



LIBRARIES

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Getting out alive: poems. 2003

Turk, Tisha

[Madison, Wisconsin]: Parallel Press, 2003

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/RYWIPVXLBESCV8K>

Copyright 2003 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.

For information on re-use see:

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/Copyright>

The libraries provide public access to a wide range of material, including online exhibits, digitized collections, archival finding aids, our catalog, online articles, and a growing range of materials in many media.

When possible, we provide rights information in catalog records, finding aids, and other metadata that accompanies collections or items. However, it is always the user's obligation to evaluate copyright and rights issues in light of their own use.

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

*Getting
Out Alive*

POEMS BY TISHA TURK

TISHA TURK teaches English and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is a Ph.D. candidate. When she's avoiding her dissertation, which is most of the time, she cooks elaborate dinners for her friends, entertains her cats, overanalyzes cult TV shows, and writes nonfiction as well as poetry. *Getting Out Alive* is her first collection.

Parallel Press is an imprint of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries.

ISBN 1-893311-36-8

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

Getting Out Alive

Poems by
TISHA TURK



PARALLEL PRESS · 2003

Copyright © 2003 by the Board of Regents of
the University of Wisconsin System.
All rights reserved.

ISBN 1-893311-36-8

This book is for all the people who helped with matters large and small during the year partially chronicled in the first half of this book. It's my great good fortune that there are too many of them to name.

Special thanks to Amber Ault, who asked for more, and to Rainer Maria, without whose album *A Better Version of Me* this collection (and particularly "Root Vegetable Poem") would never have been completed.

Published by Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries

www.parallelpress.library.wisc.edu

FIRST EDITION

Contents

I. GOING UNDER

Spilled · 8

Resonance · 9

Taken With Water · 10

Nausea · 11

Underground · 12

Adenoma · 13

Eclipse · 14

Open · 15

Going Under · 16

Oxygen · 17

Convalescence · 18

II. GOING ON

How We Live Now · 20

Three Ways of Becoming Weightless · 22

Connecticut & Porter, 3 a.m. · 23

Plucked · 24

Lunar Landscape With Tree · 26

Knitting · 28

Root Vegetable Poem · 30

The body has got to be worth saving.

Rainer Maria, "Ceremony"
from *A Better Version of Me*

Going Under

Spilled

That afternoon, after the curtains,
the stirrups, the gown discreetly opened
to the nurse's gentle hands, my breast
let slip a little milk. The body knows:
something has to be poured out
before you can see what's left.

No pregnancy, no lump; something else
is floating through me, settling. And now
everything is a sign I should have seen,
the forked stick waiting for divination.

She says: they'll do a test. I know
they're looking for what remains
in the cup when the liquid's gone,
the tea leaves at the bottom of my blood.

And when they find that residue
they will name it, but
they can't read it, can't tell
what kind of fortune this might be.

This is how we learn the secret
of hidden illness: it spills out of us,
like everything else, one drop at a time,
until suddenly we're waist-deep
in our own lives, not knowing how
we got here, not knowing what comes next.

Resonance

The nurse says I will hear a sound
like knocking. I imagine the radio waves
tapping at the door of my skull, asking
what's within, sorry to have disturbed.

Inside the tunnel I hear drills.
I tell myself that nothing useful
is easy. I tell myself that any answer
is better than no answer at all.

After the injection, I strain to hear
my brain's response, how its whisper
reverberates through bone and skin
against the close walls of the machine.

In my nightmares it echoes
for months: the sound of drills,
the silent roar of the resonant waves
and what they found there.

Taken With Water

The doctor says the dosage starts low,
increases slowly. In her voice
I'm hearing an ocean shift and rise
to find its own high-water mark.

They've discovered a new island, one
we never wanted, and I'm stranded there,
kneeling on the sand at ebb tide,
trying to patch a rudderless boat.

I'm a strong swimmer, I'm not afraid
of drowning, but I would like
to keep my head above the waves.
Around me, the air turns gray with rain.

Half a pill, twice a day, taken with water.
I can hear the breakers rolling in to shore.
When these tides run out again, I hope
they take the whole beach with them.

The doctor navigates for me, my compass
her finger on the page: *may result
in headache, lowered blood pressure,
dizziness, indigestion. Possibility of nausea.*

I've never been seasick. When I look up
the bottle-sized boat is balanced
in my hand. I am praying for blue sky,
I am trying not to listen for thunder.

