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**Longing Distance**

Poetry by Sarah Hannah

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In the poem “For the Fog Horn When There Is No Fog,” for the bright (fogless) day to be perfect would require the speaker to fail to see (the possibility of future fog, the danger of forgetting, our movement—almost imperceptible—toward eventual loss), to block out all the intimations of mortality, something Sarah Hannah is not good at. Hers is a sensibility urgently attuned to what happens when no one is paying attention (or not enough, or not the right kind) to the ways in which the world, in its restlessness, slips out of the sightline of human perception. She hears “the horn’s threnody,” its funeral song, the “warning that reiterates across / The water,” “still sounding in full sun.” She is two eyes (“the pupils swallow everything”), one “I,” absorbed in the predicament of being, trying to look everywhere at once, fully aware that time is against her and will catch her up in its fine nets whenever it will, all her attempts to see (such difficult, exacting work, so exhausting that sleep is only a temporary eclipse) as nothing to it.

On a river of language, (“A river lined with briar, lit with jewelweed”) Hannah’s line of thought is always moving forward (often between the fixed green banks of traditional forms) into a difficult future, the only certainty of which is that it will someday end. And so, while she can, she is looking and looking: up—at a peregrine, “a firm grey slant in even sunlight,” at “clouds hung like a false ceiling,” at the Horsehead Nebula—and down—at the “twists of briar” and the three-inch snowdrift in the corner of the fence, at a star-nosed mole. She looks all through the house—in the unappeasable black at the back of the “linen closet of worry and care,” with its useless remedies for everyone’s “unflagging question (past cure)”; in the workshop of a father long gone (still there are traces: “yellow cans / Bearing an ancient text: *Chock / Full O’Nuts*,” “a forest-green / Grid of holes holding hooks holding / Tools”); in “the dark bookcases” (now’s badly stained “poor imitations” of childhood’s authentic long ago, its “Persian carpet lit / With birds”). And in a quarry full of our discards: “Down sixty feet of rusted depths” to “yellow // Chevy, blue Camaro, kitchen sink,” where even fumbling young love (so here, so now) takes place among ruins, under graffiti about Jane and Beth and whoever, (the girls they once were now “Gone missing,” that strange redundancy) their names faded to flaking archaeological data from a lost time.

Everywhere the fact that things end tries to stare her down, but Hannah’s poems, aware of the brevity of our sojourn in the world, obsessed with describing the light of one life, do not blink, but fiercely and determinedly look back, searching and uncovering, shoring up memory while there’s still time, sounding their eloquent warning: “there might be fog

someday // (They will be lost), there might be fog / And even squall, and you'll have  
nothing // But remembrance."

— Ann Stapleton