

A person stands barefoot on railroad tracks that recede into the distance. The scene is set at sunset, with a vibrant orange and pink sky and dark silhouettes of trees. A large, dark shadow of a heart is cast on the ground to the right of the person's feet. The title 'A Stranger Longing' is written in a white, elegant script font across the upper half of the image.

# *A Stranger Longing*

Shannon Elizabeth Hardwick

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*Love the Day,  
for You Are its Child*

## *Love the Day, for You Are its Child*

God. Look at me. I have a notebook.

A black messenger bag. A ticket and I'm going to Grand Central.

Look at the man, sitting across from me. He's holding a child. I'm rocking my body to one of the great cities of the world. I'm worried about my meager words.

Don't doubt the day. You have lived to breathe. This breath.

I took one and found my way to the shuttle to Times Square. A man looks at me on the platform.

You don't look like a New Yorker, he says, Are you a New Yorker?

Well, I live in New Rochelle, I say.

Oh, that counts, he says, laughs.

I smile.

Because monks are chanting Psalm 19 in my ears. I can't discern their words.

And he spoke to me. I smile.

Actually, I'm from Texas.

I look down and remember a friend said that when I look at my shoes, people think they did something wrong. I stop looking down. Look back at him.

I knew it! he says. Well, I could just tell. It's refreshing. Don't get me wrong. You have a nice smile.

We get on the shuttle. He sits next to me.

Thank you.

Do you like New York?

Yes. I smile. The monks say, Amen.

I have some land upstate, he says. I like the country. I bet you miss the country.

## *A Stranger Longing*

Sometimes. But when I'm in the country, I miss running into people like you on crowded shuttles to Times Square.

He laughs, says, True.

I leave, find the Number 1 to Christopher Street.

Where's such and such street? I ask a random dog walker.

One block down, he says as his dogs paw my jeans.

I'm sorry.

No problem. I don't mind. Cute dogs.

I walk, listening to the monks and the long toll of bells.

The dog walker taps my shoulder.

It's actually three blocks down!

Thank you, I say. Thank you so much.

Smile. It's glorious, this day.

### §

There's a theatre on the corner. People are standing in line. This exact 7 pm will not be repeated. Remember that. You were born of this 7 pm.

Oh, are you trying to get in? A man asks as I stand outside the door, waiting to buzz Marie.

Oh, um, well I'm just waiting.

Well, wait inside, where it's warm.

OK. Thank you, thanks, I say, as he pulls his keys out.

Thank you. Thank you for your keys. And your blue jeans. And those lovely shoes. You're gorgeous, I think. You're a fine man.

## *Love the Day, for You Are its Child*

The stairs are narrow. They creak. So many shoes have kissed the carpet. And, meekly, I become its suitor.

Should I knock on her door? Should I wait?

Again, what do I do? As my words clatter in my messenger bag.

Hold on, I say. You'll get a chance to speak. My little ones. My half-lives. I don't know what exactly to call you. Call you. Should I knock?

Break to the scene where I'm sitting on her couch, clock ticking, hands knocking.

You should never wait. This is your time. You're having a hot flash, aren't you? she says.

Yes. I'm sorry, I say, fanning my face. But I didn't. I didn't want to interrupt.

Don't be patient. Aggressive.

I just don't feel like I'm writing poetry.

Lucky you.

I'm on my feet. Don't you see? I mean my knees. And how does the city curl inside me?

But the monks! The monks have bread every blessed night. They sing about the earth. They hold their breaths until Mass.

This is going to sound cheesy, I say. I know. I know. But I feel they are my children. And I don't know what to do with them yet. They're just running around, you know?

It's to God, isn't it?

Yes.

Why. Are you ashamed?

No. Yes.



## *A Stranger Longing*

On the train home. A man with a field coat and the Financial Times. I told him hello. Hello. Man. Man, I know I shouldn't say this. But you have kind eyes. See? We both have blue ones. Blue pearls. Did you sail once, as a boy, into the corner of some canyon? I held you then. Though I was not alive. You were 10 and I was 20 years to birth. Remember? Yes. I loved you just as I love this minute.

