

SALVAGE

After our basement flooded
I waded through cardboard boxes,
their sodden, drooping bottoms
coming apart in my hands,
and wished I had put them up on cinder blocks.
Boxes of memories, electric cords,
hair-pins, curves;
cassettes, tangled and unwound:
wisp-thin seaweeds of magnetic tape
filled with lost songs;
Baby clothes, rust-soaked and rotting,
each tiny sock, shirt, desiccated-elastic waistband,
a familiar note.
And endless tax receipts that I kept
just in case they came asking for proof of the past.
I threw out a Sega, a shredder,
three Styrofoam gravestones stamped
Rest in Pieces.
And a king-sized mattress, plush and coil,
that had sponged up the first of the flood,
– died protecting the boxes that crouched
behind, as the waters rose.
It took four of us to drag its
bloated corpse out to the street.
Silverfish scattered into city drains.

In the afternoon, I unzipped
a black and green tartan suitcase
I'd salvaged–wedged between an
etching of *Columbus in Chains*
and a rabbit-eared TV.
Somewhere, there's a photograph
of my mother boarding a train,
her graceful ankles bare,
in steep stilettos.
She's smiling at someone.
A porter stands behind her
holding the plaid suitcase in one hand,
a round hat-box under his other arm.

Inside the case were all the photos
I thought I'd lost when we moved, years ago.
Many were ruined – water-blurred and tacky,
stuck together in chunky mille-feuilles rectangles,
their faces and moments washed away,

bled together forever–
left to rot under the floorboards,
the damp, flooding, rat shit,
sad dark unearthednesses.

I laid out my past on the kitchen counter.
Sorted years into piles,
sifted the ingredients of my life:
the exact minute my first son was born.
He is squalling in a doctor's arms,
his umbilical nub dressed like a wound.
Then, he is in my arms in a hospital bed
latching onto my breast, suckling, pig-perfect.
A phone line runs across me, uncoiled,
stretching as far as it can, as I have just done.
I was talking to my mother –
telling her I had just given birth to a son.

And the day I fell in love with my husband.
He is standing next to a white Vespa
in a chambray shirt, hair still damp
from a plunge into the Sargasso Sea.
In the photo he took of *me*, I am naked,
full-frontal, Polykleitan, goddess thighs. Lush.
Wading knee-deep in Bloody Bay.
Afterwards, we had sex in the turquoise water
and he didn't tell me, when he saw the shark.

Around dinner-time, I picked up the phone
and called my eldest son.
He likes to tell me he has always been unhappy,
that life isn't worth living,
that he's going to vote for Trump.
But I remember him running
across flaxen fields, wind lapped,
diving into the tumbling stream,
swimming in the deep end.
Eyes bright. Loving me back.
I wanted to tell him I'd found a decade of
proof that he was wrong, that I was right.
In photo after photo he is laughing, flying,
a splashing light.

His phone rang a few times
before going to voicemail.
And I felt the emptiness of boxed air.
But I knew what he would have said,
if I'd reached him: "How do you know
I'm not crying in all the photos that got destroyed?"

And I would have said: I promise you
I remember. I remember everything.
And you have to believe me
when I tell you it's worth it in the end
so please stay the course.
A thousand moments, some lost, some found,
and joy and sorrow,
and Oh Fucking Christ it just passes,
day after day after day.
And you ask:
How can so much have happened?
How can nothing have happened?
How is it possible to stay afloat?
But we do. We sail, spinnaker's full,
and look back at dry land
from the blue horizon.

In Another World

In another world, eggs would come home to roost
chickens would hang from the rafters like
fat, auburn-feathered bats
and my husband would be in a good mood every morning.

In another world my mother would sing me to sleep.
And cry for me.

In another world I would not furnish rooms
with no one in them but the dream of a future self.
I would sit in my chair every day
and write something good. Or bad.

In another world,
a boat would sink too close to shore.
Villagers would row out
in their stub wooden boats,
collect a cargo of linden saplings
and sacks of millet—plant a tree that
would grow to be a hundred feet high,
whose branches stretched to touch the moon
making a bridge for us.
But in this world,
the trees can only try.

Things the tide has discarded

How many tears will it take
to fill the seas? I stand in bare feet at the break,
let the icy water soak my cuffs.
A crab creeps onto shore,
skittles its way across the sand.
Rough-winged pelicans attack
a swarm of bait fish—relentless, cruel.
Kelp fronds mourn them in the glassy deep.
High above me, a soot tern wings loop the loops.
And I lift my face into the wind.

Sea lice bite and itch at damp piles of jetsam—
a butter clam rotting in its beak-broken shell,
a plastic tampon applicator, sea-glassed pink,
crisp hollow straws and green-black weeds.
Things the tide has discarded
from its tumbling nest, and then reaches for,
reaches for, stretching its wide arms in yearning,
in regret, before turning away.
I wonder about the sea.
Does she miss the things she leaves behind,
abandons, in her wake?

My mother is holding the new baby,
She offers it her thick, ripe breast,
her puckered nipple, warm bechamel milk.
I watch her soothe and sway,
whisper secrets not meant for me.
My heart breaks and splatters on the floor in clots.
Clean that up, she says, and hands me a pyrex bowl.

At night I wait for her to come,
pull my yellow blanket over my head,
hide from the hollow longing.
A streetlight casts tree-shadows on my ceiling.
Black lace branches dance in the wind.
My room is filled with the breath of ghosts.
I listen to the house—
a body turning in a sighing bed,
the long, dark hallway agape.
The silence of floorboards.

