

Selections from *Winter Stars Visible in December* by Alexa Winik

Asterism [I]: Ursa Major

Let's say there was an architecture to her grief.

A split-level dailiness [grey stone, white paint].

Arriving as a polite thief in the night with no annunciation

it waved without feeling as a gentle neighbour would,
asking, 'Where does a son go?' to the roseless rose of Sharon.

'In the earth,' the sky answered. 'In the interminable earth.'

*Not into the earth, but into the sky, Callisto's son was cast –
a monument to what had happened.
Before he was monumental, he was a bear hurled
skyward, mid-transformation.
Before he was a bear, he was a hunter, a man
[fastidious, quick-footed]
who had forgotten the face of his mother Callisto.
She had also been changed [irrevocably] into a bear.
& before he was a hunter, a man, he was a boy.
A boy whom his mother loved with an animal,
mineral love – a major love that could bend time
as a river bends the concept of the moon.
& what had happened? What always happens.
[enter/exit Zeus]*

Ursa Major: not a constellation but an asterism – a family of fixed stars. Yet despite its hypervisibility in the northern hemisphere, it makes no appearance in the set of notes I find tucked inside a drawer once belonging to my grandmother. What first catches my eye is a line of graceful blue ink across the face of an envelope: WINTER STARS VISIBLE IN DECEMBER. Inside on loose scrap pages, I uncover a precise tracing of the movements of other celestial bodies [the brightness of Betelgeuse, the capriciousness of the Hyades]. Ursa Major, however, is mentioned nowhere.

I find the envelope while searching for something else. [What was it?]

I'm visiting my parents who live in the house where my grandmother lived & died [seven winters ago]. I'm here because it's my father's turn, his condition the kind they call incurable. Must be something about late December. We parade through its dark kitchen with clipped expectations, like doomed astronauts. Or slumped bears submitted to months of dreaming in their dens, humid & slick with pine needles. Ears pricked against a locked door to the exterior, listening for signs – *supermoon – indifferent weathers – I'll know it when I hear it – the quiet frequency of two rivers touching –*

'It's her handwriting,' my mother says in an email time-stamped 3:17 am. 'I'm almost certain.' Never mind that no one remembers my grandmother claiming an interest in astronomy. Or that you'd be lucky to see stars at all in a city like this. 'She must've written these before the Caesars lights went up by the river.'

Like her elision of Ursa Major, our memory of her is incomplete. Patchwork. An emulsion of structural failures. ‘I feel like I know about an eighth of her life,’ writes my mother, the sixth of her seven children [both living & dead].

I begin to have dreams in which I’m pushed onto a stage coated in polystyrene snow. Sickly snow on a shabby lounge chair, the false stairs leading nowhere. Am I meant to sing? To speak? I’m downstage, centre. I can’t remember. To my left: two rows of blue cardboard triangles. Someone offstage tugs them in opposite directions to evoke the movement of water. *Let me tell you about this river*, I hear myself saying. In the end, my performance, the reviews are mixed.

‘There are two ways of clambering downward,’ wrote Hélène Cixous. ‘By plunging into the earth and going deep into the sea – and neither is easy.’ She’s speaking here about writing poetry. I’ll wager that when a sea is distant, a river will do.

On the back of the last note, a short ledger of funeral contributions [for friends?]. Mostly redacted:

	<i>Given by</i>	<i>In loving memory</i>
20.00 cash	██████████	██████████ husband & father
20.00 cheque	██████████	

No essential self / no essential memory / memory as a performance through repetition etc. Or, to quote Judith Butler, memory as ‘a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.’ i.e. when I read my grandmother’s notes, I am in the anterior room of the most anterior room & she is not here. Only you, reader, & I. Gesticulating, with seriousness. What to make of this? Also Butler [on grief]: ‘I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well.’

*One legend pits Hera against Callisto the Bear.
Aligning herself with Zeus, Hera also punishes Callisto
in a bid for security [her narrow, white-knuckled corner of the universe].
Her plan is to trap Callisto in the wintered skies,
baring purgatorial teeth.
Never to dip below the horizon or taste warm southerly seas.
Hera forgets that Callisto has already stepped outside of time.
Shed her pelt. Changed her name, even [Ursa]. Is elemental, everywhere.
Visible in the last lift of the dawn, reflected in the face of the river –
wherever the old laws cannot touch.*

Susan Howe: Deep river, darkness, horror / stuck in the mire // I told them worse and worse. / Splinter in my sister’s eye / plank in my own / I cut out my tongue in the forest

