

## **Life on Earth Dorianne Laux**

The odds are we never should have been born.  
Not one of us. Not one in 400 trillion to be  
exact. Only one among the 250 million  
released in a flood of semen that glides  
like a glassine limousine filled with tadpoles  
of possible people, one of whom may  
or may not be you, a being made of water  
and blood, a creature with eyeballs and limbs  
that end in fists, a you with all your particular  
perfumes, the chords of your sinewy legs  
singing as they form, your organs humming  
and buzzing with new life, moonbeams  
lighting up your brain's gray coils,  
the exquisite hills of your face, the human  
toy your mother longs for, your father  
yearns to hold, the unmistakable you  
who will take your first breath, your first  
step, bang a copper pot with a wooden spoon,  
trace the lichen growing on a boulder you climb  
to see the wild expanse of a field, the one  
whose heart will yield to the yellow forsythia  
named after William Forsyth—not the American  
actor with piercing blue eyes, but the Scottish  
botanist who discovered the yellow bells  
on a highland hillside blooming  
to beat the band, zigzagging down  
an unknown Scottish slope. And those  
are only a few of the things  
you will one day know, slowly chipping away  
at your ignorance and doubt, you  
who were born from ashes and will return  
to ash. When you think you might be  
through with this body and soul, look down  
at an anthill or up at the stars, remember  
your gambler chances, the bounty  
of good luck you were born for.

## **For the Sake of Strangers**

No matter what the grief, its weight,  
we are obliged to carry it.  
We rise and gather momentum, the dull strength  
that pushes us through crowds.  
And then the young boy gives me directions  
so avidly. A woman holds the glass door open,  
waiting patiently for my empty body to pass through.  
All day it continues, each kindness  
reaching toward another—a stranger  
singing to no one as I pass on the path, trees  
offering their blossoms, a child  
who lifts his almond eyes and smiles.  
Somehow they always find me, seem even  
to be waiting, determined to keep me  
from myself, from the thing that calls to me  
as it must have once called to them—  
this temptation to step off the edge  
and fall weightless, away from the world.

## **Only As the Day is Long**

Soon she will be no more than a passing thought,  
a pang, a timpani of wind in the chimes, bent spoons  
hung from the eaves on a first night in a new house  
on a street where no dog sings, no cat visits  
a neighbor cat in the middle of the street, winding  
and rubbing fur against fur, throwing sparks.

Her atoms are out there, circling the earth, minus  
her happiness, minus her grief, only her body's  
water atoms, her hair and bone and teeth atoms,  
her fleshy atoms, her boozy atoms, her saltines  
and cheese and tea, but not her piano concerto  
atoms, her atoms of laughter and cruelty, her atoms  
of lies and lilies along the driveway and her slippers,  
Lord her slippers, where are they now?

## After 12 Days of Rain

I couldn't name it, the sweet  
sadness welling up in me for weeks.  
So I cleaned, found myself standing  
in a room with a rag in my hand,  
the birds calling time-to-go, time-to-go.  
And like an old woman near the end  
of her life I could hear it, the voice  
of a man I never loved who pressed  
my breasts to his hips and whispered  
"My little doves, my white, white lilies."  
I could almost cry when I remember it.

I don't remember when I began  
to call everyone "sweetie,"  
as if they were my daughters,  
my darlings, my little birds.  
I have always loved too much,  
or not enough. Last night  
I read a poem about God and almost  
believed it—God sipping coffee,  
smoking cherry tobacco. I've arrived  
at a time in my life when I could believe  
almost anything.

Today, pumping gas into my old car, I stood  
hatless in the rain and the whole world  
went silent—cars on the wet street  
sliding past without sound, the attendant's  
mouth opening and closing on air  
as he walked from pump to pump, his footsteps  
erased in the rain—nothing  
but the tiny numbers in their square windows  
rolling by my shoulder, the unstoppable seconds

gliding by as I stood at the Chevron,  
balancing evenly on my two feet, a gas nozzle  
gripped in my hand, my hair gathering rain.

And I saw it didn't matter  
who had loved me or who I loved. I was alone.  
The black oily asphalt, the slick beauty  
of the Iranian attendant, the thickening  
clouds—nothing was mine. And I understood  
finally, after a semester of philosophy,  
a thousand books of poetry, after death  
and childbirth and the startled cries of men  
who called out my name as they entered me,  
I finally believed I was alone, felt it  
in my actual, visceral heart, heard it echo  
like a thin bell. And the sounds  
came back, the slish of tires  
and footsteps, all the delicate cargo  
they carried saying thank you  
and yes. So I paid and climbed into my car  
as if nothing had happened—  
as if everything mattered — What else could I do?

I drove to the grocery store  
and bought wheat bread and milk,  
a candy bar wrapped in gold foil,  
smiled at the teenaged cashier  
with the pimpled face and the plastic  
name plate pinned above her small breast,  
and knew her secret, her sweet fear—  
Little bird. Little darling. She handed me  
my change, my brown bag, a torn receipt,  
pushed the cash drawer in with her hip  
and smiled back.