



(in the space where i was)

dana guthrie martin

In the Space Where I Was

Dana Guthrie Martin

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2

(because I cannot enter darkness)

3

(because I gathered dark feathers to conceal myself)

4

(because I think dark thoughts in the crevices between thoughts)
(and run my fingers over the slits I have cut)

5

(because I make excuses for what is soiled)
(and wash each seed separately before eating it)
(and write secret messages on my breasts)

6

(because none of the messages are apologies)
(and the messages sing hollow notes like tapping on bones)
(and sap from dandelion stems stains my hands)
(and letting go requires loosening requires slack)
(and just once I saw the apogee in a dreamscape)

7

(because I pushed my fingers inside)
(and though I tried I could not enjoy your milk)
(and I finger surfaces)
(and I twinge)
(and in the pasture you came at me with a whip)
(and I ran)
(and fear made me laugh)
(and my calves were covered in mud)

8

(because dirt makes me feel useful)
(and gives me purpose)
(and when I move I crackle)
(and I tremble in the southern states)
(and signs for farm auctions give me pause)
(and I find detours)
(and underfoot skin thickens)
(and I follow the air like a road)
(and there is no water)
(and the animals are tired and lie on their sides)
(and face the same way)
(and I can't explain this)
(and you never asked me to explain)

(because the day you found me you tucked my hair behind my
ears)
(and told me that was the way you liked it)
(and chanted your mother's name as if it were holy)
(and drew a square for me to stand inside)
(and tied me up with corset binding)
(and told me this was to keep me safe)
(and every day you drew the square smaller using a stick of
yellow chalk)
(and what you touched turned yellow)
(and yellow flowers bloomed then died)
(and I watched worms emerge in the rain only to lose track of
their holes in the earth)
(and I can neither say earthworms feel joy nor can I say they
don't)
(and sometimes I felt sick)
(and sometimes I wished for shoes)
(and I measured time by the length of my hair)
(and I kept it in braids)
(and tied it with blades of grass)
(and I could see the cattle guard)
(and knew I could cross it)
(and thought about crossing it)
(and took deep breaths)
(and watched the gravel road kick up dust)

10

(because in the end you knew how to carve me)
(and what to do with each cut)
(and you draped the chuck over your lap)
(and fended off crows as long as you could)
(and stroked the cut tenderly like a pet)
(and you hung the brisket from a hickory tree)
(and watched it hemorrhage in the heat)
(and you lay back in the dead grass)
(and placed the rib over your ribs)
(and the weight made you aware of your breath)
(and what a gift it is to breathe)
(and what a gift it is to no longer breathe)
(and within minutes the meat grew cold)
(and when you removed it you felt colder)
(and you held the shanks tight like worry stones)
(and skipped them across an awkwardly shaped lake)
(and watched striped bass gather)
(and stared at their lidless eyes and open mouths)
(and they churned the water in their frenzy)
(and broke through the surface like wet fists)
(and glinted like lures)
(and you laid the flank inside a book)
(and pressed it)
(and you framed the sirloin cuts as a triptych)
(and hung them over the mantle)
(and you buried the tenderloin in the entry garden)
(and planted monkey grass over the site)
(and the grass took over the yard)
(and its berries were sickening)
(and you refused to shovel out even one clump)
(and what was left of me you stuffed in the deep freeze)
(and covered in ice)
(and you turned the thermostat all the way down)
(and you closed the door)

(because I run faster now)
 (and wear gnats like a protective garment)
 (and use worms as hair ties)
 (and rid hillsides of poisonous flowers)
 (and bathe in a mixture of salt and urine)
 (and have a tattoo of smoke)
 (and I heal myself)
 (and what I cannot heal I grind to powder)
 (and use as a decontaminant)
 (and I sit across from you at dinner)
 (and hum Gregorian chants)
 (and I suck the rot from you each night)
 (and whisper *vacca foeda* in your ear)
 (and scatter the phrase *ab aeterno* over the fields)
 (and imperative is my only mood)
 (and when I have had too much singing my notes begin to slur)
 (and my eyes roll back)
 (and my neck snaps with recognition)
 (and this is usually taken for dance)
 (and sometimes taken for illness)
 (and never taken for visitation)
 (and I have forgotten what arms are for)
 (and what they are capable of)
 (and we used to hold ours out to compare lengths)
 (and your reach was always greater)
 (and yesterday was a thousand years and a thousand birds and
 a thousand misrepresentations)
 (and inside the echo is a cave)
 (and inside the scream a mouth)
 (and inside the air a feather)
 (and inside the nightmare a birth)
 (and inside the stone a pool of water)
 (and inside the body a pattern)
 (and I string the heads of rabbits together)
 (and wear them as a train)
 (and they catch detritus in their fine hairs)
 (and I sort what they collect)