‘The living, writers especially, are terrible projectionists,’ wrote the formerly living Adrienne Rich. ‘I hate the way they use the dead.’ In other words, we expect too much of elegy. The dead do not hear us/are not us [yet]. They swim out beyond our hearing towards some all-knowing no. & yet, all this imagination to console ourselves. & yet

What more can I say except that when my grandmother was alive, she never spoke to anyone about the figurations of stars or planets. Meanwhile, as if in a parallel universe, her lone Aquarian self was taking notice of symmetry/patterns/statistical transcendence. She noticed Sirius, which was *scintillating*. She noticed the moon was *out* like an exhausted lightbulb. Her son died in his thirty-third year & she must have loved him [with the whole fierce pelt of her]. But she hardly spoke of it to anyone. & if there is an obituary for him, I've never found it.

It's the intentionality of the dead that hurts me most. They intend not to die. Pouring their rage, unthawed, into someone else's mouth. They intend to live on in sock drawers & the smallest envelopes. With *deep love & total devotion*.

Venus – first planet of the evening, poised above the backyard ash – she described as *rainbow-hued*.

To begin somewhere:

Let's say tonight she descends the stairs into a desolate garden.

She eyes the night sky coming for the saintly evergreens, their brutal silhouettes.

She writes down only what she sees –

a remarkable object is clearing the trees.

Low in the southeast below Orion.

I will know myself – her grief takes note – what I am & what I am not.

Ankles crowned with snow, she keeps her record short:

This is Sirius, the Dog Star. It flashes.

Asterism (II): To the third or fourth generation

it begins with soaked cherry vanilla oak –
scents to coax rats from plastic homes

when their noses lift scientists shoot electric
barbs until fur rises small bodies shudder

soon it's noticed that grandbabies down the ratline
have begun to tremble at their first whiff of amaretto

we brace we brace for the coming disaster!

is a soft song that neatly folds

between useful knowledge

of water bowl

sawdust

prehensile tail

[Note on Venus: At the Temple
of Venus and Roma it was an earthquake
that shattered the cella – its fortunate marble – devotees
wept (we imagine) & yet little remains where the temple
has traced over itself with etchings of altars
votives tourists from Poughkeepsie
& unsaturated in the early
twilight a vast sprawl of
boxwood trees warped
in their worship
lowly to the
earth]



Bad jot, bad tittle. The house is deceitful above all things
& Desperately Wicked. Easy slippage into its grammar
(who can know it?): trade heart for house, or save for love.

Write these close sounds on the doorposts of your heart.
Truth is, all autumn I cried like a Jeremiah.
Formerly devout daughter slinging mud in her cistern.

Truth is, a father was dying in the bleak midwinter.
A father was my father, nothing metaphysical about it.
& here is the only real place to begin:

I am watching the grief travel its light years
to reach me, standing in the weak porch light
in this third decade of my life with my fierce attachments

to the dead (they accumulate) & tragic lack of haircut.
I must let it & all things happen. For now, I salt
the stairs & the hot pebbles fall like small planets

from the bag's mouth – *ta da ta da*. Beauty of the world
is the mouth of the labyrinth, the starving mystic says.
& I'm preparing myself: no. I'm thinking of limits –

the dark river that freezes us in, congeals against this city
its tight grimace. Le Détroit, as those colonizers called it.
The Straight River, the River's River. Such ebbs & denials,

the selective histories we border. That border us.
Truth is, in any house (the self-house, the nation-house)
someone is always not telling you something.



Let me tell you about this river.
As it did last winter & the one before that,
it will breathe under the ice like a comfortable spouse

*Below Orion's belt – M42
(the Great Nebula in Orion) –*

a nursery for young stars

just turning on for the first time

& the moon goes out
like an angry child

or a father
into the night

an overcooked light

[a name that looks
back & eats itself

//

professes nothing
to see here,
nothing at all]

[An online reviewer
reports that the Windsor
Sculpture Park is a 'great
place to work out bc the
sculptures all start to feel
personal.']

unreactive to traffic grist along the bridge,
sour notes of Hiram-Walker fermented downwind.
Six or seven knots at least, this current: To resist it,

my father said, will send you straight to the bottom.
On the edge of such promises, I carved a bedrock.
Tried desire. Earnest teenage touch in minivans.

Glow of aqua casino lights & first acknowledgements
of the body. All the while, that old inspector-god
watching through the slit of a name he fingered

on the windows. That thief in the night, getting
away with it. Bad smoke, bad mirrors. How shame enters
its sculpture garden with obvious signs: half-bitten

metal disc in the shape of an apple. Chromatic green.
Heavy-handed. I am an image, I tell the river,
an apparition of two white swans in a pasture.

