

Consequences

A Balancing Act

Mostly, we don't want to be the cause
of harm and destruction.
But what do you do when walking
around the neighborhood
means you could be committing
mass murder in mere minutes?

Every time I look down
I notice a shiny black beetle
searching for a meal,
a worm wriggling in desperation
for the moisture of the soil,
or a roly poly scurrying across my path.

I adjust my step to make sure
my foot doesn't crush that creature,
ending that life.

I want to look up,
take in the rich colors of the trees around me,
providing the oxygen I breathe,
appreciate the billowy clouds
giving gentle shelter from the sun,
or the distant horizon
offering me perspective
and allowing my eyes to rest.

My walks have become a balancing act,
my eyes gazing up from time to time
to accept what I'm being given,
then quickly shifting back down
to make sure I'm not taking.

Stars and Stripes

Keys and ID clatter in the bin,
looming metal detector.
Will today's guards
be friendly or resentful?

Heavy doors buzz,
razor wire-topped pathways
snake between buildings.

Guards suggest
we "make America
great again." Ignore how
people in jail still
have rights, are still humans.

It's the shoes. Shower shoes?
Thin terra cotta-colored plastic sandals
barely holding onto, protecting those feet.
A strong signal these men are unworthy.

We see stars in their eyes
as the registration form in front of them
allows them to imagine voting
for the first time.

Then the stars fade,
as much as the overwashed
thick stripes on their shirts.

Back out to face the wall,
arms up, legs spread,
brace for the unwelcome hands.
Then back into the cells.

We all wait for old glory to save us.
Save us from this man with scars on his face
running almost as deep as the ones on his heart.

Or that man whose injured hand shakes
as he signs his name
on the registration form.

Who will save us from ourselves,
forgive us for what we have done?

What the Mind Creates

For years after that night,
my pulse raged,
my stomach clenched
at the sound of anything
moving outside my window.
I held in my breath
fearing an exhale would reveal me.

I saw them looming
in my doorway.
A man with a knife,
a man with a gun,
a man in a mask.
Men.

The moonlight
glared off their weapons,
showing me where
I would soon see my blood.

But hadn't I created them?
My mind was cruel like that.

She asked if my mind
couldn't help but see them,
could it change
which way they faced?

The men are still here,
but now they stand
at the corners of my room
facing out.

Their weapons sparkle
in confidence.

I am protected.

I Don't Think About Them

I don't think about the kids I gave up
except when my disease flares,
the disease I developed from the extreme stress
of the short time I was a parent

Except every time another friend of mine has a baby
and I'm terrified about the daily horrors
they're gleefully signing up for,
I don't know how to separate my experience
from what they envision parenting to be

My mind goes back to scrubbing the reeking accidents
out of the carpet from the youngest,
patching the holes in the walls
from the furniture thrown by the oldest,
the excruciating hours of screaming tantrums
until their throats were too raw to speak
of the gaping wounds of their histories,
what they've seen and what they had no choice
to do for survival

I don't think about the kids I gave up
except when I see the swirls of pink Sharpie marker
that never came out

Except when I smell hot Cheetos and my stomach turns,
thinking of that big fight with the red powder-stained fingers
smearing the white wall
while I cleaned up the snack-speckled puke off the floor

Except when I hear a small child scream
and my heart races
while I scan for an exit,
my flight instinct kicking in

Except when I think of their parents
in and out of prison,
gutted by their separation from their babies,

this family being just one example
of the collateral damage
of the war on drugs

Except every time I see other kids we've let down
and left behind,
along with their parents,
no matter what they've done

What about what we've done to them?
How we failed them

I don't think about the kids I gave up
except when I do

Control

I feel the sharp sting of recognition
The total emptiness twisting through my body

This boulder on top of me
Is not budging
My cries for help --a hollow echo
Followed by a screeching silence

My mind scrambles for the memories
Of when I had it
When I held it gently in my palms
Caressing, reveling in the security

But the image is a mirage
It was never there to begin with
And this clarity releases the pressure

My body still broken
Smothered in fear
But floating now
Letting go of my own weight
My anchor
Embracing the chaos of the unknown