Nausea

Bromocriptine tablets for prolactin secreting tumors may cause a dramatic shrinkage of the tumor. . . . As with other ergot alkaloids, nausea/vomiting is a common adverse effect associated with bromocriptine therapy and occurs most frequently when the drug is administered for hyperprolactinemia.

—“About Pituitary Tumors”

Sunday: 2.5 mg, could not eat. Monday:
crackers. Tuesday: spit acid.
Wednesday: crackers. Thursday:
could not keep down toast.
Friday: crackers. Saturday:
crackers. Sunday: could not eat.

Monday: could not eat. Tuesday:
crackers. Wednesday: toast.
Thursday: toast. Friday: toast.
Saturday: rice. Sunday: dosage
to 5 mg, could not eat. Monday:
could not eat. Tuesday: could not eat.

Underground

After the first month of vomiting
I enter the new cavern of my body.
The hollows above my collarbones
gather shadows from the rock;
rings fall off my thinner fingers
to echo like footsteps in vacant spaces.

For three days once I ate only lettuce,
drank only water, rinsed myself clean
like a bowl to hold something holy.
I felt the purity of emptiness made smooth
by running water, surface still wet, the light
of a clear mind reflecting off slick stone.

That was years ago. These dry stones
hold nothing to help me. My mouth fills
with minerals and dust. This is a cave
of earthquakes, fault lines that shift
without intention, unnatural disaster
that leaves a jagged hole underground.

Reaching further into the cave I find
a glow beyond my fingers, veins
of light in the rocks, phosphorescence
where I had expected only darkness.
I don't know if this light will be enough
to see by. I don't know where this cave ends.

Adenoma

In autumn they found
the tumor, blooming
like a late flower: it should
not have been there.

I wonder when it found
me, when the seed was planted,
took root. How have I tended
this unknown garden,
the ground I took for granted?

In April, edge of the frozen season,
the latest doctor's voice tells me
there is no change.
On my kitchen table, tulips
shed their red and yellow petals,
shrinking to stamen and stem.

In the garden of my brain
I picture springtime, harvest,
fields left fallow. In May,
at the market, I buy spinach
sweetened under snow.

In my head, the flower
changes color but not
shape, no further bloom,
no sign of ceasing.

Eclipse

I'm forty pounds lighter, my head's light too,
I'm afraid I'll float away. This afternoon,
in the hospital parking lot, I'm clinging
to the steering wheel, waiting to stop spinning.

Through the windshield, the crescent moon
looks starved, corroded, empty.
A trick of the light. It's big enough
to cover the sun, to cast its shadow
on this part of the world.

I'm forty pounds closer to the moon,
my head is weightless in the thinning atmosphere,
and the doctor says this medication
is not enough. There's still too much
of me left, everything I've lost
is not what counts. There's moon dust
settling in my brain, it's almost nothing,
but it's enough to tip the scale.

How can something smaller blot out
something larger? I hold up a pill
and it covers the moon. I hold on
to my body, but it's disappearing
in the shadow of this lighter self.

When the doctor said more pills, I said
no. I've spent too long
in the gathering dark, watching the sun
dissolve, watching the moon grow wide.

Open

When my mother says *surgery*, I say I'm open
to the idea. We've seen scans of the brain
from three directions, we've held the tubes of blood.
The body's padlock has been picked. What's left
to keep secret? Why not open it
to the knife, the laser, the small miracle?

I am afraid the surgeon's key unlocks
an empty room: the ordinary self
is gone, is lost inside some hidden tunnel,
lightless, sealed. I am afraid there is
no way back, nothing left but sickness.
I am afraid of what might save me. I tell
my mother I need to sleep on it.

In the dream, I open my eyes
and I'm still in the dark, at the edge
of a hole too deep to fathom. The voice
like my mother's says: Here is the tunnel,
here is the trap door swinging on its hinges.
This is how you fall back into the world.

Going Under

The phrase is a promise: no memory,
no pain. But how much further under
can I go? I've been submerged
for months, drowning in late-night calls
about what we love most, what we'd miss,
slipping into a stream of solemn conversation
like the needle slips into the vein.

