog
Is one of Cam's favorite indulgences. I hope
These nights cling to her memory. It won't be until later
That she realizes how not many nights there are
With Little Bug tucked beside
Her sleeping bag, untethered
From time. But she can take it with her if
She lives in it right. Oh Mom, Cam will do
So many somethings I'll want
To tell you. But those stories
Will never escape the box.

Journal Entry From A Year Ago Our Last Week Oceanside With You

7.20.23 10.50 AM
Thurs Morning
Rodanthe, Beach

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Yesterday's time
Travel from 2043 day...

Rebecca & Vi started morning @ 7:20
Bringing surf board to ocean
By Harry's house. When they got back
I made blueberry pancakes for Cam, Vi & Mom
With Monday's leftover batter.
Rebecca down to water early
By herself, then we prepped the beach for everyone—
Super windy & had the small tent
Down half way. Pool guy said
To fill the pool
For 2 hours with the hose to prep for later
Wind effects. Waves finally
Good for riding (smaller) in front of
House nextdoor & played in water
With girls & cousins until
1 PM & wind got crazier
As clouds pre-storm rolled in.

I Find Opportunities To Be Around You Again

We got a cuckoo
Clock for the kitchen. A cute little blue
Wooden bird pops out every hour. Instead of counting
The time, it plays recordings of bird songs. They remind me
Of the sounds of the woods outside our house
Growing up. Now sometimes when the bird plays a song I close
My eyes & imagine some moment standing in
That breakfast room, with the birds
Whistling from the pines
Beside our deck outside, and you saying
Something to me from the kitchen. Sometimes it's early
Evening when I was seven & sometimes it's last
Summer, the morning
We packed the car before driving East. Those were
Our days.

I miss you.

One Last Thing Before I Go

I also never told you
About Little Bug's defiant solo bark from
Beside the wood-plank fence atop
Our backyard hill with the redwood
Tree. Her sharp response to me
Calling her down
From her perch. A protest
To the unstoppable impulse. Even though
It's meant to wound me, I'm buoyed
By the spirit of it, an irresistibility to be
Her own.
If you'd heard it,
You would've told me
What she was saying.

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Summer 2024

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