

Grace Wilentz

THE LIMIT OF LIGHT



Gallery Books

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in memory of Rod Keating

Insect in Amber

The amber egg atop Attenborough's cane
glowed like the round abdomen
of a lightning bug, inner lit —
a torch in the dark of the movie house.

My mother and I sat sheltering
on a rainy afternoon in summer.
Jurassic Park cast its light on our faces.
We were looking up.

In the amber globe, we're told,
a mosquito holds the meeting of pre-history
and our present in a drop of blood,
invisible at the end of her fine-tipped quill.

We stayed mesmerized
by amber's glass-like beauty.
My mother bought a pair
of amber earrings full of flecks

and polished into two heart-shaped beads
that cast orange swinging brightly on her neck.

Becoming Esther

In the law building at NYU
on Washington Square West
students throw a children's party.

It is Purim.
My father brought me here without a word.
What is there to explain?

Here is a long strip of silver cloth,
folded in two.
A scissor carves a half moon
that opens into an oval
to be slipped over my head
and tied at the waist with a sash.

Now I am Esther
who married the King of Persia
and saved her people.

We eat triangle Hamantashen, lick the jam,
wave the tin noisemakers bearing Haman's twisted face.

That morning we left home without a word said.
We are a secret.

Belly of the Whale

After days
of not speaking to anyone
the sound of my voice
echoes back to me
like the voice of a stranger.

Ribs come together above me
like church rafters.

Time is parcelled out in the silences between
the slow-beating life of this beast,
the groan of its body,
the shrill song of its calls.

I remember watching it rise,
mountainous.
I considered its swooping frown and thought:
how very like a clown's mouth!
before the lips opened with a yawn
and the suck of water pulled me in like a riptide.

And then: silence, unlit dark.

There are the moments when
I feel myself to be
in a darkened theatre.

Sometimes I can feel us diving,
weightless, as I dream.

The Conman

The conman arrives and warms up,
overturns his cardboard box, sets out
the white ping-pong ball and three flipped cups.

He takes out his roll of small bills, a ruse
of counting them for you to focus on what can be got
instead of what you stand to lose.

He'll keep your dollar. His is no magician's trick,
and so the conman wears short sleeves,
switching cups, sweaty against red brick,

his skin shines in the summer sun.
When the corner lookout gives a shout
the conman kicks the box and runs.

He turns corners, ducks down alleys,
spots his old girlfriend passing by, calls out:
Hey miss, I'm missing you and all your money.

He wins but somehow is never
winning. Always he is paying out.
On 6th Avenue, in a folding lawn chair,

chin to chest, the conman sleeps.
He dreams he overturns the cup and for once finds
the folded dollar underneath.