

Things I Believe

God, somehow.

Whatever, whoever, to whomever God is,
he/she/they/it made his/her/them/itself known to me on the back porch in winter
when I feared beyond the air was nothing.
Past a sleeping family, through the sliding glass door God pulled
me in my pajamas, bare feet blue in the snow,
to hear the breath of what had lived long before I woke.
The trees did not burst ablaze; the sky stayed put.
God spoke instead in whispers and delivered me a robin,
a small thing,
that hopped up the wooden stairs and chirped a prayer of spring that had long since
abandoned my ears, even when the latest years grew warmer.

God sent reminders.

Above the mountains in West Virginia, light spilled through low clouds to spell out my name.
My grandmother in a butterfly.
A heart on a frosted window and a phone call across time zones saying
leave him, he can't hurt you here.
A hotel room, my eden when homes became hell.

God sent a woman in a blue suit whose right hand raised my voice and made me sing
ancient, mournful dirges
melodies of deliverance, yes sister I see you
I know what it feels like not to breathe
I know what it feels like to remember
and with her I relived the nights I was shaken,
slapped, raped, scarred, poisoned and the mornings I believed
I would step outside and see his body on the concrete,
his blood draining down to me because I did not love him hard enough
fast enough
painfully enough to deserve the God I thought I knew.

The woman in the blue suit spoke softly.
She held my hand, and my mother's hand. She told me God was real.

And I believe her.

Harpers Ferry Memories

One kid raises his hand and says

“I heard that Lincoln didn’t really want to free the slaves that bad.”

West Virginia is hot that day, even along the Potomac

--*Potowmack*, say the ancient tongues that simmer in the grass--
and the students are hungry, they are tired, they just want to get back
on the bus because the cute boy is sitting one row
behind and they only have two more days to exchange numbers before
they go back home and school starts and
they figure out how many more years they have to do this.
this ending and beginning. this
beginning again, but they are never any more refreshed from the
last time.

So this kid, this smart ass who has spent the morning inter-
-rupting me

raises his hand to tell me that he heard that Lincoln didn’t really want to free the slaves
that bad, to which the band erupts
in discordant tuning notes of, “my teacher said.”

I use my arms, stretched toward the sky because only god can help me
with this fucking group,
to silence them,

command them to sit (yes, on the grass, it won’t kill you)
and here I am, about to shove thirty-four middle schoolers to their asses with
all of the knowledge I accrued debt for in college and could have just figured out from a book
that told me yeah,

Lincoln’s political objectives were more important to him than emancipation,
election was more important to him than emancipation,
if he could have won the war without liberating the slaves
that’s right, Aiden,

he would have and hey

have y’all heard about the way he censored Southern sympathizing newspapers and threw their
editors on prison ships?

have y’all heard of Andersonville prison?

did y’all know what cannister did? it turned people into red mist I mean how glorious is that
did y’all know that union soldiers raped southern women (most of them black)?

has anyone told y’all yet that John Brown had a white savior complex?

have y’all thought about the fact that we still contest the meaning of the civil war so hard that
someone thought it was appropriate to kill another human being in virginia in 2017 because he
and his white right friends really really really really still think the civil war was about states
rights and not slavery?

I stare back at the kids in their little khakis, swaying in the West Virginia heat.

“Lincoln was a great leader who cared about everyone,” I say
and send them off to lunch.

No More Locked Cars

Give me a river bank instead,
rising because it stormed every day in July
so when the water reaches his ankles he will start to worry,
and at his knees he might want to stop pushing.

One of two things at his hips:
he runs and is almost forgotten except in other blue eyes,
or he plants his feet in the mud and takes my wrists and says
(to love me is to drown here,
today)
because little boys don't know it doesn't have to hurt.

The river rises.

I did not have to be swept away to know that love is not drowning,
to know that I am not really stuck in the West Virginia clay,
but I was. Because nobody told me.
So. I plunged below, and up became down,
and I watched the women flowing with me become algae, only to move
when the current moves. Only to speak to say yes, okay, take what you want but please stop
asking
(finally).
When I reached the shore alive,
I asked why they could not come, too.

The river rises. The water can take him.
I will stand, unbaptized, on the heights. Dry.
Give me a riverbank, rising because it was always a scary time for me,
my mother, the blue goddess,
and a locked car was never a good place to say no.