(and place each item in an étagère)
(and once I found an owl pellet with bones inside)
(and worked the bones like a puzzle)
(and fitted them into the shape of a mouse)
(and not a single bone was missing)
(and I wondered if someone would ever fit me back together)
(and recognize me as human)
(and if you would try to pull me apart again)
(and did you mean it when you said you would let nothing of me
go ever)
(and why years ago did you cut a swatch of skin from my thigh
to use as a handkerchief when you could have had all of
me at any time)
(and did holding back make you feel generous)
(and neurochemically balanced)
(and what did it feel like to carry part of me against your chest)
(and was it like running your hand along a nation's flag, knowing
your invasion was near)
(and lately I have been thinking of the way birds molt)
(and how feathers are dead structures)
(and if lives are cast off in this manner)
(and if that means something surrounding the life is not dead)
(and what exactly that might be)

(because while you are sleeping I stand in the hall)
 (and wait for your breath)
 (and what I mean is I wait for the familiar scent you give off like a
 flower yielding to hastened decay in the absence of a root
 system)
 (and the scent is sickly sweet in spite of, or because of, the
 decay)
 (and the sweetness rises from my feet)
 (and hangs on my skin like mosquito spray)
 (and I whisper *dear taker of the taken, dear flesh of the fleshless*)
 (and I cover you in ampersands and et ceteras until you can no
 longer move)
 (and until the weight feels like a rock burial)
 (and I want to see how long you will keep breathing)
 (and at what point your body will stop being a contagion)
 (and I wonder what you will do to me then)
 (and how we will negotiate our new physicality)
 (and if inside your lungs you have stashed windmills)
 (and if those windmills will tear at your internal landscape as they
 fall)
 (and kick up clods)
 (and if inside your wrists bailing wire will tighten)
 (and hold you in your fighting posture)
 (and keep you from flight)
 (and how for me, near the end, plate tectonics seemed to
 govern every suspended organ)
 (and they swelled)
 (and shifted)
 (and competed for limited space)
 (and a broken rib or two might have relieved the strain)
 (and how would I prepare your body)
 (and would I wash your heart in a butter churn)
 (and dry it with doilies)
 (and preparing a body for burial always feels like preparing a
 body for burial)
 (and after is more like before than you might think)

(and will you recognize me now that I have grafted feathers to
every pore which, with a blade's urging, would accept a
quill)
(and your arm slips from the bed)
(and nearly lands on the floor)
(and your fingers spread as if to reveal a precious token you
want to show me)
(and there is nothing in your hand but air)
(and perhaps that is what you want me to see)
(and sheets lie about you in surrender)
(and twist around your legs)
(and your skin turns pale on top)
(and plum red underneath)
(and it is as if the sun of your body is setting)
(and now blue is ushered in)
(and would you thank me)
(and how many nights have I heard you beg for this)
(and wail in tongues about how you missed me)
(and I know every language now, even the ones we made up)
(and I know how the long O escapes the throat before we can
retract it)
(and that the throat is merely a place to house the O)
(and it is shaped like an O)
(and the teeth hold the throat in place like pincers)
(and you used to open my mouth and pinch my nose)
(and breathe into me until I thought I would explode)
(and the last time you did that I passed out)
(and woke up later alone)
(and the sun had gone down)
(and I could not remember the day)
(and it was then that I realized your name was both noun and
verb)
(and you were agent and action)
(and I was acted upon)
(and I balanced on that thought)
(and the sun came up)
(and I realized I had missed it)

(and you returned)
(and said I had nearly killed you)
(and when you breathed back in)
(and my air filled your lungs)
(and you began to convulse, you had all the evidence you
needed against me)
(and you had always suspected I was tainted)
(and you had hoped you were wrong)
(and I was just like the others)
(and I can't remember what you said next)
(and I tried to dress)
(and your mouth gnashed as you pulled the ribbon from my
corset)
(and ordered me to lead the way to the pasture)
(and I wanted to look back at you)
(and knew I shouldn't)
(and I didn't want you to see my face)
(and I walked slowly like an old barn animal with bad joints)
(and your hand went into my back)
(and I saw the post you had set)
(and you tied me to it)
(and touched me)
(and whistled *Wade in the Water*)
(and said you were sorry)
(and damned yourself for what you had to do)
(and I raised my hand)
(and you broke it)
(and I sucked my skin where it hurt)
(and the grass underfoot was coarse)
(and itched)