I was keeping to the script (how quickly the unsaintly
daughter discards the body!). & even now,
in an airplane 30,000 atmospheric feet above the earth

the river won't look me in the eye. Consoles itself
at a spacious remove, carrying with it each resistance,
every minor revolt. I call them my happy record

of mistakes. Oh, this I – my streaming line in the sand –
like two crabs waltzing sideways claw to claw. Doubled
back to its roots in the effacement of rage.

& yet irresistible, this current remains: am I that I am,
am I that I am, am I that dead & voided thing?

[Overlooking the river,
directly across from the
silvery glint of the
Chrysler Buildings, *Eve's
Apple* by Edwina Sandys
invokes a subtle play of
negative & positive space.
Two-dimensional from
afar, the sculpture accrues
more angles as you draw
closer to the apple, poised
lightly between two
fingertips. According to
Sandys's description: 'A
depth which reaches its
fullness only when the
viewer is staring directly
into the centre of the
hand.']

[*Eve's Apple* is a perfect
two-dimensional object
lesson for the Sunday
School teachers at the
brown-brick chapel to
bring to life, for the
children, the inheritability
of sin. See? No matter
how dainty the hands. No
matter how small the
bite.]

Great Square of Pegasus just west of the zenith by 8pm

daughter : awake : unhushed : in the difficult mothering of
winter : may your heart be a test : be a text : be a trouble of
hooves : a sinking below : or clawing into the earth : cremated
: blanched : a gutted harp : & may you feel its current below :
performing mourning : its dark robes flowing : & may you
open the third door : to the word it permits : a conjuring of
violet inflorescence : or blue stems unfolding : the penumbra
shift from the I to desire : see how I am no longer afraid to
say : the heart : & may it learn to excise itself in unlikely places
: launch its escape : [away from dry rot : gridlock : every blight]
: & even in these grim rooms of obedience : may your heart be
always its own winged disappearance : a faux funeral : a flame
you cast across the lake : & its mirrored stage : as a plan : as
planetary : as a prayer inside an absence of prayer : & may it
return to you transformed : dear daughter : awake : unhushed



Meanwhile, ice accumulates.
A woman can die here from easy slippage
(a lack of salt), here on the threshold of this house.

It happened once. Which is why I shoulder this salt sack
like a body bag, one decade after it happened.
(See, how I slipped her in there?) Subtle,

because there are few things so horrible as sentimentalism
in winter. A real drip. Nevertheless, did I mention,
how we cradled her, my grandmother's wounded head?

& it came to pass that we laid her in our manger
of sheer facticity & lake effect snow.
Whatever winter stars were visible that night

were also complicit, like any god in an origin story.
Some naked & cold flash striking a copse of ashes
who do not applaud but pietà their long arms at adagio.

Slowly, with great feeling. Few things, I think,
as horrible as a storm, or memory, arriving on time.
& this slippage between void sky

& void earth is always dead on arrival.
A blue fire that blows no smoke.

& who will
help me
unwrap my
emotional

poultice
of

mis-
remembranc
e?

Under
conditions of
limitation (no
oil, no tears),
you will be
asked to
improvise. You
must pick up
your yellow bag.
You must
scrape & salt
the path.

Saturn – shines just to the upper right of Jupiter

Jupiter – brilliant & very radiant

And where is Io now? The fathers busy being fathers.
Mothers, the mendicants of certain griefs in certain rooms.
But Mother, was it you I dreamed standing in a field of parsley?
Reverent as a cow you were at time's end or time's end as I understand it –
raw nerve stripped, standing in relation to no clear object.
& I drew close to your eyes in their fixed galaxies, which eluded me.
They asked for nothing past the length of the lash. & yet those lashes –
we would break to see them up close! The soft embattled facts of them
& you next to me in that lay-me-down pasture called Some Great Resolution –
where the scent of it swarms from the green leaves
& the green sky, in every direction. More mist than rain.

(1) *Pleiades or Seven Sisters – will be first to draw the eye.*

These mark the shoulder of the Bull.

Binoculars will reveal many more stars than the 6 or 8 you can see with the naked eye.

What else did you see? Only a thin categorical leap between *trauma* & *dream*, says Freud. The gauze tears easily. & I told myself: A faithful translation is as good as a one-eyed rocking horse. Or simply does not exist.

