

Bloodlines

A Recent History

Between

Cartoon stars line his forearm
 wedged between brass knuckles and lucky dice
 he had drawn when he was blazed
killing time before he slumped back to his apartment
 empty;
he had sold his bed frame for fifty
his laptop for two-hundred
pawned his sister's gold necklace for ninety

dollar signs on his pillowcase and
a blue drawstring bag he wears on his back
and never takes off—
a mark of unease hidden in view
deafening but muffled by his family's denial
 —or faith

seven years a stranger
and stranger still—
 he can't remember
 his childhood house
with swan-patterned couches
and a sliding glass door opening
to unfenced grass he had imagined
his dog running through
4x4 patio he had wished would stretch
driveway stained with oil that leaked from his first car:
a bronze Honda civic he would total three years later
(and two more after that)

he had his high school graduation party in that house;
neighbors and neighborhood
friends he could look up again but won't
Class of 2002—we did it—

Sometimes he forgets to shower or just doesn't want to
he doesn't speak to his siblings (they're mean)
but sometimes the stigma retreats in increments
and he finds a space (a text or email)
to remind them they have a brother
or to ask his mother why there is no peanut butter in the fridge
and why doesn't he have friends

Trust cracks deep like nervelines severed and buried
in little things:
stealing from his sister's piggy bank and his mother's purse
petty crimes that come with addiction
and aftermath:
cement blocks weigh on his family
threatening to crush the backbone it was founded on

His brain is different now
battered and beaten flesh no longer recognizable
seven years of tar leaching his skin
setting in around 21
as adulthood loomed
pulling him through a gateway to infancy—
he's a kid again but he can't feel it

I can feel it—
walking in ghost shoes shadows
of his steps lingering beneath mine
as I turn the same corner

skirting towards an energy of youth
and vexing to make it telescope into
something pocket-sized that I can grapple
without slipping

I stare at him searching thinking
that there is some version of his old self digging
below the dulling ink that streaks his arms veins
swollen with screaming that haunts my eardrums—
the kind that hardens blood and chips away
at the already rusting heart of a family
pushed over an edge seven years high

withdrawal is hardest when no one is there to listen
or sympathize—

I stagger
caught between pity
and thinking if he was gone
things would be easier

There is no pledge of family among strangers
no gravity to reign me in
secure me to the ground so I am strong enough
to speak to him *speak to him*
my mother told me

but I find no words
just visions of him
living out of his car

I miss him—
preemptively
and in retrograde:
 I miss who he was
but I only remember him through photographs
and stories I wrote when I was twelve
about how he was too tall for his bed
and too big for this town

my father lets him sit on the swing in the backyard sometimes
so he'll sit for hours
sedentary wandering of a soul
trapped inside itself
depressed into a complacency or numbness

or maybe he's afraid (like me)
with fear injected so deeply
we can ignore it

but it stays with us always,
forming lesions that itch
to be slit open

 —I want to tear
his blue drawstring bag and see what's inside
see if he's clean (he's not clean)
and make him stare back at me
before we all give up and fall
spinning into what we fear most:
letting him go

Anchored

I had never questioned
her mental health before—
perhaps there had been a looming threshold,
one she toed but never stepped over (until now).

Strength:

a duty to her children, her home, herself
borne from the loss of her own parents
and her decision to move to this country

Twenty-two, newlywed with a one-year-old in her arms
settling in a one-bedroom apt in Tampa Bay, FL,
a “sunshine state” that didn’t stack up
to years living under the dry, Saharan heat.

She throws the word *depression* around more easily;
we are all adults now,
able—or required—to remove layers
of formality, diffidence, and fear
from our conversations,
a jarring shift from years of whispering, closed doors, and coded Arabic she thought I
didn’t understand.

Her firstborn is still her youngest,
a man-child who has simultaneously drained her
and made her a mother again— a mother
whose strength is holding us all up
at the cost of a piece
of her own mental fabric,
shards of which are now woven in
or swimming in the space around us.

Can he see that he’s been given a gift?
A second chance (and third, fourth, fifth)
to start anew, his debts forgotten,
wiped clean *too clean*—
the kind that’s unsettling,
perfect to the point of suspicion,
seeping with a desperation to be pure, innocent, reborn.

How far does unconditional stretch
before love is no longer recognizable?
Becoming both anchor and burden:
but either way,
holding you down.

Withdrawn

We've never really talked about it (about *him*)
except for that the time we cried together over the phone,
and it was at that moment
that guilt immobilized me:

I had left her
alone in a house whose walls
were thick enough
to keep her wondering
but thin enough to steal her ignorance

From limbo, she retreated:
sheathed in thoughts of homework and friends
and college (her escape)

I wonder if
her reality matches the invented spaces
I filled for myself:
missing pieces from the narrative I strung together
from phone calls, bad feelings, and a few visits home.

She has her escape now,
and for that I am grateful,
even if I had nothing to do with it.
Protection is elusive when
there is too much debris hurdling
toward you
and youth is no longer the safeguard
it once was.
But growing up comes with its own kind of armor—
firm, but that breathes in
tiny fragments of truth

that pierce the heart
but harden the skin.