The field coat, he hung it on the hook behind his seat. He put on tortoise shell glasses. I was still listening to the monks chant. I was going back to New Rochelle. He was on his way to Connecticut. I know. I looked at his ticket.

This is how it feels to love the railings. So much. Are these to God?

Yes.

I have a notebook. I write in it. The man next to me, he has a kid going to college. In California. Didn't want to follow his dad to Harvard.

What to do with the string of things. These words.

She said, Keep writing. Are you ashamed?

§

Later, I will write:

Work must take time—so we can appreciate its gift. How else will we become intimate with the infinite, with what cries out to last long after our shells crumble?

I will read:

"Is life so wretched? Isn't it rather your hands which are too small, your vision which is muddled? You are the one who must grow up."

And:

"Dare he, for whom circumstances make it possible to realize his true destiny, refuse it simply because he is not prepared to give up everything else?"

Thank you, Dag Hammerskjold.

§

This is the feeling. What I felt on the train. In Greenwich Village. In a kind of longing.

## *A Stranger Longing*

See this as my prayer. As I ride the shuttle to Times Square with a man who tells me about his land upstate. As I ask for directions from the dog walker. As I tell the stranger in the field coat on the Metro North that, in fact, I love him. As I learn to ask for patience.

Humble words. I have a notebook. On the train to New Rochelle. I have a notebook.

Are you ashamed, she said.

Me: straddling a fence between the immediate and the lasting.

Do not doubt this. You are real and it's your child.

§

Hello, he said.

Hello.

I have The Beatles playing.

I noticed.

And so we danced. Moment to moment. Danced.

What did she say?

She asked if I was ashamed, said I should keep writing.

I said as we danced. To Penny Lane.

Is this writing? he said.

Yes.

*Dear Hospital,  
I Love Your Breathing Machines;  
and, Pine & I Talk After Discharge*

*Dear Hospital, I Love Your Breathing Machines; and, Pine & I Talk After Discharge*

There are little creatures in my lungs and they don't want to leave. I know, I know, close to my heart, dear ones, but please leave—there are other plains out there with wider expanses than my alveoli.

Sickness lifts the tops off of cans and leaves me staring into the sky thinking there might be something I am missing on all of the other days, in other states-of-being—

The chest breathes without notice most of the time and then, suddenly, an ache or tightness. Other senses take over.

§

As I walked out of the hospital, the green of September deepened, as did the blue.

Are your lungs about to collapse? I asked the pine.

Just wait, said the pine. Any moment now, your memories will scatter like my needles.

Pine, I said, does your heartwood break down, your lignin gasp, collapse? Why are you following me in dreams?

Nothing that settles on the frontal lobe stays and you're about to remember something that hasn't laid its hands on you in a while.

Your smell does that to me, I said.

Later at the pharmacy I read a magazine article about the last days of Patrick Swayze's life.

"He wanted to die at his ranch in New Mexico, but his doctors wanted him to stay in California".

§

Once, I held the stump of a pine on the same ranch in New Mexico as a girl. So tight. Remember this land, I thought.

Then I wrote in a notebook about how the land was heaven. A heaven. I didn't want to leave.

## *A Stranger Longing*

Some chord in a water-trough spun out and licked my ankle. The river running through the ranch property spoke in thousands of tongues, more tongues than rainbow trout.

See that line, my dad said, it's got a big one in a fight. Pull!

I leaned the whole weight of my frame against the rock-banks, tossed blonde into the wind. Dad had a grip on my belt-loops. The thrill of almost falling into the ice-current straight from the mountain's tips rushed spotted blood-bugs to my ears.

HA! I gasped. Lighting leapt and something gaped next to me as though birthed from rapids.

Breathe! But the eye of the trout shocked open in surprise, stayed on the sky.

Can I throw him back, I asked dad.

Take him like this, he said.

His hands, thicker, demonstrated.