Dream Archive: I was given a tour of the house, in which special attention was given to its state-of-the-art control grid for managing internal hierarchies of private & public pain. Later, a collective laughter tried to erase it from my memory. But I still remember the mechanisms of the house, its corridor with the laundry chute where a voice was scrambling up the walls about loss – as wish fulfillment spinning its bottle back to yourself, as a paintbrush dipped into a cup. *It turns the water unreal shades of blue!*

Dream Archive (Necropolitical): What else can I tell you except that being in the house was like falling asleep in the bed of a prehistoric lake. Breathing difficulties due to the intrusive phenomena of water, its evaporated body lurching above me. Ghost with incurable cough. Phosphorescent damp. At midnight every night, I hear a voice as deep as a lake: was I mournable, grievable, even able to die?



Lately, when I think of my grandmother
I think of how she expected to return to this house,
but she didn't. & I can see the Dog Star flashing,

the star she loved. December, I know, pines
for such simple language. Offers up simple disasters
in return. Pareidolia of a face in the windshield.

A cathexis of salty ghosts. Every night is when I feel it
the most – their soft *rut tut* at the door. Tonight,

I paint myself into the midst
of the *Traum* in which I am
the good supplicant:
‘Let there be no catastrophe
in the wind tonight.
Let me bruise no snow
tonight with my blue bare feet.’
& I hear my mother
make promises
she can't keep:
‘I love you, I love you
mother, father,
sister, brother
who I never knew –
I'll come too,
bright & blue.
No special pain am I,
no special branch,’
she tells the moon
(that I've smudged out,
removed).

it's my father clinging to the cliff edge of divine

intervention. He believes God will heal him in a twinkling
(for God's glory) while my mother orbits a half-lit kitchen,
a collapsing star. Her sadness sets her alight from within:

a taut fission of tea bag, tea bag, wooden spoon.
We spend most days sentried in various rooms,
a pair of frozen lungs afloat in separate jars.

More wind, more lift in these trees, I notice,
& drop my bag of salt beside the door.
I let the weary world refuse rejoicing

& it surveils me solemnly against its cyclorama sky.
There's Ursa Major, tilted towards the river.
Her bent arm shelters the unconstellated lights.

& loud Orion, that headless Olympian.
He lifts his pelt because he needs to feel festive.
No one tells me, Do not be afraid.

Is that what I'm waiting for? It strikes me that I need
to feel more. Or that I consider the existence
of angels only when I'm in need of a good wrestling.



You think you'd grow used to it, the interminable season.
But nothing, as they say, prepares you. They also say:
There's no wrong way to experience winter

except never leave home without roadside flares!
Like anyone, I perform my wintering well.
But I have questions for my dead.

They accumulate, a frieze over every ur-memory:
parametered lawn, Douglas firs lightly salted in the frost,
lampposts dipped below zero with their cautionary tales

of children's tongues torn along their silhouettes.
I admit: they overwhelm me, those stars.
Betelgeuse, Sirius – they make me yawn.

Lackeys each year of the dead's failure to return,
& every *in absentia* we invoke to expel.
The grim-salted deck of us sailing on. Haunted,

like a ship named for its port, that returns,
returns. Without & without. Remarkable,
we the living. Can you hear it in my voice?

Somewhere between speaking & singing

[the house where
famously no
sound
accumulates]

Above & to the right of Orion lie

the lovely stars of Taurus, the Bull.

Best recognized by seeing it as 2 distinct

star clusters

Grief as infinite
translation:
disruption of the
waters, *mes belles*
infidèles.

Precious failures,
only offsprings,
etc.

bluish Rigel farther to the lower right

of the belt stars locates

the hunter's left boot

this I that breaks the space. Like a breath
between two arias. It's humiliation, yes,

but also astonishment. The lyric, when it slips,
is always prone to its own astonishment.



(2) *In winter, Milky Way*

once again crosses the sky

from east to west

How to permit this shovel to the earth?
Having emptied myself of obedient gestures & without
an answer from the lonely spruce, the river's rigor mortis.

& high

No answer bellowed from the window, the coming storm,
the curtains gently shut. Every void makes room for grace,
the starving mystic says. & in these rooms of acquiescence,

into

the

I've learned to pilfer, to take & eat what is never offered.
Wintered wafer. Soft bloom of ice dissolving on my tongue.
If my angel arrives, this is where she'll find me:

north

at winter's end under a Piscean moon, small as a fish
in a river of tremendous accumulations. Wrestled
awake already in a thawed rage (a greater love).

Where under an indifferent gathering of stars,
their darkest forests, I too am trying to be numerous.
A bright, stammering shape of an animal.

Reaching not towards the governance
of any moon or sea but some other outer field.
Where the light if there was light would be.

Note: The voice of the "mystic" draws from Simone Weil's texts *Gravity & Grace* and *Waiting for God*.