

Single Motherhood

Time sends us far offshore this summer,
catches us watching the morning glory climb,
clipping back those that fall victim
to the unforgiving heat, those eaten through,
those refusing to flower, drawing a line
in the sand that remains absolute.

And, shockingly, in spite of
my inept efforts with water and waiting,
the wine-colored vines double over,
reach up to encircle the makeshift lattice,
curling and climbing with a beauty
that is far more than I deserve.

Thickening as they ascend, they adopt
others, open arms to collect the fragile
ones without an anchor, blowing about
like angel's hair. I tuck them into the stronger
stalks, and the next morning, they have settled
there, already looking up, finely veined leaves
and delicately wrapped wings folded patiently
before the pinnacle performance, the much-needed
revelation of their vibrant bells tolling
this season's hymn of forgiveness
for being only one person, one rock
on unsteady ground, one fragile young girl
trapped in a much older woman's body,
a masquerade of bravado that shatters
when spying two saucer-shaped sets of eyes
in the rearview, gauging me for tears,
signs of breakage, all that causes a doubt
that floods the back seat like a deluge.

Those wide eyes have watched every flower take root,
twine its course up the ladder we built
with our own battered hands,
grow veins of such resiliency, I wish
they curved beneath our own thin skin,
multiplying, reaching, wrapping around each other
so many times, their late August lights
guide us home like a beacon
I once thought I could become.

The Human Condition

My daughter cries herself to sleep,
yearning desperately for something
that has no name, no identifiable
characteristic, no tangible being.
What can I tell her about an ache
I know so well, it has grown
like a membrane with cell structure,
multiplied and manifested, magnificent
in its tenacity and *thereness*.
I wear it as a second skin that has no
molting period. It flakes and peels
but reforms, an incredible feat
of science, a resilience that knows no
bounds. But it has also
wrapped her inside, cradling her
like a seed that has sprouted
and is pushing at the seams,
its blooms so imperial in their violet
shade, crimson veins seep through
where our blood has mingled
and pooled triumphant.
I tell her this and her silence
echoes in a cacophony of familiarity.
She will grow into the emptiness,
the space of a need so great,
it deafens all else. But in its
regeneration, its reality, its residence
in her soul, there will be soil
in which to plant, seeds
that will bear fruit.

This Precious Vessel

You're such a hippie, she screeches,
not disguising her disgust, turning her head
away as my naked reflection flutters
across her full-length mirror, illuminated
by the finest, most delicate fairy lights,
stickers for New York, Los Angeles, Seattle,
anywhere but here,

tiny plastic babies she bought to make earrings,
spectating now like a twisted strip-club audience
or reminder of all those who slipped through,
the hundreds who missed the mark, a wide-eyed girl
with Monosomy 16, a sandy-haired boy
with Down's, cursing me, eyes burning into
the slash-mark burrowed in my belly,
their frozen mouths screaming in the silence:

you were broken, old, exposed for so long
to the chemical wardrobe of the world
and you still bleed, leave us all
in the swirl of sewerage, our half-formed
hearts racing towards you, calling from a universe
of possibility that once twirled in your mind
like a carnival wheel, looping in its insistence

like the night the chain on the swing broke,
snapped like that fist of bone in my spine,
exploded into shards with points like daggers
dancing down my spinal canal,
flirting with the cord, asking it out for a drink,
then sulking when denied, rubbing
against the cilia before finally resting in a pocket of forgiveness
at the base of everything that allows movement,
makes mind to muscle a reality that still exists,

the EMT saying, *Can you feel this? Can you feel this?*
Can you feel this? An eighth of an inch
of a winter midnight flying by the window,
the bellowing of the siren so high-pitched,
when he asks me my full name,

I cannot be 100 percent sure
but ask instead, *Can I still have a baby*
with a broken back? Who is the president?
What month is it? *What is your full name?*

And before, naked, putting makeup on on the floor,
she glances in the doorway. *You have such a beautiful back*
and then the phone call that severs the night,
my arms and legs strapped to the table, my neck
paralyzed in its immobilization shroud, the needle
drilling into my toes like Jesus with a jackhammer,
the nurse running to grab a chair as she slips
down the wall, her head between her knees,
Stay with me, Stay with me, Stay with me.

