

The Tide

by Sally Houtman

It's six a.m. and you're at your desk
and the hollow rush of the first flight out
skirts your waking daze and you know
what this means — that it's leaving time
for some but not for you, because
you're anchored here — elbows
straddling your keyboard as you
search the night for a helping verb,
a compass point, a light to circle
in the dark, and now through the blinds
the sky splits open, leaking light, leaking
day, and the forecast calls for rain, but what
you are thinking, wanting to know, with your
chin in your hands, half-blind, staring up, is,
what God would want with so much sky.

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And it's toast and jam and it's off to school
and the sky is grey and you scrape each plate
and consider the cost, the price to pay for
measuring time in tides and trickling sand
and you hear the phone and in your head you
hear his voice and you'd think the sound would
be a gentle nudge but as you pick it up, you
brace yourself for the 'here we go again', and
the toothy-edged awareness comes like
rusty metal digging flesh and in your mind you
play the tape of that's not what I said, and that's
not what I meant, and on the phone you find
you're dropping commas and rescinding phrases
and you are scraping the veneer off words
and still you're not heard and it is then
you begin stitching meaning into minutes

because you know the rain is coming
and when it does there will be no caulk
to seal this leak, and of this you're sure
because the weather knows your bones

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And so you go about your day like nothing's
wrong and you ignore the check engine light
and the low-cabin-pressure sign and you ignore
your brains' static backbeat backward
masking screaming *Paul is dead* and *Pull up!*
and *Don't look down!* because you know
it's no one's fault there was no one there
to tell you to cross at the lights or come
in from the rain and he is not the one who
dropped you in some godforsaken wasteland
with a toothbrush and a compass and made
you find your own way home and this is what
you're thinking as you catch the bus and go
to work where you sit and issue spoon-dosed
pleasantries and dodge the spatter-pattern of
the day's contempt and all the while you cast
slant glances upward because today the sky—
a mulish grey—lacks even the decency to rain.

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And it's home again and it's home from school
and it's *The Lion King* on DVD and while
they watch, you fold their clothes and realise
you need to watch it too because
you are grinding teeth and grinding gears
and swaying hips and you are trying trying
trying to be anywhere but here and so you hum
along and tumble in the music's flatted notes
and falling pitch because if you had your way

you'd take your heartache honey-glazed
and when it's done you try to write but
it's your daughter in the doorway with
so many needs and your needs, too,
so strong you can't deny them but yours
you must keep distant, far upstream
and out of reach, and when the phone
rings again you're all excuse me, please
forgive me, and that's not what I said,
and that's not what I meant, and you are
hands that rise and fall to estimate dimension,
doing clumsy guesswork in the air, and
to him you are all door and no window and
you are an obstructed bleacher-seat and
a half-lit exit sign and all day you've
held tight to your umbrella but there's
been not one measly drop of rain.

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And it's up-up-and-away and here we go
and that's all folks and up the stairs and
down the hall and once again you're on
your own and you twist your mind's dial
too far left and there's a static awareness
that's still arriving, just beyond your high-beams
and it is one part come and find me, three parts
go away, and with the dark and the quiet
comes a sharp reversal, a certain something
that connects like stilettos on a hardwood floor —
that tomorrow will be the same, that you'll
still be a losing streak in skin-tight jeans,
each swerve another stitch pulled free
and you'll still be good reason gone to ground
and you'll be repeat steps two and three
and right then something idling in you guns

the engine, leans on the horn and a red light
inside you flashes yellow then turns
green and what was once a gauzy, mindless
time-spliced twitter becomes an assassin's
loaded clip and you are ready as you lie
on the bed and think of downpours past
and those to come and there is nothing
left but to wait for the rain, for the storm
to bring its heightened waves, and to welcome
in the tide that will wear all stone to sand.

