

Journey of Storms

by Paula Bramsen Cullen

An excerpt containing chapter four:
Eye of the Storm

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Doctor, Tell me

Safety or
threat
in your
eyes?

Were I your
daughter
would your eyes change,

cool depths
turn to umber,
winter warm to autumn,

pupils enlarge
to take me in?
Shade me with
your brows.

Through your eyes
is the only
way in
I know.

Changing Houses, Changing Skins

Are you teasing me, my friend?
Sitting hat in hand,
forehead creased in discerning lines,
lighting, like a gray-haired hummingbird,
in your vast black leather lap.
Your vacated chamber
clanks out its silence overhead.

The upper walls, superfluous
now that life has left
and heart has slipped away,
have bricked themselves around you,
between us.

Upstairs,
floors accustomed to carpet
lie pale.
Foreign shadows swim and pass
uninterrupted now by furniture angles.

Your heart has left the shell,
following crib bumper, spice rack
sat-out chairs to
that new home.

An Analyst's Movement

Are you a man who skips out?
A fleetfoot,
sneakfoot?

A rabbinical counselor
hopping in elevated shoes
across the debris of your
patients' desperation?

You are coming unglued
from your rock-bottom shoes.
Trust's a casket
with the nails driven in.

Retreat from Trying

I've said
trust is a casket
with the nails driven in.

The only wily, winsome thing—
I didn't know how far
the points were hammered in
to pierce the wooden base of shame,
to sting the buried source of pain.

With the corpse
I buried a flutter of trust.
With the corpse
I buried, and bury I must,
fingertips tingling with almost the touch
of eiderdown peace
and the deep scent of musk.

I'm riding with Charon
on the wide river Styx.
As his hull patterns black
the river of dreams
he grins of dark and toothless things.

I've gone where you cannot reach me now.

I Can't Seem to Reach Her

*Even,
even as I speak
my words fade,
sighing through the window sash.*

*My kindest vowels
unravel into feather streams.
I see them seeping out
through the seams of her skin.*

She can't yet take me in.

Wrong Words

He said the wrong words.
He didn't know it.
I knew it because
my body burned.
The fire spread from my face
turning into a thoracic ache.

He'd been waxing so eloquent
but when he looked up he saw I'd left
right in the middle of his soliloquy.

He looked everywhere,
seeing only my shell.
He couldn't find me with his eyes.
That called for intuition.

He found me just in time
for the hour was near gone,
just in time to extinguish the burning.

*We have years, he said,
but no more minutes left.*

Thanks for finding me.
I'm glad you cared enough to see I'd gone.
Tomorrow we'll recover the words I missed
and you can recommence your eloquence.

The Poet and the Analyst

To study creation first hand
you have your own guinea pig
winding on her tiny treadmill
of lyric lines.

She pokes the glass tube
to water herself with you
and then back to the wheel where she resides,
spinning in thought concentrate,
spinning out poems that point arrows
and punctuate
an analyst's daily routine.

Therapy Dance

What kind of inelegant ballet
are we dancing, dancing?

We dip and bow
elastic legs
rubber arms.

You are the one who spins me
keeping your hands
nearly touching my waist
but just shy of it
allowing me to spin 'til dark if I choose.

When time and the lights are right
we do beautiful work together
moving with sweeping grace
to stop the heart.

But then the second violin
breaks a string.
The oboe goes astray
and plays a seventh low.

You trip
I slip
and we land sprawling
on the sawdusted floor.

It's Impractical

It's really quite
impractical
to try to live a life
with small children in it
and dishes and muddy boots tracking the floor
and committees to be called
and also be an analysand.

Sometimes a session will
send you soaring so deep
that to surface for a skinned knee
or to arbitrate a fight
jerks your heart
like a telephone ringing at two a.m.

So you glue a smile on your face
in the absence of a real one
using your memory to guide it,
and you tune the timbre of your voice
to sympathy.

But all this
depletes already thin reserves.

Kitchen Incarceration

Five-thirty.

I peer out through the bars
for I'm in here with them
these shrieking and scratching
blond haired, bright eyed
monkey boys.

My first son jumps and shouts
and spreads his arms
in a horrible gesture.

His brother thrives in delight,
reaching the height,
flings his arms wide,
leaping through space,
lands in a squat and shrieks out his
ear splitting fervor.

They're off again,
pacing the walls,
picking their noses,
picking up bits
and pieces of offal
to handle and taste
despite screams
from their mother.

We're all in the cage
scratching each other.

Mother Lessons

*Let him fall.
The getting up
is so important.*

But you don't understand
a mother's care.

*Let him fight.
The making up
is so important.*

But he's my child, my flesh.

*Let him cry.
The sniffing
slowly feeling better
is so important.*

But I've lit his life with a spark
from mine.
If I let him fall and fight and cry
I'd have to let him go!

