

The Things I've Carried



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Amanda Crum

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Poems inspired by
Dirty Dancing

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Things I've Carried / Part One

As a child
I carried a corduroy purse
full of my most essential
belongings:
crayons,
strawberry lip gloss,
a jade butterfly necklace
my grandmother gave me.
My father,
a firefighter for the county,
had impressed upon me
the importance
of being prepared.
When my grandmother died
I sat in cold sunshine
and nudged a divot of grass
from the ground
with the toe of my patent-leather shoe.
Dug those crayons from my purse
and tried to imagine
what the girl who put them there
had been thinking
and what
she was
preparing for.

Highways

Driving through pines
reminds you of being small enough
to hold your father's hand.
The smell has become
muscle memory,
a reflex born of all those long-past Junes.
You roll down the window and
breathe deep,
count the mile markers
until the edge of the lake appears,
a slash of oil paint
on the horizon.
Those trees hold secrets
you'll never tell,
keys to the summer
unfolding before you like
the white dotted line.
They whisper of heat
and the shimmer of lake water,
catching the light like
the beads on a dancer's skirt.
*Look, they say,
look and remember.
You'll never have another summer
like this one.*

I Used To Wear Shorts

in 1988
in a trailer park with no name
I made up dances
with my best friend
in her driveway
it was the summer
before I learned
to feel ashamed

Screen Door

What's on my mind
is a murmuring that can't be ignored.
It's a whisper in the gloom of a graveyard,
a slow tease that burns like a match head.
When the fire finally starts--
fwump--
it's like the snap of a pillowcase
in the upstairs bedroom, an echo against wood
and grain that sends me running.
The screen door slamming sounds
like a memory: eight years old and sick
of the heat, fiddleheads between my fingers
at the edge of the lake. Absently scratching
a mosquito bite on my calf with the toe
of my shoe, watching my reflection
to see the change, hoping with a
child's desperation to see a ghostly face
just beneath mine. Waiting for something
out of the ordinary to bring me satisfaction
on a day as plain as the underside
of the clouds scudding across the sky, feeling
for something that isn't there just so I know
I'm real.

Sisters And Other Strangers

She's got hair that never frizzes,
perfect teeth
in a wide mouth
that never says the wrong thing.
You watch her charm and obfuscate,
never missing an opportunity to side-eye
as she passes you in the hall. She knows
exactly
what she's doing. You grew up
with the same parents
in a house with green shag carpeting,
but she got the boobs
and the pebbles at her window. That screen door
never betrayed her with night-screams,
instead it laid in wait for you.
Now, in the mountains,
you watch her strut
in her best emerald dress,
a peacock trying to attract boys
who already have easy access
to birds of paradise.
You follow her gaze across
the dancers, those women
who leave a trail of
feathers and
rapacious thirst
behind them.
For the first time,
you feel
a kinship.

Life Of The Party

Something you should know about me is that I'm inside my own head
95% of the time.

Self-involved,

you scoff, and turn away.

But that's not it, not the heart of it anyway.

There's just a fear gripping my interior

and it has claws,

sticky burrs that hold tight.

They keep me second-guessing

and gnawing at memories

to mine them for mistakes.

I people-watch every chance I get,

a wallflower who needs an education

on the art of conversation.

If you catch me staring,

it's not born of rudeness,

but rather the desire

to learn

the dance.

We Riot After Dark

I bruised my lips with rouge
to push the boundaries of age.
Hands on the bus

discovered me,
I bloomed under a boy's gaze
when my tights split open

pale thighs. Later I clenched a
heart-shaped locket in my fist
and recalled questing fingers,

a mouth without a home.
Shame and desire shaped
and formed me,

a woman-child who wanted
better but didn't know
how to ask.

I Carried A Watermelon (?)

This is where helpfulness
and curiosity
hold hands.

Stay

he said

Stay

and you regarded his cool
cotton sheets
with something like amusement

you had never been asked before
and he
had never asked
someone
like you

his hands emancipated
and
explored
left you hovering
near the beams

and you
who had never imagined yourself
in a prison
escaped
lifelong shackles

Baby Is Spelled F-R-A-N-C-E-S

I've done it again,
slipped into the skin of someone else:
a woman who wears perfume
and whispers what she wants
in the darkness.

I never want to leave,
watching your eyes
above mine and
filling my hands with you.

The light is on.

All the better to see you by,
those two red spots high
on your cheekbones
and the way your gaze
cuts. When dawn creeps
into the room

I'll walk barefoot by the lake.
I won't pretend
you're with me;
instead I'll leave us
in bed
and pin up my hair
the next time I go out.

Lake Water

underneath the storm/
they lift and they separate/
only to tangle

Elemental
(Things I've Carried/Part Two)

The first time I breathed,

More, please

there was a sense of guilt
that made me think of

the first time I said

No.

On The Porch

1. Sometimes the summer sky over a small town
breaks open and spills its secrets,
leaves you hollowed out.

You think
about other small towns,
not far away,
where you once looked into the hills
and saw your future.

2. You wear a charm bracelet
and on it you hang all the things
your mother
wanted for you;
all the times you apologized,
needlessly, for existing;
each time your father
opened his mouth and dug your grave.

3. The clouds, those pines.
They'll show you
that your sadness is not fleeting;
it's been your shadow
since you wrapped your hand
around Daddy's index finger to cross the street
and that will jolt you. The idea that you
never had a choice.

The Last Tenderheaded Girl

In your young days
everything was measured by pressure.
Your worth was valued
by how hard you forced
your sister's pencils to paper;
Don't bear down,
she said,
you'll wear it out.
You learned a light touch.

Pushed too hard on the swings
and you were relegated
to the merry-go-round,
clinging for dear life
next to the girl who smelled like pee,
both of you trying your hardest
not to be whipped
into the cosmos,
never to be seen again.

When your sister volunteered
to French-braid your hair
she tugged and snapped,
nimble fingers yanking the root
until you cried out and pulled away.
Are you tenderheaded?
she asked, and you knew
by the tone of her voice
to say *No.*

To be tender was to be weak
and to be weak was a liability.
Now when you brush your hair
you rake the bristles

across your scalp
and set your teeth
against one another,
certain that you'll never crumble
no matter how much it hurts.

Quiet Room

Watch me tremble
in the light
like a
pearldrop of water
on edge of leaf,
shuddering like the tendons
in a ballerina's calves
as she considers
the gravity
around her.
Bathe me in golden
dust motes
as the sun crawls home
and let me roam
in your eyes for a while.
Love is strange,
you mouth,
and I agree.
You keep me trembling
long after the music
leaves the room.

Building Currents

There are things the sky knows
before the sun is up,
secrets you'll only hear
if you can hush the crows long enough.
That pylon hum
sounds like a voice you've heard
in dreams,
like a storm slowly waking
the trees,
like a specter building currents
to come on the line.
Take your time
crossing the field,
keep your eyes on the vanishing point
and remember
the weight
of this moment,
when you are living
in a changed body.