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(because I have saved what I can use)
(and the rest of you will rot soon enough)
(and your eyes watch me from a bowl)
(and later I will feed them to a mouse who will be eaten by a
snake)
(and you never stared with such intent when you had lids)
(and the stench enters my lungs without invitation)
(and this is how you speak to me now)
(and how I listen)
(and I breathe deeply to listen deeply)
(and hold my breath when I want silence)
(and every day is sleepwalking)
(and I never wake)
(and our home is as it was but the walls shift in and out)
(and the rooms are not always in the same place)
(and I wait for you to arrive)
(and watch the faceless clock)
(and you must be stuck inside your bones)
(and so I pulverize each one)
(and this work takes days)
(and I spread the dust along your favorite paths)
(and on the bed)
(and I feather it on like shimmering powder)
(and your fingernails I string into a necklace)
(and your teeth I fashion as earrings)
(and I weave your hair into an anklet)
(and they say the world is made of halves)
(and those halves find one another)
(and the first time I saw you I went to you)
(and it was as if I were floating)
(and my bones felt hollow)
(and something moved through them in a rush)
(and when you said my name my body filled as if with viscous
liquid)
(and I had no more need for lightness)
(and words vacated my mouth)
(and my skin expunged impurities)

(and your skin was a vacation from my own)
(and I traced letters on your back)
(and you could never get them right)
(and you told me you had nightmares so I held you)
(and did not sleep for years)
(and they say the world is made of parts)
(and those parts recall being whole)
(and I know now that emptiness filled us)
(and what we perceived as space was always inhabited)
(and breathing)
(and it longed for the wholeness we longed for)
(and I circle the pasture three times before entering)
(and step carefully over the cattle guard)
(and remove your head from a lingerie bag)
(and place it on the post)
(and I watch)
(and the crows come)
(and dance around the find)
(and what is left of you is no longer you)
(and it nourishes)

(because there was wind)
(and rain and sun)
(and cold days)
(and hot days)
(and long and short days)
(and once the stars came out during the day)
(and paraded through the sky like a woman in a sequined gown)
(and once the sun lit up the night, a flaming fist)
(and at one point I convinced myself I saw two moons)
(and then I realized one was your head)
(and it glowed brighter than the moon)
(and finally there was no day or night)
(and no absence or sense of absence)
(and I almost forgot your name)
(and I nervously picked at my feathers)
(and began pulling them out)
(and I enjoyed this the way anyone enjoys self-mutilation)
(and no matter what I did your expression never changed)
(and you seemed to smile)
(and we remained like this)
(and after one year and one day I rose)
(and placed my last feather in your mouth)
(and tucked you under my arm like a football)
(and gathered up what I could find of you)
(and placed your parts in the compost heap)
(and set the heap on fire)
(and I watched the horses react)
(and the crows)
(and the snakes)
(and they all moved away)
(and they had the sense to move away)
(and I moved closer)
(and you made me hot)
(and I wanted to burn)

(because the thing I want to do is often the thing I never do)
(and I raise my arms over the fire)
(and my wrists glow)
(and I allow my breasts to grow sweat-slick)
(and let heat occupy the fronts of my legs)
(and singe my thighs)
(and threaten my pubic hair as if it were a small forest)
(and I am the fuel fire needs)
(and inside fire, oxygen and I will couple)
(and fire will breathe me the way I once breathed)
(and smoke from my body will fill the air with another language)
(and I will call to you in this way)
(and perhaps never know if I reach you)
(and did you mean it when you said I was one creature)
(and you were the emptiness by my side)
(and did I mean it when I answered yes)
(and the thing I want to do)
(and the thing I never do are one creature)
(and I lift my left foot as if stepping into a lake)
(and in that moment I resemble a bird about to fly)
(and I will be mistaken)

16

(because my shadow rose from the fire)
(and moved intact through the sky)
(and was taken for a storm rolling in)
(and hung over the pasture for weeks)
(and made day into dusk)
(and at night acted as gauze between stars and earth)
(and because my shadow never shed water)
(and was not dissipated by wind)
(and in aerial photographs suggested the shape of a bird)
(and closed around missiles as soon as they were fired)
(and because locals found the pile of ashes)
(and inside it your skull)
(and because nearby they found feathers)

17

(because I was mistaken for a miracle)
(and girls visit me wearing papier-mâché wings)
(and they chant)
(and dart in jagged lines)
(and sing of love)
(and sing of love)
(and they hold a single feather in one hand)
(and a papier-mâché head in the other)

18

(because of the day)
(and the night)
(and the day)
(and the night)
(and the day)

19

(because of feathers)
(and lift)
(and gravity)

20

(because of)
(and)

21

(because of the space)

22

(because of)

23

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Dana Guthrie Martin lives in Walla Walla, Washington, a charming town whose name means many waters. She shares her home with her husband and their beloved chihuahua, Cricket "Miss B" Hayden. Martin's work includes *Toward What Is Awful* (YesYes Books, 2012) and *The Spare Room* (Blood Pudding Press, 2009).