

Generations

Possibilities

ONE

The moths at the night window are drumming
like messages from dreams

*the prisoner in his cell, locked in his cell,
galloping away into the locked dawn.
the square kite in the calligraphic blue
dreaming of a second kite, falling to earth.
a willful child without crayons
ripping to flaming shreds the white paper.
parakeets in separate cages
chattering of the mesquite-green winter.
the father of the boy with his birthday toy gun—
he an adult because he knows how to kill
the rust bird of empty tins
singing to the streets' orphans
from its landfill nest.*

It is possible I don't believe
in a sun to illuminate caves
while my homeland lives in darkness.

TWO

Millions of suns buried in caves
—not at all like diamonds
but stars, stars in the millions.

*bearded smoke, bearded sky,
the bearded sky of my childhood*

My friend's great-uncle, who had collected
feathers all his life, let them drop
one by one, colorless and spinning,
into his death's day's dawn,
and then he came down from the flat roof
to the courtyard well and drew water.

*everything dancing, the sun westering,
bits of straw spinning in a puddle*

*—make my poems a clean rag
to wash with—wash here, wash there*

And, Wife, bring me sweet jasmine tea.

Just now the sparrow was singing a grandmother song:

“Shall we eat, or shall we save the seeds?”

Wife, tell me again about the crisp papadams
and the succulent nan, sold on Siddhapur Street,
the spicy crackle and the golden crumbs.

Remind me that I was always a mustard
seed to my mother, a fat envelope
with many winged-stamps to my father,
my father who whittled crutches out of words.

*Mama’s dead, and someone else
is picking the sweet jasmine leaves
to spread out drying in the courtyard*

Saying Kaddish

My father died alone.

The week before, I said goodbye and sang to him:

*Eternal Father, strong to save,
whose arm has bound the restless wave ...
O Hear us when we cry to Thee
for those in peril on the sea.*

He used to sing to me, maybe Glenn Miller or Gershwin,
at bedtime in another life shared and lost.

Sometimes he made up stories:

Jimminy Grasshopper who spat tobacco juice
through the gap in his front teeth.

Every night in the dark, he counted slow as a metronome

twenty-three

twenty-four

always announcing first how far, how high he'd count

thirty-seven

thirty-eight

so I would fall asleep.

In the nursing home, Dad
had no pleasures. Couldn't
read, didn't eat. He hurt
everywhere.

He burned holes in blankets,
and they rationed his cigarettes.

Magnified and sanctified be God's great name ...

My father, once a dark haired altar boy in white surplice,
never missed a step in the priest's light dance
from sacristy to altar to communion rail. I think of that often.

The celebrant's hand with the wafer, our eager tongue:

The bread of Life.

How it has no taste of its own, how even crumbs are to be consumed,
the celebrant's finger tip collecting them on the silver plate
afterward, after us.

... in the world which He created according to his will.

Then the wine, real wine pricking the top of our mouth.

As if it may break, the priest slowly turns
our common cup, wiping the edge with a white linen napkin.

Do this in remembrance of Me.

The purple-red seeps up the threads, undoing the starch,
a permanent stain, and it spreads along the hem.

May the great name of the Holy One be praised to all eternity.

In the nursing home, my father's face became
a pharaoh's face, tight skin over high bones,
eye sockets deep like cups.

"Are you my daughter?"

In one of mine, I could take his whole hand
that used to seem so broad.

For the dead, for the war dead, he sang:

*O Holy Spirit, who did brood
upon the chaos wild and rude ...*

*O Hear us when we cry to Thee
for those in peril on the sea.*

Into black water--the ship steadying on the black water--
bodies slid, one by one, souls commended to the deep,
men he commanded and lost.

fifty-nine

sixty

sixty-one

Hallowed and honored,

extolled and exalted,

adored and acclaimed

be the great name of our God,

though He is above the praises, hymns,

and songs of adoration men can utter.

As a Gentile, I do not lay on phylacteries.

Yet my body wears reminders of my earthly father--
the whorl of hair at my nape, the leaning of my teeth,
and I have torn the garments over my heart.

I will not mend the rip though my father's shroud
turns spider web thin. I say Kaddish for him,

I say it over and over

eighty-six

eighty-seven
for him, for myself. For us all.
*May He who ordains harmony in the universe
grant abundant peace and life to us ...*
one hundred
Let us say Amen.

Traces
for J. M. McN.

