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IRIS JAMAHL DUNKLE

## THE ISLANDS

“O for God’s sake they are connected  
underneath

They look at each other  
across the glittering sea  
some keep a low profile

Some are cliffs  
The Bathers think  
islands are separate like them”

– Muriel Rukeyser “Islands” from *The Gates*

“I had a sense of being below the surface, where the islands are  
attached to each other. Other women knew what I knew. Of  
course they did, they always had.”

– Alicia Ostriker “A Wild Surmise: Motherhood  
and Poetry”

“[Sappho] is indeed rocks set in a blue sea, she is the sea itself,  
breaking and tortured and torturing, but never broken. She is  
the island of artistic perfection ....”

– H.D. “The Wise Sappho”

I had no idea when I was 22 and I lived in New York that I wouldn’t always have  
a life built around poetry; that someday there would be real, live people with  
little hands and toes that would make my decisions for me, and that choosing  
to walk away from them and write would be difficult. And though I would  
love them beyond all mercy, I would never forget my first love: Poetry. Never

would I imagine, shipwrecked after two months of not sleeping from a colicky baby, feeling like an alien in the spring air, living in a body I didn't recognise anymore, that I would ever find poetry again or that it would ever fit in the enormous project my life had become.

My story isn't that unusual, at least not unusual for a poet who chose to have a family. As long as I can remember I have been writing. Stories, glued together to make books in Third grade. Tiny, tiny lyrics pouring into flower covered journals in junior high and high school. My heart was a big, blue weight I wrung and wrung on the page. Writing became how I made sense of the universe from my own, specific vantage point.

When I went away to Washington D.C. for college, I discovered a dome shadowed city where history was written on everything in invisible ink. Look closely and stories rose to the surface of everything: cement steps, the confetti of blossoms. The Library of Congress echoed with the granite certainty of the Poet Laureate's voice. The Folger Shakespeare Library offered a white linen table cloth filled with finely prepared meals, wine and animated conversation of poetry luminaries. I felt small next to these giants, but walking home down the long, wide-open space of the mall, the dream of my life grew behind me tall as the granite monuments shadowed in the growing dark.

Then, in New York City, everything was poetry. Riding the 'flying trolley' to Roosevelt Island to teach poetry to the long-term care residents at Goldwater Hospital, even riding the F-train into Manhattan and walking around my shady neighbourhood in South Slope Brooklyn, were all poetic moments. The characters who lingered outside of the off-track betting center, the cotton candy Brooklyn sunsets that illuminated our silver rooftop, fed into my daily writing rituals. So much so, that I couldn't imagine a life where poetry didn't act as the axis around which my life turned.

But after Graduate school I got engaged and moved back to where I was from, Northern California. The writer's life I had imagined fell in upon itself when my student loans kicked in. I took a job creating websites. I got married. I had two kids. And somewhere as these milestones began to fall, one on top of the other, I began to be unable to see my life as a writer clearly as I had in the past. I stopped writing every day. I stopped writing for months at a time. I began fighting a battle in the nether world that exists between my writing life and my *real life*.

Time, especially personal time, grew thin and rare: *A precious commodity*. I kept my writing journal in my diaper bag, but like the rest of my writing life, even the size of my journal had shrunk. What was once a grand, thick, black book,

filled with cutout pictures, quotes and daily writing stints became a tiny dog-eared spiral notebook. I had little of the deep quiet – *that velvet silence you can almost hear*—in which to write that I had once required. Instead, I caught tiny kites of thoughts the brief seconds they lingered in my busied mind. My life was a series of sticky notes and drop offs. I wasn't only Mom, I was a working Mom. HTML and what [and how] I would cook dinner, do laundry, clean house, wafted through my mind anytime my hands or mind slowed. And every day I wondered, where would I find the space to eddy out, and write?

After a few years of this limbo, I decided to go back to school – to get my PhD in English. I'd always wanted to teach writing and literature at the college level and the idea of spending time with poets (even long dead) was heartening. And I did. I dove into my program even though I was advised against it. (*You have two small children! How will you ever be able to focus on your studies? Do you really think this is the right time in your life to pursue this?*). Didn't they know? I thought. What I needed was a way back into that focus in order to feel like me again. I needed a vehicle, to take out deep enough, so that I'd have no choice but to dive into the lake of my mind and swim back to myself. It was there in Cleveland, Ohio that I discovered in fragments that Sappho, who spoke in a language I could understand, had a daughter. It was there that the bright words of Sulphia which had been buried in the back of Tibullus's book found me. It was there that I finally realised that words like mine, like the ones that were still rotting and sunken in my mind, could still be revived and found. I was still salvageable as a poet (even though I had children). My life as a mother was writeable.

