

Clearfelling

Submission for Sixfold Poetry Contest

Womanhood: An Education

Fear, like a falsehood, hooded burlap, jute jostling against ears;
and when I can't hear my escape from this old world to new,
draped rough around winter shoulders, I call to you.

A whoop and roar or quietness I work to snub out completely.
Dear self, don't try to disentangle the nest I've been working—
the cattail fluff and dry leaves, whatever I could get my nails on:

The elevator doors closing while my child knee bled,
flights of stairs clamored and climbed;
 we are not yet divine:
 the shaking plane wings and drunk pilot
I couldn't see; my mother wheezing in another late
night room of waiting rainbows; strange vegetables;
 sabulous lies, sinking into fossilized shorelines;
 a fogged breath, being eaten by my father's legacy;
this lunacy; the only one not picked up
from school on snow days; loose dogs, snarling;
 brain parasites; warnings: tornados; a stranger at my door;
 my tabby kittens lost; I am alone; a teacher frowning;
 a friend in a tule dress crying; a memory floating,
 melting ice beneath weak feet;
 youth fading like the stories
 I used to write in pencil, those too, floppy, disappearing;
 my words, written
or not; realizing I am not held by any other and cannot hold any thing.
 And death, surely.

Fear, like a truth, pitters and patters in this ravine of shoulders;
a track for the train to thunder down, shuddering while my sore mouth tries muttering,
I have just one light and it flickers.

Take me as I am, take me as I come,
I will love you long,
 my fear digging in beside yours, waves whet with the curious
moon, rising
and setting, again.

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The loggers start when the stars collapse
into their canopy;
a bruised sky spins through colors in notches
as axels round the hairpin below the cabin.
Aloft, I pretend to sleep.

They say the harvest is healthy for men
and their lunch pails—
men who tug at the airhorn
because a woman shares the road
and in her morning smallness moves aside—
men who throw bones out an unseen window
watching if my dog salivates.

She hides one in her rueful mouth
not knowing that for which she hungers.

Remember that fleshy vulnerability?
Seeded some moonstung
hour, howled in by a cutting wind, heedless and headless?
It is sprawled now naked in the clearcut.
Time and the turning of megrim days,
too many midnights caught up to my mind's shrubbery,
idolatry of flesh, of one happiness licking another
in the mudmoist soil,
free in the forest, our once homeland,
free to flee,
free to call destruction regeneration—
all these named and unnamed swings
brought it to pieces.

Strangers see its skeletal shadows
from the opposite shore,
wildcats pounce upon the innards
and stalk what remains of its splintered ghost.

This poem yet another sapling
aging too quickly,
just a junk tree in the end,
there one moment then gone,
replaced and repressed; I strain to see what's left growing hillside,
somewhere that's supposed to look natural
to the untrained eye, that's supposed

to spurt biodiversity from a barren floor.

I thought I made a new friend
with a young lumberjack.
He yesterday confessed a dream.
"A good one?" my words ventured.
"More than good," he said. A woodshed
for his pleasure, as if that's the natural order
of our small knowing: the inevitability
of our machinery, as if the scarred slopes
don't remember a thing.

Across the Lake

The first ring of trees—
cottonwood, skinny trunked,
leaves spotted like the underside of a dying monarch,
watch the clouds creep over a lonely lake.

The fire is tumbling tonight as the light dips down in strips
then dives and drowns, strangely.
If I said this elbow of woods was unholy
would you believe me?
If owls start tumbling from high branches
and lily pads leak from carp stomachs,
would you then begin to believe me?

The fire is churning tonight,
spitting out faces onto the soot-black glass,
but none yours, none mine.
My eyes scale the second ring of trees, unchanged
emerald, the tallest testaments, far from our dusty window,
and I imagine that sinking rowboat full of my body
in pieces:

 like every fallen leaf within me,
at rest in all its parts, so beautifully crumpled:
 my eyelids
 to nostrils
 to teeth to collarbone,
 my nipples
 to trunk
 to pelvis to knees
 to long leg hair
 to hallux

not being held but seen by another.

It's inevitable—the way the sky slinks back into itself, until slate,
until haloed by watermarks;

 who we used to be.

Swamp Queen Deluxe

The pocket of Cajuns dancing
in Louisiana backwater, stewing fish heads, are the sons of sons of daughters
of Acadians who were run out of their wildwoods because they chose not to fight.

Sharpen gator bones,
'cause that man calls me catawampus. I'm a mermaid, swamp queen deluxe,
chasing back with these clapperclaws as you steer my sisters and me into the cypresses,

but we cannot seek cool refuge,
or rest, breasts up, under a cathedral of mosses. There is no reprieve
from sunstroke; woman, you're an outsider, but I'm an outsider too: admire us,

as you sometimes do—float our way
and in the same day fear and revere Her. Our guttural growls put that gris gris down deep, lacing
black danger. That pin has been in my mouth since momma's

waterwomb. Survival is stitching an arm
before they can bite out the thread. Come sundown, we make camp. The pot froths over and
eyeballs spill and stain marching, shiny shoes. Do not paddle here

again to make love to miry shadows.
We now swing with a choir of gowned ghosts. Pauve ti bete, how many times can creatures
drown and be resurrected? Clutch my molar-marked hand.

Revolver

The newly cut grass kisses tops of feet, itches the inches.

Twenty-one weeks hasn't seen your body so squarely
across from mine, that body next to the other,
like an inevitability, like the way night dips

her golden breasts into the mouth of day—twenty-one
weeks since you had stayed, lingered long in the doorway
before lounging on a faded futon, timer readied.

Ten tiny minutes: you waved me over,
pulled me atop, animal apex,
curls tempting cheekbones, falling;
eager breath exchanging,
belonging to no one, lips ascending
to their gathering place—meadow
of lupine and paintbrush,
where pure purple and red, rapt,
blended into brushfire haze.
That first time, true instead of teasing,
I like your touch. Then those other words,
long rooted, easily exposed—
a scoop away from the surface.

Here, I shoot a look at your shoes, *For running away*, I joke
clumsily. You stare down the legs of this overgrown season,
even after our small patch has grown ugly and wild,

even now, when the struggle to share this verboten space
searches for the smoothest tip of conversation.

Guns it is, why not?

Tell me about your rifle, its recoil,
the gravel lot where you could put a pistol
in my starved, shaking hand, the hand
I swirled between thighs,
careful not to touch the full betrayal.

A shotgun would be too much punch,
kickback, bloody my unlocked mouth,
once whining for air as you slithered
down fragrant folds. We whisper
to that moment, now aged fantasy, and O'
how I think of it, and you, and a lifted

lemon dress fluttering against a fencepost,
your long torso pressed into my back,
the bullets in your pocket indenting
stippled skin. I feel everything, dear,
before I feel nothing.

Once, you chased after a face pink and peaked,
but we've come to a standstill, straight, small speak,
knowing the buzzer has blared *times up* over and again.

Take me to grass grown from gunpowder, flailing tin cans,
an echo that comes back only to sever the silence,
half-cocked sorrys, wet toothed smiles glittering,
a steady touch, a peace offering,
sulfurous and dusty,
eyes rolled shut, then open—
all things dangerous if not deadly.