The long chain of vertebrae
hung over the door, arcing higher
than our rooftop, longer than our driveway,
and my sister and I pretended
it could catch us and gnash
and shred our bones,
and then it would thud across the marble floors
and out the museum doors
to the duck pond. Maybe it would swallow them
whole with its colorless lips gooey with feathers and blood,
and then, like a lake monster, it would submerge
to terrorize the city park.

This spring, wrens, pushing loud *cheery cheery*
out of tiny brown chests, couldn't be lured
to nest again in the tool shed. On the lawn
far from their hatchlings, to fool predators,
they dropped half shells that fit
over my little finger. Shells so thin
their opaque curve has no more
layers of cells than a leaf--than the perfectly
serrated and veined fossilized leaf
that used to rattle in a pasteboard box
of college books--the ones they offered me a dollar for
or sixty cents, the books I stashed in another layer
between so many others.

We're moving again. Time
to sort the odd drawers and cupboards,
weed out all the stuff we've lugged around. Time
has curled labels off these boxes,
retrieved from our parents' attics:
Principles of Geology. Vingt Lectures Faciles.
Origins of Language. Notebooks with squashed silver
spiral holding pages of washed-out pencil. Snapshots
of roommates hunched over dark desks
or mugging at our phantom future.

And no names, just scrawled dates.
A mind is so vain of its ability to hold fast.
Did I ever really study German?
These flashcards of verb forms,
riffing in my fingers, bring only
the face of the handsome teaching assistant,
MWF, two to two-fifty.

They say in sixty years paleontologists,
who used to cross desert sand
and mountain scree with pick and pail,
will deal with curators, not customs agents,
will dig through basements and storage barns,
not mesas and hills where memory is first hand.

But now in gift shops, children cuddle plush
Tyrannosaurus Rexes and Triceratopses,
and little boys demand photographs of themselves,
cross-legged in the limestone memory
of heavy-footed Sauropods' dinner-time stroll.
Next to displays skimming through evolution
(from Pterosaur to Archaeopteryx to cormorant)
the visitors' center plays a tape
of probable dinosaur song on PVC pipe,
bent to follow remains of Corythosaur skulls.
The creator's inhalations are audible
between blasts as colossal as a foghorn,
as lasting as echoes stomping across stone floors
or hollow slams reverberating in some giant hall,
sounding like that old boggy-man Brachiosaur
that swayed over the museum door and
preyed on us silly girls,
sounding nothing like wrens,
the light and cheery wrens that refuse
to remember their last year's nest.

5 O'clock at the Lake

The first step in ballet slippers.
The first rung of the high diving board's ladder.
The way the child learns to count
on her fingers and then
grows up an engineer.

In the Arctic mewling puppies are born onto the ice.

After *bonjour* comes a universe
mirrored infinitely in every stranger.
A single egg becomes the king's breakfast
or a plain white farmyard hen.
The first scribble on the paper
opens all the pages ever bound
into a book, and it is the eyes
of others that enliven those leaps—
*moon-crisp shadows in the newly planted garden and
the half-remembered chapel and its grimy painting
of saint and skull and lion and
that surprise of a sparrow dead in the empty feeder*
—and others' ears that want the measure of meaning.

And now the silence between us
as the wind over the lake rocks the car.
But truth commands a farther look:
the night of conceiving a gifted future;
that long, long sliding of the planet into ice;
the first ecstatic vision of angels promising paradise.

Now logic demands the painful unwinding
of two lives: that unspoken knowing
of something less solid within the wind
whipping the lake, pushing all the white geese
into one far bay, requiring words
between us, silent and cold in your car.

Imagine you're on the hotel balcony

—*surprise depends on focus.*

Examine

the azaleas blooming red below you. Think about the postcard you're writing and the sea and clouds lacing the horizon—that's when the left-field surprise of quake and giant wave grabs you, squeezes your heart. Now imagine someone beside you says, "Quick—look at that calm epicenter because it's about to disappear in noise and vertigo." You're ready, alert to all possibilities with your attention tuned and primed. Nothing can sneak up on you now unless it's the half-finished postcard that bursts into flame under the pen you've put down on the tiny table of this balcony so that you can study that middle distance, that doomed and too-close scene. Avoid surprise by spreading out your sight and hearing widely all around you, and concentrate on smoothing your attention evenly into the space you breathe. Keep an even plaster of thought (so to speak) on the walls of the world where cracks and nail holes, unattended, threaten to expose the unwelcome. And now as you wait here in this metal coffin for the CAT scan to finish, think away all surprises, think how thinking can protect you from these secrets, still embryonic in the next hour's chance, from tomorrow's diagnosis.