Years later, the railroad stitchwork on my spine
has softened, so when she recoils at the source
of her birth, I turn to show her the street
I walked the first time, the ladder I used
to pull myself out of the chasm of chaos
before conception, the same winter day
she dug her heels in and took root, a mere shadow
of an idea I pulled inside my body
like oxygen.

Prey

Insatiable and incensed, night tracked us
as it always does, its scope unstable but poised,
crouched on hind legs in the highest branches -
a deadly reconnaissance welcome in its regularity,
but weighted now with the inconceivable notion
that one day soon it may not be, and *then what?*

But the brain, in its impeccable muscle machinery
will not let us dawdle there,
and which one of us would, our mutual ambitions
rushing in a torrent toward the charred horizon
like a hemorrhaging, bestial herd let loose
in a landscape torn from the radar, ripped
free from any recognizable topography
in a Darwinian map of
every man for himself.

Like the persecuted Jews, we waited,
armed with nothing but our instinct to survive,
adrenaline bucking our nervous system
like Narcan, a holding-your-breath intensity
that never relents but instead explodes
in your veins like atomic energy, that same
mushroom cloud smoke camping out
in your lungs, settling into the marrow,
claiming ownership.

We knew only to mask ourselves -
a parade of educated people
knowing nothing - breeding fear
like the sexless mammals we were -
for how could we touch when our own skin
was shedding its poison, toxins shimmering
like halos around each of us, an impossible barrier,
a noose of false security that could strangle
or save, and *which one? And why?*

And in this stagnation, we settled, phones silenced,
our voices choked with smoke, the trees
speaking for us, the birds still alive, the cardinal
bending its head to a puddle, its feathers
the red of the blood still beating beneath our skin,
the color we would see if the world swings its sights
our way, catches us in the crosshairs and bears down,
a reticule so precise in its target precision,
we'd shine brilliantly for the briefest of moments
before the final curtain fell.

Sold As Is

The pencil-sketch measurements -
height in inches and years
mapped out in erasable hash marks
I cannot erase.

The lightswitch plate
hand painted with clouds
mid glide in a sky as blue
as blood beneath the skin.

The window screen with holes
punched through to let bugs in
or the sparrow trapped on the porch
the day we moved in, frantically
throwing itself from wall to wall -
wings thrashing, feathers
tornadoing in fractals of light
bathing the greenhouse
in just enough heat to nourish
new growth.

The Rose of Sharon
bending towards each other
and breeding profusely,
branches entwined like hands -
fingers curved into each other
to create trellises so heavy
with buds, I must tie them back
to keep them off the ground.

The bushes needing tending,
the autumn roses climbing the fence,
the chips of red paint flecking
the back stairs, the cracked wrought-iron
railing whose rust stains the hands,
even the mice whose ravaged bodies
I must dispose of, the cat on proud
parade, blood on the carpet
that will never come out.

The bathtub resists the drain,
the oven has given up the game,
the furnace breathes into
a crystal clear vial that must
be treated like a king
or the sediment will leave
us belly up in the dead
of winter.

And the 2 a.m. shock of a baby
who won't eat, my head lolling
on the couch in the wake
of a violent birth, her tiny body
torn from me like a bone from
its socket, a permanent dislocation
that howls in its emptiness,
a hunger beyond satiation.

A picnic under the table,
the sunlight stretched across the floor
at midday, the sound of little feet
running down the stairs
to find me secretly writing
in a corner of the porch.
The slam of the screen door,
the precipitous drop to the back yard
that makes mowing an impossibility,
the rocks we painted with the words
LOVE HOPE FAITH
in watercolor paint that doesn't
run, the wildflower shoots
the deer have gobbled up, the stones
slick with rain and glistening, the spider webs
catching the first light of dawn

and the sign in the front yard,
jackhammered in, leaving a gaping hole
to be patched afterwards,
a cavern of darkness I no longer possess
or can claim as my own.