I want to believe that afterwards
I'll float to the surface. That's where
I want to live now: I want to worry
about next month's rent, whether the milk
has turned, what time the bus stops running.
I want small obligations, something lighter
than love or the body's sinking bones.

Oxygen

I tell the night nurse: I didn't know
so many signs could be vital. She holds up
a small white splint, says: This one's for oxygen.

The red light shines through my finger.
Somehow it knows where to find the breath
in my blood, sees the life I can't feel.

Normal, she says, like temperature, pulse, electrolytes;
and when she quizzes me I know who I am. We agree
the blood pressure could be stable by morning.

The arterial line settles deeper into its bruise,
dry breath rattles in my dry mouth.
She asks if I'll want breakfast, if I want anything.

Her smile is framed by the IV drips.
I want to ask her for a morning without vomiting,
for air unfiltered through gauze or blood.

I ask for water. Holding my breath to drink,
I feel my blood pounding, anxious. I cough and gasp,
telling it: I am breathing, I am breathing, I swear.

Convalescence

Five days after the surgery I still find the sticky residue of adhesive on my face, my breast, the inside of my elbow: reminders of tabs and IV drips, measures of heartbeat, blood pressure, breath. I find I am nervous in the middle of the night—I wake up forgetful, sit up too suddenly, feel the pressure change in my head, panic, wait for something to go wrong. I am still cotton-mouthed, twitching, dreaming of anesthesia and machines. I am still afraid to take these pills, two white, one red, one pink. I cannot swallow without expecting nausea, vomiting, collapse. Five days and no collapse. This is how I know I will be well.

Ten days after the surgery I do not find blood in my nose and throat, I am no longer afraid to breathe at night. On my left wrist, the bruise from the arterial line still spreads, but fades: the purple streaks bloom green, yellow, brown. Today I wear my watch for the first time. Today I swallow four pills without flinching. I meet a friend for lunch downtown, we do not talk about hospitals, we talk about other things. I eat and drink as if this is not unusual, as if this could be normal. Here, at this table, I am hungry and I am still alive.

Going On

How We Live Now

After eleven poems from a terrible year,
you asked only: How do you live now?

I live in the cluttered rooms of a heart
that keeps everything: a chipped vase
that held flowers from someone else,
bottles drained of wine at a party
you didn't know about, candle stubs
in saucers you didn't crack, photographs
of everyone but you who made me smile.

The house of the body is held together
by the bent wires of friendship, rusty
but still strong. Its porch is propped
on the lids of jars I filled with hope
and lentils for the coming winter.
In the smallest room you can still find
the rattling teeth of anger, pulled out
and left under my pillow like wishes.
I've been saving love in cardboard boxes
and paper bags. I'm learning to give it away.

How do I live now? This month I said:
I will live in this imperfect house, untidy
heart and empty head. This month
I washed all the windows because I want
to see clearly, I patched the quilt
my great-grandmother made because
I want to fix things before they fall apart.

This month I cooked beets, which you dislike,
in five different ways. This month I ate
two fortune cookies and saved one fortune
that said: You have been given many gifts,
use your talents wisely. The other fortune

I swallowed whole, as if you were there
to see me do it. I'm standing at a clean
window, holding a candle whose wick
is burning down. I would swallow it too
if I thought its light would bring you back.

Three Ways of Becoming Weightless

I.

I'm on a plane, on the way to a funeral that should not be happening. I see the shapes of grief in a small square of forest, the white sprawl of a sandy pit. From up here the world is tidy, recognizable in its divisions: stripes and wedges of brown and green, ragged edges made clean by distance. Shoreline. Interstate. Suburb. Racetrack. Field. I'm inching out onto the wing of the plane, aiming for that stand of trees, that splash of white, ready to fall through the indifferent air. I'm waiting for the sensation—I know it from dreams—where the whole world is moving without me and I am suspended in the long instant before impact.

II.

I'm in the bathroom, floating near the ceiling. My body's piled like sticks on the floor, still clinging to the habit of gravity. From up here I can see through walls. The house is a mess. In the corners of each room the voices collect like dust, left behind by everyone who comes here. They brush against each other, hopeful inflections catching on the flesh like mothwings on cobwebs. I'm watching them struggle but I can't help them: I know too much about the ways we fail each other, the way hearts get broken all the time.

III.