*Yes, but you see,
the letting go
is so important.*

Tapestry

My children's anger
that twists me to an old
and shrieking shrew
is just an echo of older voices.

Why, children fight and scream,
but a moment wait,
their arms entwined
in ancient game of maid and squire.

But older voices
harsh with rage
bouncing through cathedraled halls
most fearful yet to tiny ears.

Such a house to hold a king
becomes a prison cell.
The stone walls ring
with curse and portent.

Their age, their age
gives them the power
to rent in two
the family fabric,
woven safety, gentle words

sewn for me, sewn for you,
minded, tended,
passed to me then back to you
to smell and suck and feel.

When I hear my children's rage
through the echo of the past they scream,
and I feel the threads give way.

Choices

I have run
from life
toward death.

Turned
aside
patterns
of light,

shooting colors,
muted sounds,
percussion masking failure.

Black
shadows
antiquing
blank, flat surfaces

and I
appear
authentic.

Suicide

That savage god
latent
in us
all.

Its rule
prescribes
obedience.

Gnashing teeth
foreclose the debt
contracted by
our genesis.

Snarling eyes
proscribe
trained referee's intrusion
into that god's business.

Eyes soften to
satin, beckoning to
coffin satin.

Yes.

Graveyard

God!

The sun is burning black blood
and the walls of my coffin turn to slime.

The pond near my grave
shows dead arms beckoning.
I can't but laugh at those bony arms.

They needn't tempt me to their torment.
I've found my home
in the two-by-six earth pit where
through the night the moans
of the half-dead make me restless.

But when light came
when another day of sorrow glowed
a bright voice said,
But the day has changed it all.
Blood is red.
the dead arms, only branches.
The slime is the mist of your breathing.
There is no death in you
and the blood is the flow of a woman's life.
There is no death in you.

Then the wings of the condor flapped,
obscuring the bright voice
and I sank back to darkness
where branches are dead arms,
the mist is slime
and the sun
 burns
 black.

Premature Interpretation

I, too enshrouded by the fury,
too encapsuled by the pain
to hear his words
as more than grief,
as more than sentence
to endless loss.

His words
grip like teeth,
gnawing away the flesh of patience,
the flesh of trust,

biting down,
biting down
on what the shroud surrounded.

Lullaby

Old Mother Death
come cradle me.

Come ahead now
in your billowing skirt
and wash-worn blouse
with soft white hair
piled like drifts of snow.

With arms so strong
to grasp my hand
and break its hold on life.

Old Mother Death
oh, cradle me.

Voice Bridge

He would
help
in all times
anytimes.

That
gentle
voice
a command to thumb my nose,

“thank you,
not today,
not tonight, despair.”

My parsimonious spirit,
bankrupt,
stretches past the vapor curtain
of its own shadowed eyes,

clutching
that
gentle
voice.

Patient's Last Recourse

Flee to *as if*
That will save,
only that.

Fleeing to dreams,
a more common resort,
but beyond dreams,
past illusion
as if waits,
bedrock, ready to abort
the stomach-lurching fall
taken now, repeating then.

See *as if* to save yourself,
halve the pain.

Suicide Rejected

There will always be a
home around you
my sons.

No dark motherless night
will swallow you
and follow you
through all endeavors

filling them with fear
filling them with emptiness
and fear become a living
swallowing thing.

Sleep soft
my sons.

Compassionate Intervention

So many times
that dark curtain
whispered its intent
to shroud me.

You could have leaned back coolly
substituting skill for caring.

You could have said,
*You seem to want to destroy me
by destroying yourself.
Clearly misdirected hostility.*
then settle back,
the picture of a rational man
with confident eyes on his diploma.

But when pills or sills seduced me
you leaned forward
imploring me to understand,
not my motive now,
but the consequences—
the motherless boys,
the widowed man,
the analyst lacking his analysand.

Motives are for later
when the sun shines.

Timely Interpretation

Run that past me
one more time.
Say it in as many ways
as any could devise.
Say it to my mouth and toes.
Say it to my eyes.

Say it 'til it channels
a pathway to my womb.
We'll let it grow there
in my woman's kiln.

Weave it into strands
that thread into my dreams.
At night I'll reincorporate it
in images that seem
by me alone invented.

If we say it all these ways and more
it will at last belong to me.

The Patient's Perverse

It's true
I love to laugh with you.
But the stone inside that I could overlook
as long as tears made oceans of my eyes
has taken on layers
growing cell by cell,
a malignant living weight.

As I feel better
I perversely feel worse.

The hardest time is past
when sorrow flowed unchecked.
The hardest time is coming
a time to grow, not just recover.

The hardest time is coming.
The stone is adding
layer to layer.