I pluck at the black-glass eye of my rabbit.
Pluck at it, rip it off.
Thin threads protrude from a star-shaped hole.

They wave at me, begging for remorse.
But I feel nothing.
I clasp the cold eye in my tiny hand.
When I look through it I can see myself,
my own dark heart, and it makes me stronger,
mutes the dread, the killer waiting in the closet,
the blazing fire, suffocating smoke,
slow-motion fall from a window.
My mother dying.
Fear is a pebbled shore of tiny glass eyes.
Think of a white shirt instead.

My mother does not fear death.
All life is ebb and flow:
earth worms and maggots will feed on her flesh,
a pear tree will grow from her rich soil,
flowers will bloom on a hillside, she says.
She must not know the picture she paints in my head –
she must not know the things she leaves behind.

When I wake in the morning,
the tiny black eye lies on my pillow.
I hold it up and look through the dark glass.
All I see now is refracted light:
warped, dancing, Corinthian.
In the kitchen, my mother is making pancakes.
There's bacon cooking.
The baby is asleep in its cot.
She looks up when I come in.

More

Hours later, I can still smell
his sweet-sour sweat, his traces,
sleep-wrinkled into the pillow;
feel the watered grit, gruel-thin trail
drying on my thigh like jellyfish hair–
bioluminescence washed up on a moonless shore.
And picture how wordlessly he crept around our room,
stabbing for things in the semi-dark,
trying not to wake me.
I could hear the town car lurking,
purring, impatient, outside our house
in the quiet gloam–
that cusp of night and day beyond the window pane.
A few stars struggled to stay alive
in the hushed eggplant sky.
He kissed my forehead, muttered goodbye.
I listened to his footsteps leaving,
his roller-bag strumming our cindery walk,
rattle-plastic ball-bearings on cement.

I watched him from the window.
in my thin cotton nightgown.
He stopped, mid-step, his back to me,
picked up his bag, so careful
not to disturb the neighbors
whispering dreamed things in their lingering r.e.m.
Lifted it three inches off the ground,
extended handle wedged in his armpit,
awkward, shoulder shrugged to ear.
And I thought of the way he would
swing our son when he was young,
and we walked him in the park,
and he begged for more, for more,
for more height, more levity.

I watched as the black car
rounded the corner, away from me.
Watched as the streetlights dimmed off,
one by one, in the grey quiet,
when the air is still filled
with the womb-like promise of a rainy day–
of wet streets, slick against the soft thrum of tires.
That moment before the world wakes,
and you are part of the secret.
When day hasn't yet dawned,
and More is still possible.

Tiger Ghee

I know I'm fucked the second he says salmon.
It will be disappointing, and he'll feel gypped.
That's the thing about ordering smoked salmon
in a coffee shop. But I don't say anything,
because that would be me being bossy
and controlling. I stare at the slats of the café chairs –
the way the heavy sunlight lances their backs,
the way black dirt has ingrained itself
into swirls of wood, shellac wearing off,
slowly chipping away
like a thin coating of brickle.
The chairs would be so much nicer
if they'd left them to weather,
or painted them a saturated color
that would fade gracefully–
lily pad green, or a chalky sea blue.
That's what they'd do in Paris.

He's saying we need to go to a marriage counselor –
too many resentments have built up between us –
he wishes he hadn't tried to cover up his feelings
all these years. Putting on a false veneer
has only hurt us.
I stare at the cast-iron legs of the chairs
and try to figure out
how, exactly, their folding mechanism works –
how they stack together so neatly
when they get put away at night.
It seems counter-intuitive to me
that the seats pull up from the back,
instead of from the front.

He says going to a shrink has made him realize
that it was partly his fault his mother
threw him out of the house
in his twenties. And if that's true,
then maybe his whole narrative is wrong,
maybe all his rage and self-pity are unjustified.
I say 'Yeah.' And let tears drip down
from under my dark sunglasses–
wipe them away with the back of my hand.

When our waitress drops the check
I smile at her and hope she can't see me.
A splodge of apricot jam has fallen off my bread,
onto the side of the table. I watch it sliding down
at the pace of glass.

I want to wipe it away before it lands on my thigh.
But I know he'll feel slighted if
I try to clean it while he's talking.
He takes two twenties out of his wallet,
and I say "Wait."
Because I know that, once the money is there,
she will come back to collect it,
and we will stop talking.
And I know that, if we stop,
it will be the end.

I need to wipe my leaking nose,
but my napkin is a shredded, crumpled heap
of tears and snot and ham and gruyere and
egg and jam. He hasn't touched his napkin.
It's lying there, to the left of his plate,
under a clean knife and teaspoon.
There's a butter dish on the table
between us. A single pat of salted butter
melts in the heat, becoming a warm, oily trickle
on cheap white porcelain; tiger ghee.
I know, then, that the world will eat me alive,
swallow me whole, if I stop running,
stop chasing my tail.
And I wonder how something
that once fit together so perfectly
could just stop fitting.
I'm angry at myself for eating bread and butter—
I can't bear to look at my legs in the mirror
these days, and my back is covered
in a swathe of fat. But heartbreak makes me eat.
I bat my dangly arm and watch
the way it jiggles to a slow stop.
"Wait," I say.
But he puts the money down on the table.