

The Hatter's Taunt

This time I have been considering words that start with the letter V:
voracious vice, voluptuous vanity, vicarious vulgarities,
but you're looking for a poem and that's the letter P.
So place your quarter in the jukebox here and I'll see
what little diddy I can muster up to please. Take your place
on the dance floor. Now take your tea. Or perhaps a boat
of jam for the throat, a watch tick-tock, each a perfect note.
Change places.

This time let's do everything right.
Stand there, front and center, revealed for all to see and I
will be the unknown beast in the shadows, prowling
in discordant Minor keys. And if your hearing
is downright keen, you'll catch a shadow suggesting the shift
of a sultry shoulder blade defined by its iridescent sheen,
a shark circling the pulse of the heartbeat high in your throat
the smallest mouse high on sugar cubes and coke—

Change places.

This time you need only focus on keeping yourself afloat.
And when you can no longer bear it, the heat of the overhead light,
I'll swoop in—a valiant, Valkyrie valeted
to finish the job, all but one of us beheaded.

The Mango Boat

1. Beached

They come to the water wearing the skins
of their previous lives. Each step
toward the horizon is a question.
Each dip of the head, a prayer, to forget
this life and remember instead, the way
Indian children remember
their previous incarnations.
They want to go back to the time when
they were just cellular, entire ecosystems
in a single cell, floating without cause
through the dark side of God's wildest
dreams. Darkness broken by a single
strand of light. They must carry forever
the taste of it, as their bodies broke surface
the burning first breath, a filling up with fire—
transformation midwifed by temptation.
The temptation to forsake weightless eternity,
for the burden of knowing,
they must come to the water and wish
for redemption. Come to the water and drown
unanswered prayers,
the forgiveness of a dreaming God.

2. Dream

Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light
the interstate, perforated, yellow stripes
like measles, a blemish against the smooth
grey. *What so proudly we bailed at the twilight's*
last gleaming are rows and rows of soybeans,
green, lush and knee- high, ending only
where the corn shoots up, a tall kid
blessed with an early growth spurt—a farmer's
son, thick in blue jeans and ready to fit
his father's football jacket *to the T. broad stripes*
and bright stars thru the perilous fight, but not off
to college where the interest rates are too high.
Off to the last factory best described
as a heat pooling in the road.
It shimmers, then fades. This mirage, this
birthing pool a hide-and-seek tease, meant
to torment the parched throat-tires spinning
so long against the unending road.
Much needed rain rolling like the ocean surf,
frothy and grey *O'er the ramparts we watched—*
so gallantly streaming over miles of flat prairie,
punctuated by a copse of trees a place for the
deer to bed down at night, protected from
the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air, above
the railroad car, abandoned, growing roots
in the alfalfa bearing the words of a foreign
language, a city dialect of those who no longer
have the voice to speak so why not speak by hand
and in color, to strangers, as flat-bed trucks play
hopscotch with semi-tractor trailers, share the road
enough to haul pigs, haul beans, haul the women
that most will never see again. *Proof through the night*
that our flag was still there, on a bag of *Lays*
on a box of OREOS— in the wrenching hand
of a fat banker, draped like a canopy over a sick child,
uninsured, and dying. On his lips, a last
Oh say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

3. Reincarnation

It took me awhile to come down to this:
A single autumn tree
a blood burst of red,
defiant against the pressing white
of an approaching winter sky.

And be it the first leaf, headstrong,
or the last tiny fist curled
around its mother's fingers— we all fall down.

Cut every branch and I am still a tree.
Cut my trunk and my roots survive.
Dig up my roots, and
my decomposing leaves
have already been swallowed,
has become the dirt which feeds
every dead mouth— And where was I before

I was here in this body? From what water
did I spring forth— Athena from Zeus's mind?
Venus from a shell? Just another daughter
emancipated from her father's crimes.

You already know the answer:
a single red leaf
a hand spread wide
against the white winter sky.

4. From Before

I think of the distance—
all 8434 miles between your birthplace and mine.

7329 nautical miles had you used your father's
sailboat to reach me, taken Poseidon's Pacific

by storm. And I like to think of you that way,
Muka Asim kid, big boat, white dress bright

against the transverse blue, little tiller, and wave.
I even imagine a bushel of mangoes at your feet,

orange fish tangled in the net. The way you eat
like the way you sail, with abandon, with intent—

steady in the rocking sway. I'm not surprised
you found me. You are that kind of girl.

Had you come sooner, you might have found
me on the floor of my grandmother's church,

or in somebody else's backyard. Maybe even
running the wild wooden stream, muddied up

like a hunter, beating my flat-chest like a warrior.
Or you might have come into the bathroom, any

bathroom, and found me crying, or hunched
on the back porch whispering need to the stars.

You've have recognized me. You would've said
I have this boat. Said, Palanga, don't be silly

as I turn my face away, back toward the stars,
toward that old church, that old house, and wild

river—the way my mother traces the burnt
spoon, the flame. By compulsion, I am still

turning, yet here you are,
pulling me into the mango boat.

Here you are, pulling me from the dark
of the woods, out to open sea.

.