§

This is where I first learned to ride a bike, I wrote, frantically, next to the same pine stump, and caught my first fish, I added, leaned into the ring-stained footstool again. And now, we have to sell the ranch, I ended the entry, crying, grabbing the amputated tree as though I could keep a part of myself there forever.

§

I try to catch my breath in a sudden remembering. The bronchitis holds me down. Against the pharmacy floor, I read the magazine article, wondering if the tree stump was still there.

...as though I could keep a part of myself here forever.

"He wanted to die at his ranch in New Mexico."

*Dear Hospital, I Love Your Breathing Machines; and, Pine & I Talk After Discharge*

There's a journal to my grandmother in my room from when I was twelve.

Dear Fredda,

I went to the roof and watched the sun go down. You know we sold the ranch. I guess it's about perspective, mom says. But I just ache. It feels like I was really happiest there. I'll miss Jenny and the horses and climbing Hermit's Peak. I'll miss the smell of rain on the mountain and how you can see so many stars because everything is cleaner.

§

Over the pharmacy loudspeaker: Hardwick, your prescriptions are ready.

Help me to breathe, I say to the bags and bottles.

The pine outside said, You will remember the things you don't remember, soon. See, the sky and I wave daily, but how often do you look up?

I hugged a stump of your sibling once, in New Mexico. I wanted to hold on to the land, as though anyone could own it.  
Go back, said the pine.

I did, do. And I bet so does he, now, I said, while the buzz still crawled on my hands.

From time to time, alveoli find it difficult to move air. Tissue tires. One day, nothing will move. Still. Breathe. The land inside.

*Remembering the Dream  
You Had About Me*

*John 3:8*

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound,  
but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.  
So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

—John 3:8

The man I've never met asked in a text message,

Where do you turn inward?

I was driving to Starbucks to buy coffee and thought,

I have no damn idea.

I texted back,

Sometimes on my yoga mat or  
when I'm walking to the library  
to get lost in Goethe  
or a book on neurology.

Later, on the elliptical machine I heard myself pronounce,

There's a whole other plane on which to live!

Sweating the worry out, I thought,

Jesus, why has time suddenly stopped being time and instead become one big cocktail party?

The man I'm sleeping with asked me, What's it sound like when God talks to you?

What does it feel like? I said.

No, sound like.



Oh. Nothing. It doesn't sound like anything.

That's right, he said, because didn't you say you'd die if you heard God?

I breathed. I noticed I was breathing.

When I was younger, I thought the ringing in my ear was angels.

Later, I found out it was from years of ear infections.

Once, I was so sick, the ceiling fan told me to cut myself.

OK, I said to the ceiling fan.

No, God doesn't sound like anything.

In that book I'm reading, he said,  
she hears things like that.

You mean, the crazy woman?

No. She might just be the last woman on earth, not crazy.



*Psalms 137:6*

May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you.  
—Psalm 137:6

My window blurs with rain this morning.

Mirror, brushing hair.

Caught in the tangle of rush-morning-minutes.

I stretch my sides, rivers of blood, spots in the air. I am curling, brushing.

This is my kneeling. By the bed, the rain outside—

calm somewhere other than my mind.

Someone wrote, Shannon, I dreamed you were reading God.

I brush eye shadow, lips.

When was the last time God stood in a row of cows?

Rain, 80% chance. By the bed. This is my kneeling

in the rush morning minutes.

You wanted to know what I compose to. Is it Bach? Brahms. The sideways cab-drivers.

Inside a room somewhere. Shannon, I dreamed.

You push through the door, into the rain.

Is it raining? Have I breathed?

You're dreaming I'm reading God. Is it in a field? Am I laughing?



*I am ashamed to cry or sing or pray*

I am ashamed to cry or sing or pray,  
even in a corner in my house,  
even in the spare room in my ribs,  
even in the dark of my eyelid.

But I'll fall down again,  
into a scattering.

And in this desert, I take branches into my mouth, rake the length of my back against brush.

Into a scattering, a bit of bone, hide.