Once a week at night I taught a small writing workshop at the university's women's centre. My students were all ages. Some published, some not. But all of them wanted to write. So that's what we did. One of my students, who had suffered a stroke and been left half-paralyzed, often wrote about being a mother. She was from Maine and one night after a group free-writing exercise, she told us a story of a secret place on the rocky Maine coast she'd been visiting since she was a little girl. A rocky cave, hidden underneath a sea cliff, that to find, you'd have to shimmy down a steep face. If you timed it right, once you got to the bottom, entered the cave and looked back out toward the light and the smooth horizon of the sea, you'd see it: the cave lit with the green and purple translucent jewels of sea anemones and the clean, blue line of the ocean's horizon stretching out toward infinity, toward hope. She said that the beauty contained there was her secret and that even thousands of miles away from her home, even in her half-ruined body, she could still find it. When she told the story, all of us (women from different stages of our lives) entered that cave with her and looked out. I know I did and somehow, I've never left. Somehow, I am still looking out at the horizon of the sea. Looking for, wishing for, tiny specks on the horizon – sister islands – to arise like hope.

My life continued. My classes (both the ones I attended and those I taught) ended. I couldn't find a college-level teaching job, so my hours at my corporate job increased and finishing my dissertation as well as any hope of finishing my own book of poetry faded farther and farther into the background like a missed ferry. But somehow, the cave, the fragmented words of Sappho and Sulpicia all still lived and breathed in my mind.

Then something happened. An island appeared on the horizon. Up at 4:30 am, for my daily 4-hour commute, I began to feel my brain percolating still stirring up the past day's images, the wisps of dreams still lingering in my coffee fired brain, but it hung still and flat as the cool waters of San Francisco bay I'd pass over on the Richmond bridge in the middle of my drive. If only I could dive into it.

Podcasts entered my life suddenly. I first stumbled upon them on the Poetry Foundation website. One morning, I got into my car, put on my headphones and heard,

"Good morning, this is Al Filreis, and welcome to Poem Talk"

and instantly re-entered the discourse about poetry. On the radio show, three poets/poetry scholars compare and discuss their close readings of a single poem by poets disparate as Adrienne Rich and Jack Spicer. There was something about hearing this intimate discussion about a poem that awakened in me my own voice. Somehow, the act of listening to a poem, on borrowed commute time, empowered me to think my voice could/should engage. In fact, I'm sure many fellow commuters have been freaked out by my impassioned outburst at the unhearing host. *No, Robert Duncan is responding to H.D. in "Often I Return to a Meadow" can't you see the obvious allusions Al?* Each night before my commute I would load my iPod with the voices of my contemporaries speaking about poetry and poets and each commute I'd dive into their words until the cool water broke and my own words began to shift and align again. By the time I'd arrive in San Jose my mind was abuzz with words and ideas. And before work would begin, I'd sit in the quiet office and unwind those words and idea from my mind onto the page. My mind no longer sat stagnant as a breezeless bay. The tiny islands began to appear on the horizon. The world I had left, the world I felt was no longer accessible to me, as I was islanded in my worlds of motherhood and corporate life, had opened up in the tiny island like space of my car.

Somehow, because I was going somewhere, because I was driving to work, I was annulled from guilt; it was okay to claim back time in the car as mine. Somewhere in this space I discovered how to re-connect to the written word.

And this small event, this small shift in how I perceived my life, changed me. My dissertation, which was not being written, suddenly began to breathe again in my mind. I found a local library where I could find research materials and I began to make time to write it. Poems began to stop fluttering like kites, and to land thick and hard in my brain so that I could no longer ignore them. I was not only living my complicated life, I was writing it. All of it. The sweet smiling faces of my children and their sticky hands and the enormity of my heart now that it contained them. In the space of that commute, I discovered an island inside myself. A rocky island, where hope surrounded everything blue as the sea.



KEVIN DENSLEY

## FOR THE SAKE OF BALANCE

next to the island of Haiti  
there should be another one  
called 'Lovey'.