

# THE BLUE WORD

*Laura Christina Dunn*

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Night with the Pacific—  
 our clothes wrinkle  
 resting on a log washed up  
 in the last storm.  
 You ask for something  
 we can say together.  
 Your words are rattling stones  
 beneath your feet  
 and the slapping of water  
 into you as you move into  
 the deep water. *Your will be done.*  
 I call to you your name—you—  
 and I dive to see what  
 you look like  
 underwater.  
 Salt stings, sound leaves—rises  
 to the surface  
 you—in air pockets you.

|                              |                              |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Unable to pass through water | our voices                   |
| leave the world of drifting  |                              |
| ship hulls crab jaws         | a water ski salted by coral. |

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And Newport—  
city lights strung together for miles  
white out        where the city ends        and a new one begins  
where the coast ends        and inland begins  
where night ends and dim begins.

I measure coast by salt-painted houses  
I measure a day by how far we wade.

We wade to Anchorage  
or a stone's throw,

we wade inland, fifty-four miles—

those urchins are stones.  
Those days are porch lights.

The red lines on these rocks mean the property  
was underwater once,        even though  
we are miles from the sea. This is still sea floor,  
this is still.        Now

in a white light on a dusty road  
you can see specks of earth  
in the air.

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—I'll give you five acres of security  
and a penny to put in water. You'll  
get a fence made of driftwood.

You'll wade in the creek  
the one leak            I let through.

And the dimes are chattering  
in a waistcoat  
and the women grow silent  
in a convenience store.

—Silence becomes you, you  
in white you'll shine in white—

White like the ocean sometimes  
in a storm. Like

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His Kingdom come  
to the surface. Silt-shining  
on whale skin.

Now only body  
spread out across black pebbles  
on shore with people

called here by the smell  
that reaches for miles—

the smell that passes through shop windows  
and your nose pinched closed.

The children keep  
pouring buckets of sea water  
on the whale's skin.

A ritual                      they remember  
from other whales        that landed in their world.

The man in yellow shorts—  
we watched goose bumps peek out  
between folds of hair on his legs  
as he watched the whale.

He called the whale dead.

Of his legs in the weather, of the dead skin orang-ing  
the wind peels  
the flesh as it would sand  
if it had a dune—

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—And we watch the wind shape the dirt  
as it shapes the body now.

And the salt water  
tries to fill the spaces between stones  
before it turns away again, taking with it  
that black as the wet shine  
turns stones the color of the sky.

Too easy to pass through flesh—  
throwing a stone  
makes a hole in the whale's body.  
I should have been stone.  
I should have sea legs.

What could make you rise? Is there a song  
that could make you  
die? Rise

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—so fast from the deep water  
to escape a ship trying to see  
with sonar. Rise too fast

the bends  
punctuating the whale's body.  
Too fast to survive.

And in the basin—  
water appears in the pipes  
and fills the bowl,  
bowl made to be empty  
and made to be full.

Or a lip of a glass bottle,  
drunk, named after what we did.  
Taken into the body, the liquid becomes me,  
those red faces, the stumble. No.  
Where's the door for the skin?

When you waded into me—  
night on the Pacific,  
did you know the ocean could catch fire?  
A sink can catch fire.

We were kids. We kept a dead whale wet.  
As a prayer or message  
sent from the place it won't get back to—

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Pray in your chamber, having shut the door,  
I mean pray in your storage room.  
Forgiveness in the towel closet.

For the kind of sonar  
that pushed a whale here.

For not trespassing.  
The ocean doesn't pick its borders  
the way we do. Our lungs sink and expand  
when air visits.  
Put no ash on the face.

It's hard to stay underwater.  
Always rise like the voice, rise  
like the whale. The neighbor,

her work done. She closed the store.  
After sixty years in air  
her heart stopped in her apartment.  
Dirt stripped from earth  
by the shovelful. By the shovelful,  
we hide her with dirt.

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Twenty years ago and walking  
around one city block  
you told me                      all the oceans                      would dry up soon.  
I imagined still scales  
and fish spines caught in wind,  
endless beaches  
where pebbles grow smaller to sand                      grow larger to stone  
to cliff.

Suppose the seas rise tomorrow—  
gone are the cliffs  
the driftwood  
gone is the whale body                      gone home.  
Back to the deep water                      submerged  
and merged                      once more                      the sun  
warming the water, the water coloring the sky  
the water covering the land  
                    and uncovering  
the whale body.

Who was buried in a cliff wall  
by Landsmen Construction,  
imported dirt for what the stones don't cover.

Can I make anything without dividing you  
from me? Suppose I'm  
never old. Suppose the sea was a fountain  
spilling on gray hills.  
Emptying streetlights—



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You by the stove. It must be winter.  
You filling it with driftwood and matches.  
You and I in the tool shed this time  
mumbling.

Our clothes in a pile,  
this time the lamplight the sea wind passing  
through cracks in the wall. I say the word—  
you— passes out of my mouth you  
and into your ears,  
the blue word, the shade of the sea.

And the navy ship called out to see  
what hid beneath. The sonar  
chased him to the surface.

These sounds we make  
to see beneath the water  
turn the color of water.  
These sounds we make  
could call a whale from its world.

Laura Christina Dunn's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fugue*, *Alligator Juniper*, *The Bear Deluxe*, *Camas*, *Touchstone*, *Zero Ducats* and *California Quarterly*. She is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Montana. Originally from Oregon, she lives in New York City.