And in this desert the heat-body inside my body rises, talks gibberish until my lips are parched.

Into a scattering I howl, break flocks in the sky.

Darkness hides in the hide of my thigh when the stirrings still.

I have laid my palms on the side and watched the prints lift, ghost-like, from the bed.

I have crawled though, no trail has been pressed.



*Psalm 44:25*

We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.

—Psalm 44:25

Your letter arrived today. Maple leaves stuck to my shoe.

I said, my ghosts, my ghosts. Again in the bath, sang about fields, opened things up just to shut them out again.

What did you do when everyone went silent, when your ear wouldn't stop ringing?

My ghosts, my ghosts. I wait. Nothing passes by the window.

If I held my stomach, if I dug my nails into sides, would I lift somewhere?

My arm, half in bubbles, extended to you.

It's been months. Sometimes, when I touch myself, I stare at the bare light bulb.

Maybe the walls will melt together. Maybe I'll eat less, feel lighter, get a buzz.

Today, I walked until my feet hurt, held the rock in my purse, curled my hand into a fist. Knew you wouldn't speak. Knew the sky wouldn't reveal you.

When I wrote, God, speak to me, I meant that I couldn't stop repeating the number seven. That eight swirled around like a jellyfish above my head.

The pages spill into the bath. Your words blur into my midsection.

I make up the letters. I seal you at night, whisper imaginings, small tulips, under my sheets.

No wonder you're silent.





*John 3:6*

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.  
—John 3:6

She beat her body, from her feet to her chest, lashed her knees with twigs, branches of the yew tree.

Walking toward the Jannat al-'Arif, something took hold of my shoe, bit it.

Yes. I would wrap thistles around my waist for you.

The river told me—  
sleep and God will speak to you.

I told myself to let myself in the water,  
let myself in the water-shed, let myself  
in the shedless water-skin, let myself  
in the infinite watering.

She let herself drift into a conscious state of unknowing—unknown to herself  
she undid her blouse—thought her body a land understood by its crop—wrapped herself in thistles  
and yew-leaves—

Nothing stays here—

Once, I stood by the pool and told my mother,  
I don't know whose voice is coming from my mouth.

She said, Everyone experiences feeling unreal, Shannon.

God told Adam to name the animals. And so the spirit was with him.

What happened next, no one will tell you—but the yew leaves might—

Because I'm the chief of humanity. I'm God when I concentrate on my hands.

Walking toward the Jannat al-'Arif — a love-for-all-things snaked from its dark, shaken at the site of  
sunlight.

Why are you here, I asked.

With you, it said.



*Jonah 4:10*

You have been concerned about this vine,  
though you did not tend it.  
—Jonah 4:10

I'm unkind to myself.

Do you want to be a flame?

No,  
a firefly in your bathroom.



*But I Do Not Send the Letters—*

## *A Stranger Longing*

10 October

I saw a pigeon today fall from a branch. The bundle of its body tilted to one side, swaying toward grass. Held up in the coal of its eye was an innocence or perhaps it was simply a mirror.

I thought about you today. I thought about how we'd probably talk about variations in stone, the color of earth and how we try to hang our thoughts off of them like hooks. Were your thoughts useless, then? Can you sometimes spot them running between orange groves?

§

Do passions push up around us? I couldn't carry all of mine on the train the other day. I had to leave some behind. But I find that this doesn't matter because every commuter has enough to share. How can they not see them, lying on their laps, hanging off their coat, sitting beside them in the empty seat. I'm tempted to go up to them and say, Did you lose something? I'm sorry, did you drop this?

§

I never talked about the lights when I was younger until Jenny told me that inside quartz there are millions of crevices which hide every longing you could imagine.

§

I can sometimes feel something you wish to say, hovering, or just lightly brushing my arm. Your beauty, though, still rustles in the tree tops. I have to look up to hear your thoughts. And the pigeon fell from the sentences we never spoke to one another. Our disconnect embodied in the failed wings. But I swear. You do fly within me. I hope you hear me say this, type this.