I am balanced over the center of your body, the center of everything. Your breath has come loose from your lungs and your chest rattles under my hand, as if your heart is shaking. Mine is. From up here the world is a bowl of blue water; the tiny raft of the bed floats on its surface. Your face is full of light. Our hopeful skin keeps me here, suspended and ready to fall, and you reach out to hold me as I float, tethered by love, lighter than air but hanging on.

Connecticut and Porter, 3 a.m.

Halfway home from someone else's
house, she opens her overcoat
to the weather, imagines fingers
like rain tracing the curl
of an ear above a damp collar.

At the first deserted intersection
she waits for the light to change.
Two flyers taped to the lamppost
bleed their patterns onto each other.
Here's the shape of a phrase, blurred
by rain. Here's a woman printed
in red on the wet night, still waiting.

Two blocks down she crosses
against the light. Her overcoat
billows in the singing wind,
empties, and fills again, closing
and opening like an uncertain heart.

Plucked

Some afternoons my mother pulled her hair back, sat down at her dresser, switched on the mirror framed with light. From the other side of the room, I saw her face distorted by the glass. In her own eyes the image was clear at last, better than real: there's the imperfect truth, written on skin. The tweezers hardly seemed to move. Her mouth winced but her eyes never blinked.

My grandmothers longed for perfectly arched brows. They plucked out every hair, started over, pencilled half-circles onto the bone above the eye. Their doll-faces, perpetually surprised, stare out from my mother's wedding photographs. My mother told me that this was unnatural, no one does it anymore. In the mirror she examined one brow, then the other, each one as cleanly asymmetrical as a bird extending a single wing.

I wanted that mirror's mysteries, its gift of precision. My mother caught me leaning in close to the medicine cabinet, gripping the tweezers, squinting, trying to decide where to begin, how to draw the line on my own skin. Here, she says, let me show you. A little pull, a little pain, nothing much. She's happy to help me be tidy and contained, it's what she's been longing for, all my lines neat, all my curves smooth. I'm sure she hoped that it would last.

Years later, when I explained
why I will never marry a man,
she looked at me and looked away,
and I thought I knew what she had seen
or failed to see: the photographs
she will never have, the mirror
I will never be. She winced
in a way I remembered, and I wondered
what else had been plucked out, what piece
of the life she wanted, what dream.

Lunar Landscape with Tree

I.

I'm holding a postcard that made it back from the moon, Apollo Mission image in silver and shadow, captioned: *Floodlit by the morning Sun, the lunar highlands to the west of the Sea of Tranquillity stand out in stark relief. Altitude seventy miles.* Her handwriting floats on the back of the card, a negative of the night sky, marking the orbit of a new planet: someone's left,

someone's been left behind in a silent place. Is this what she sees from that airless height, these craters like eyelashes on the cheek of the moon? Is this what it's like, the sky becoming the ground?

I'd like to be there with her, but it's too far to travel on short notice. I have to wait for brief transmissions, jerky images, a voice crackling with static and heartbreak. I'd like to make a wish, but I can't choose between the comfort of gravity and the lesson of weightlessness.

2.

She brings in the tree from the porch. The weight of its large blue pot tells her that gravity still works here. She dusts each leaf as tenderly as if it's made a long journey and come back. The branches sway to a rhythm she can't feel, a sound she can't hear. Inside the moonlight she and the tree turn silver together.

In the unslept morning she eats eggs
for their curves, drinks tea because the mug
keeps her hands steady. Outside the window
the lunar highlands glow, and the edge
of the Sea of Tranquillity seems closer.
She picks up the guitar she's learning
to play, and listens. The tree
in the corner of the room grows larger.

Knitting

When that boy taught us how to knit
it was summer and we didn't think
about keeping ourselves warm,
only the glow of learning something new.
You dropped garter stitches
when he looked at you. His seed stitches
found their way into your scarf.
You planned a sweater in double seed
because it looks good on both sides.
We didn't know then that even
the best-planned pattern won't reverse
perfectly. Some stitches you can't turn over
at all, like the moss stitch we learned
from the stone who later rolled away.

All fall you knitted tiny caps and socks.
I started a crib-sized afghan I never did finish.
Through a cold winter we kept our fingers
warm with the needles, our hearts warm
any way we could, knitting by feel,
at night, in the dim glow of the TV set.
After the ice storm, huddled over a kerosene heater,
we hated the landlord but loved the scarves
that grew under our fingers, wearing them
wrapped once around our necks as we knitted
the second halves. You grew faster
than the scarves did, those last weeks.
We didn't talk about second halves in front of you.

