

Luck of the Draw

“Vertebral fractures of the lumbar spine are usually associated with major trauma.”

*This pact is non-negotiable,
Fate whispers, cigarette perched
in the crook of his lip
like a smoking sjambok
still dripping blood
in miniature crimson pools
across the mahogany gurney
of his desk, to which I am strapped,
throat to toes, as faceless birds peck
my feet for possible flights
of feeling or its absence.*

There are fifty pockmarks per ceiling tile.
I am about to ask whether
this is random or planned like God
scattering stars in the emergency room
but his voice disappears
in a trail of smoke
as night blackens outside
this windowless room
and the body I knew as my own
is gone.

I am flat-backed for ten days.
The fist in my spine has splintered and splayed
when the antique porch swing ripped free
and crushed my folded body
so unfolding becomes a series
of complicated negotiations
in which I play no part -
a petrified piece of driftwood
frozen in a wrong-place-wrong-time
December midnight whose barbed wire
before and after
carves itself down my back like a tattoo
inked deeply when dead drunk.

And then. Harrington rods flown from Ohio
in a harrowing blizzard. Titanium vice clamps
on six bones, the one from the bank
belonging to another ladder in another home
but requisitioned now
for this condemned property.
Great poisoned puddles of Demerol
stagnating in my stomach
while mother, father, sister
donate enough bags of blood
to weaken their vigils
by a bedside of morphined
moth wings and papery veins
pumping mercy-laden
plea bargains for footprints
in the dust.

And one month later, stick-limbed and frail,
upright atop the surgeon's exam table.
*There was another, he says,
with the same fracture: L1 in its entirety,
hanging a tire swing for his daughter
from a tree branch - breastbone down,
completely gone, but yours, that eighth-of-an-inch:*

cilia blown gently as a paintbrush over canvas,
settling at the base of the canal
like stones rubbed smooth by current,
by permanence as pain, by trauma
as a turn-of-the-head moment
caught in a camera's flash
so when developed,
my wild eyes could be anyone's,
blinded momentarily by those same white
diamonds littering the ceiling, the sky,
the space above us hovering with God's breath
or just our own, sighing across
the moonless, gutted field of reason,
or its howling lack,
as our sight must radically adjust.

Communion

Today the snow skidded sideways,
flakes catching in my lashes
so blinking fractaled the slate-stained sky
and the gravel trail tunneled into emptiness

as I searched for the gentle-faced man I saw yesterday,
also alone in the barren winter woods
when our eyes met briefly
and hello hung in a frozen cloud of breath

the way it did in the busy bustling hallway
when your defeated face found mine,
your expression naked, pain laid bare
like a branch ripped from its trunk, another marriage -

another failed attempt. You were small then,
a burdened boy, and I leaned toward you,
openly, desperately, my own shattered vows
old news, a lone hawk at midday

caught in an open-winged squall. For years, you
remained stoic as a stone I could not overturn,
though you'd scatter bread crumbs, bird seed,
a hand on the arm with such heat,

the burn blistered before scabbing over
as you burrowed beneath the ice
and I sunk you from consciousness
with the steel will of an anchored heart.

And now, as I look for a man I do not know,
who does not come, the gravel beneath my feet
whispers of your leafless limbs that never bent to me
in a communion of silence, of snow, of afternoon

unearthing itself over and over again for me -
only for me.

The Betrayal

The man across the church basement radiates unease,
 eyes dancing a chaotic tempo
as she moves through the crowd toward him,
 her hands held out like an offering of abundance

she so clearly lacks. His body shrinks from her
 and he cannot meet her gaze, desperate as it is
with unmasked hunger, need naked as a newborn
 screaming into a motherless universe.

Her willow arms bend to him, and when he cringes,
 all inside me falls to ash, her upturned palms
electric as the porch lights the night I could not reach you -
 calling and calling to the same blind click of voicemail

as I drove to the apartment we once shared,
 ran up the stairs to find the door wide open,
windows ablaze with lamp light, TV on, my frantic messages
 blinking red on a machine that would betray me.

And when I finally found you downstairs in your rental,
 a single place setting before you and the renter
leaning over your shoulder in a deep-dipping blouse,
 spooning some richly fragrant meat onto your plate,

I emptied out on the front stairs, leaves blowing about
 the closed windows as your eyes brushed over me,
only a thin branch knocked loose in the wind
 and you bent to your food, a wolf to fresh kill,

while the freshly-sober woman, rooted in the center of the room
 watches as he fades through the propped door into darkness
and the crowd closes around her, swallowing her supplication,
 erasing her from the scene as if she was never there at all.

In Memoriam for a Chronic Pain Sufferer

I was lying in a bed:

A creature void of form

Been so afraid of everything

I need a chance to be reborn.

- War on Drugs, *I Don't Live Here Anymore*

I offer what I can, not what I know.
Not the hollowed-out oak out front,
not November wind ripping through threadbare bones.
Instead I watch the solitary monarch lift
from the chokecherry aflame at the back fence
on a migratory flight from which
she will never return.

You lived in spite of what you carried,
shouldering a yoke of pain known to few,
limping in and out of shadowy streetlights,
the smoke of fogged mirrors never catching you,
not really.

Alone you braced your body against the world,
perched crooked-legged on the head of a pin,
a deformed ballerina on point, a single toe
the tether that harnessed your skewed gravity.

Now you're gone, and I wear your dusty shroud
to this silent feast of souls. No one can stomach a bite.
We are all choking on your brilliant name howling through the air.
And ever true to you, I utter not a sound
of the concentration it took to balance that way day after day.

Oh, who would have believed the price of stowed pain,
the body a roadmap of trauma, a rag soaked in gasoline,
a plastic bag caught in a highway's gust of wind, and
me, nothing more than that finely-veined black piping on your wings,
the only one who knew you as you were -

a vessel badly beaten, torn by storm and stitched together
by sloppy hands, so for so many years, you music-box spun
and spun, plastic smile on repeat for each go-around,
until the windup key could finally take no more
and you simply stepped off.

Sunset, a Tribute

for JJ Gillesheimer

January's dusk lays its heavy hand
inside the car, my fingers wrapped
in my daughter's finely-veined palm
as she looks out the closed window
at the slate-draped sky and says nothing
about things with no possible explanation.

The streets are ice-slicked and we move without speaking,
tires catching on solid puddles and piles
of sand-encrusted gravel, the sun brushing
fuschia strokes across a flat-backed sky
darkening itself into a black sheet.

Bare tree branches bend against the weight
of coming night, and as the light falls, it catches
for a moment in the leafless boughs,
stakes the sky in an unmistakable splash
of blood red day dipping down
to meet us where we are.

She reaches for her phone
and I pull into an empty field
to circle around so she can roll the glass down
and snap the rose's final blush
on this winter's too-cruel canvas.

After, we park in a crowded lot
where men direct traffic with flashing wands,
and I walk with her hand in mine, through
a door much heavier than it should be into a room
filled with people and a satin-lined box for a boy
her age, his body quiet as a streetlight before dawn,
visiting one last time,

and later, when I find the photo taped to the wall beside her bed,
that brief etching of vermilion sun blanketing
the branches and frozen parking lot beneath,
her opened car window and bitter gust of wind
lifting the hair off her neck
as she captures a glimpse of such transient beauty,

I reach over her as she sleeps to touch the light in the picture,
its curve rich in mauve and crimson flames,
so when I pull my hand away, there is heat there,
my fingers thick with the coral dust of day's reckoning
before the dark
and it is suddenly so clear:
we did not attend his visitation tonight -

he attended ours.