

Lioness

When my man stood in the morning kitchen
His shadow cast an exact likeness.
Brown flecked yellow linoleum, his soot profile.
Not a husband, round forehead, swollen lips, wandering eye.

In 1950, they call him Negro, they call me Jewess.
If he knew what I was carrying, would he have
sat at my table nine months?
A Jewess and a Negress both carry nine months.
Would anyone believe that in 1950?
Yes, a woman with child knows the turn of a day.

A Jew has nowhere to go on Sunday morning.
My man ducked his hard head out the door a June Sunday.
In January the shadows are short.
There were no shadows in the room when we glimpsed the crown.
I took her from them, we locked eyes.
Already familiar her heart smell.
I could have licked her clean.

On berries, squashes, ripe bananas, milk bottles with honey she grows.
There is heat on her belly when I put my lips there.
There is a sun inside.
I know how to calm a tidal wave.
I can put a hurricane down for a nap.

In 1954 my kitchen is set for a party.
All of our guests bring sunflowers.
We have honey cake, four beeswax candles.
All around I hear the buzzing of a hive.
I lean down to peer into her eyes.
They are happily distracted.
“Mommy, look at me next to you.”
I scoop her up and our shadow is an unrecognizable animal.

At night in my clean house when I try to think,
the street noise through the window distracts me.
Out there the language hasn't changed,
but through a mere pane of glass it loses all meaning.
I step inside her room.
Her mane on the pillow thrills me.
Her eyelids gently lowered over a dream.
Lashes brush the night air.
I bend my mouth to her ear and carefully, “Lioness.”
Her mouth curves into a tender smile at the sight of herself.

The Diviner

When you cry
the stars skitter off the night's face
and I brace my arms
To keep the cloth on the table.

Then I understand
how a mere wall of stone
held back the crusaders
at the shore of Rhodes.

A salmon can press
through two hundred pounds of river
upstream, to its birthplace, lay eggs
like thousands of pin-pricks.

A man with eyes closed
guided by a forked branch
can dig a half mile, underground, with a shovel
can draw water for a heard of sheep, laying down.

I can fathom this strength
I remember you before you had cried.

The Eighties Were Different

If your best friend was a child actress, you went on auditions with her.

And if you were sitting in a waiting room, and fourteen, you had a chance to audition too.

Once I almost got a Doritos spot

because my teeth were better than hers.

I bit into six Doritos for the camera

and I never felt more semitic.

But her everything else was better than mine, and neither of us got it.

When she landed a role on Charles in Charge, I spent the week on set with her.

The cast and crew treated us both like new friends.

The Eighties were more innocent, even when they were so gritty.

I asked Ricky Shroder what he wanted for his birthday.

He told me a box of condoms.

At the tender age of fifteen she lost her virginity to an overweight boy in the bedroom of a party.

She regretted it within minutes.

It was my brilliant idea that we tell him she was a prostitute and that he owed her a hundred bucks.

We both liked this idea.

We did it, but he didn't pay.