You laughed at my clumsy fingers, my dropped stitches,
and I kept dropping them to make you laugh,
undoing the work of my hands for different work,
the crib-sized afghan well-sacrificed.
You bought me a crochet hook, showed me
how to keep everything from unraveling, when I

should have been the one keeping your loose ends together. No one guesses how much work it is to recover a stitch without the right tools. You never drop stitches now. Is it because you know what it's like to come undone when other loops stay intertwined so easily?

We joked that we'd be old women together, knitting on the porch, making long blankets out of scraps. Why wait? We're ready now. I'll take off my leather jacket and wear the cardigan you made for me. You'll bring a bucket of lemonade and your beaded shawl. We'll sit on the swing all afternoon, eat peaches between rows, knit their juice and every small unraveling sock into something new, some delicate lace for girls to wear when they meet boys on summer evenings after dark. You can't tell them anything. It's summer, but we know what's coming. I'll knit you mittens to cry into, a sweater to hide in, a chenille cocoon for dreaming inside. I'll knit you a new heart in twelve colors, a pair of woollen wings.

Root Vegetable Poem

The man who sells me sunchokes
folds the top of the bag and tells me:
If they dry up, just plant them. He sounds
so certain. I'm sure he's right. These
surviving roots, tiny and heavy
in my palm, they'll come through
one way or another. Onions hang
in strings from the rafters of the attic,
rows of carrots wrapped in paper
line their basement crate, potatoes
packed in sand guard the coldest wall.
I'm not yet dreaming of asparagus,
snap peas, strawberries, mint. I want
what lasts through the long winter.

I am making vegetable stew for a girl
who will never taste it, who wrote me
an essay about sexism, the best
in the class, and a letter saying
she doesn't want a body anymore.
Under the summer sun she was already
pale and thin. Now, I imagine, her bones
are cold, too close to the surface.
She's tired of the flesh, its grease
and softness. She wants to be raw,
paper-skinned, small and hard as roots
readied for winter. She wants
to dry up and not be planted, to let go
of what binds her to the ground.
I wish I could tell her to take root
in her own self, to tell her there's still
something inside her that could grow.

Instead I stir the onions, add salt
and wine, scrub parsnips, dice turnips,
pull sunchokes from the paper bags
stacked along the cellar wall:
protection from what howls outside
and in. These roots have their own voices,
rustling against each other, speaking
into the wind. These days I'll listen
to anything that knows how to breathe
underground, anything that digs deep
and holds on. I can hear them whispering
to both of us: the body is worth saving,
the body is worth getting out alive.



GETTING OUT ALIVE

by Tisha Turk

is the twenty-seventh publication of the Parallel Press,
an imprint of the University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries.

Series design by Tracy Honn.

Typeset in Scala by Greg Britton.

PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOKS

- The Perfect Day* · Andrea Potos
Hosannas · Katharine Whitcomb
Apparition · Max Garland
Sure Knowledge · Elizabeth Oness
Luck · Marilyn Annucci
A Visionary's Company · Rick Hilles
The Twig Songs · Gwen Ebert
Them Poems · Mason Williams
Our Sainted Lady Esther · Matt Welter
What Grandmother Says · J.D. Whitney
Border Crossings · Heather Dubrow
How Dumb the Stars · Francine Conley
Eat and Remember · Carl Lindner
The Only Everglades in the World ·
Robin Chapman
Cicatrix · Charles Cantrell
Anna, washing · Ted Genoways
A Girl in Water · Barbara Edelman
From the Sketchbooks of Vanessa Bell ·
Allison Funk
Sand Island Succession · Judith Strasser
Small Acts · Mary Mercier
Rendered into Paradise · Jean Feraca
What the Body Knows · Alison Townsend
Singing to the Garden · Roger Pfingston
Light Made from Nothing · Susan Elbe
Bones of Light · Judith Sornberger
Marquees of Buffalo · Dennis Trudell
Getting Out Alive · Tisha Turk

PARALLEL PRESS



PARALLEL PRESS
Memorial Library
728 State Street
Madison, WI 53706