I take a train again tonight. And though I won't find your words in suitcases in the overhead compartment, you're constantly falling off the shelves. I know you'd laugh at this image. I know you'd say, Thank you, Shannon, for remembering my name.

What do we do, then, but write diaries in our heads all our lives? You probably wrote one, too. And I think, without knowing it, we're all writing it to one another.

## *But I Do Not Send the Letters*

21 October

And do you know what “the world” is to me? [...]: a monster of energy, without beginning, nor end; [...] a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, [...] with an ebb and a flood of its forms.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Notes, written 1883-1888)

It's freezing here. There's no heat. It's worst around the ribs.

It fits, though. This contrast.

I woke up this morning in love. I went running, chasing my breath, arms stinging as the sweat reacted to the chill. This set me going. Up the hill,

Gustav Mahler's First Symphony in my ear, waiting, waiting, and then I can see it. Long Island lay ahead, daydreaming. The sailboats bobbed, wagging their tails like the sea-

herd they are. Switching from right foot to the left, mirroring their sway, my body said, Give me something to do! Does that make sense? There was a pulse in my ears against

the symphony, playing off each other, the physical and spiritual. Opening my eyes a bit wider, then squinting, salt in the air sticking to lips as I ran into nowhere, into no one

but displacement, weight.

I repeated to myself, over and over, your name. In my head. As though vowels could pull you closer to the earth, summon somehow a recollection of you as a shadow, low-

lying and near me.

Here, my chest pulls in. There's heaviness in thought. Some find it odd. I understand loneliness like that.

### §

I dreamed you held a rope once. That you were hauling something in. Perhaps you were in a boat, looking for shore. A way to anchor. Pulling the rope toward your body,

there came a moment of knowing that someone would be thinking of you doing this.

## *A Stranger Longing*

I think our brains know who love us even when time holds us apart.  
I think our bodies know more than we do about need.

Can this moment have happened again, before, and that's why I woke,  
in love with what only Angels can see?

When I think about your mind it sets my body in a spin. And who you are, exactly, I don't know.

If you must affect me like this, please hand me your thoughts. Pass them down  
from heaven or the trees. I don't care.

I just don't know where this came from and I don't know how to shake it.



## *But I Do Not Send the Letters*

5 December

It's been awhile since I've thought to write. Part of me feels cut off from receiving signs from you. Either I've not been paying attention or something in me closed. My mind seems to drift, rummaging around in a mud-hole somewhere, trying to see what bubbles to the surface. I thought I had a clear vision but now I just stare out of windows and float, an anxiety balloon, waiting for its branch.

I miss conversing with you. How, when I'd be walking from the library, you'd present yourself in the widening sky. I wrote that I imagined you reaching for a line, tugging for a boat to be anchored.

The image of your sleeve dangling in the water—the silliest things hold us here—reminds me that I still occupy a space.

To occupy a space. How one walked by you, watched you enter a room, electricity around you like a god. Aware of being alive.

Passions grow, regardless of topography.

None of this matters. Your passion is residue now. Every fear and joy evaporates when your mind unthreads, as will mine.

You sit patiently. I should be more like you.

*Wash Away, Say*

## *Wash Away, Say*

Dear,

When I try to grip the world and fight against my ego,

That's when I come closest to loving

Only myself.

So I thought I'd jot this down on the back of my hand,

Thought I'd walk for a while in God's spit,

Wash it wash away, say,

Hey,

Forgive me,

But in order to keep my words true,

I have to stop writing for a while,

And in order to live more fully,

I need to be dead for a couple days.

Solomon,

I need a little bit more of you,

More from the man who calls me Hannah,

More of the days where I'd walk in God's spit, singing.

Does he know how long Hannah waited?

I don't mind,

Really—

## *A Stranger Longing*

When I was having an anxiety attack

Last night, when I was punching my forehead

To feel a sting, he said, Think of something

Calm, beautiful.

I thought about the time I rode my horse for six hours,

Got lost in a storm,

Called out to no one, held on to her mane—

Waited.

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