

Painted Chickens

Twenty years ago  
I received a birthday gift  
from a close college buddy/sometime lover  
(*what on earth were we thinking?*).

Back then  
the past was already in the past  
and twenty-four was already not young.  
He gave me a coffee mug covered in chickens,

yes, painted chickens –

three of them posed mural-style around the outside–  
one on the left facing right, one on the right facing left  
and one in the middle facing forward–  
and one on the bottom  
that looks like an index finger with an eye,  
a comb, a beak and a wattle.

How, I can't fathom, but my friend knew  
that those orange-and-red-bodied, expressionistic chickens  
would be a boat-floater for me.

The one time I had slept with him  
had been an epic shipwreck,

followed by a silent drive to the airport;  
we ate pancakes on the way  
and drank coffee while I stifled sobs of regret and humiliation,  
averting my eyes from the  
helpless horror in his.  
I then flew off bewildered, drowning,  
into the wild blue sky.

His southern gentlemanly charms  
still somehow served for years to come to allure;  
he kept his promise to write  
and took pains to catalogue for me the  
details of his worldly escapades  
and various, accompanying sexual conquests,  
making sure to emphasize how they were all entirely different from me

in the ways in which they were hot for him,  
so as to prove those trysts' relative rightness.

Then, for my birthday, came,  
unexplainably gratifyingly,  
the chicken cup.

The cup burned hot  
even before I ever filled it  
and drank  
from my static and impossibly happy  
aphrodisiac chickens  
in their vibrant, feathered cloaks of  
chili-pepper red, royal purple, verdant green,  
blushing like lovers on a Grecian urn,  
clucking, urgent,  
with dilated pupils, unblinking  
under yellow stars in an indigo sky.

*Why?*

My southern gent, now so long ago flown  
from this callous coop,  
wooded another and had his own brood,  
and so, in due course, did I,  
but the mug—  
no worse for wear—

remains

a spectacular feature—  
like a bright birthday piñata (with its promise of sweet reward)—  
of my sacred morning ritual.

These chickens,  
still ecstatically surprised,  
letting out unabashed, open-beaked caterwauls,  
adorn my most aged and prized  
coffee mug.

This vessel, perfectly-sized,  
cups its contents so lovingly, fiercely,  
like an egg  
enveloping its cache of gold,

as I take privileged sips.

The big chicken on the left  
might actually be  
a rooster

and that one on the bottom,  
a middle finger.

The Artifice of Death  
*In Memory of My Beloved Friend, JPM*

Before you came to my dreams,  
I had believed your self-hatred  
precluded love.  
Had you actually known in life  
that you could still create bonds  
from the beyond?

The brief words you left behind  
in the blackness of a vacuum  
were vengeful, frozen reminders  
that everyone and everything  
had failed you.

You took your sun from the world  
and returned to the ancestral night,  
where all artifacts of mortality,  
like splintered clay idols,  
are pieced together from the dawn of time  
and placed carefully on exhibit.  
The Curator catalogues young deaths like yours  
among those who died cynical and regretful in old age.

Did you suppose you'd be exempt  
from an eternity of the sorrow  
you left for those you'd claimed to love?  
Did you somehow know that I  
would preserve your warmth  
in the ornate museum of my dreams?

How did you know where to find me, waiting  
for you in the shadows of dusk?  
I waited in an endless gallery,  
lost within marble halls, gilding and  
minute faces carved into tiny,  
polished soapstone figurines.

Among the lapis lazuli  
likenesses of Osiris and Anubis, I waited,  
grew tired, and rested my head  
against a marble portico  
of a room that led to forgotten souls

drifting in everlasting twilight.

Would my deliberate remembering  
resurrect a vestige of you  
from the static crypt?

You finally came to me  
as the evening sun  
filtering in through a skylight,  
and gently brushed my cheek as I dozed.  
That warm gesture was the same,  
entirely benevolent force  
which I had once known as *you* in life.

It was you who had once rendered  
out of the vague concept of me  
a solid silhouette  
that still cuts a dry island  
into the murky ocean of living death  
and stands against the firmament,  
a testament.

Your kiss had gifted me  
a quickening, a start, a far-off end,  
a will, an enthusiasm to live,  
a reassurance that every new  
dawning is possible, because *I know*  
you are the same, boundless heart  
that once evinced such light.

Though I still believe when you left  
you were resolved to your semblances of  
self-loathing and violent whim,  
I won't presume to condemn  
the rent apart, toppled effigy  
of who you once were to me  
and who you became  
lying in slabs;  
blame doesn't mend brokenness—

In forgiveness, death becomes artifice.  
In my dreams, these symbols of non-life  
are subsumed by time and  
life and death become interchangeable.  
Aren't we all relics to be exhumed  
and polished to flawlessness?

Though I conjure  
these burnished, ghostly cyphers of your being,  
they are no less solid, no less substantial,  
than my own, chiseled breath;

you are surely no less precious to me  
sequestered now  
behind protective glass.

I Am Alabaster

I am alabaster, polished, translucent—  
and I am ashes, tamped in hollows,  
crushed between the breath of the living and the souls of the dead.  
No one will tell me if I will survive.

As the blush of dawn unfurls over dunes  
and seagulls soar on ocean thermals,  
I break apart and scatter in the wind,  
losing the border where everything else ends  
and I begin.

Lighter than air, a cloud of me rises up  
to speak to the hawk perched on a streetlamp  
and tells her I am fine, because I don't know how to talk  
about not being fine—  
besides, I am flying...

I want to be the best version of myself,  
the beautiful one,  
carved in lucent crystal and buffed to a shine,  
so that my face will reflect your eyes,  
which will be mine, crying,  
because you have recognized the truth of me.

Specters of what was and what is  
are ground into fine, dark cinders  
amassing as shadows  
beneath my alabaster feet,

while my crimson heart  
yet thrums  
with faith                      in what will be.

If I Saw Aidan Turner Walking Down the Street...

If I saw Aidan Turner walking down the street,  
I would not stop to contemplate the earth beneath...

I would not for a second consider that I  
was already in junior high when he was born,

or that my own daughter is now the age I was  
when that brand new star-to-be emerged from the womb,

replete with a tuft of black curls, which I can't help  
but to surmise. My daughter views him in his full

adult glory—deep voice, dark eyes, just enough scruff  
to pass as a vampire or Middle Earth heart-throb,

cloaked in black leather and adorable Irish  
cadences wrapped about him like a lucky cloud.

My daughter is certain that she could reach him first—  
fully trusting in her youthful abilities,

and in my usual habit to step aside  
in favor of promoting her self-assurance.

I have not been tough enough on her in some ways—  
for instance, I have not gone for a hard tackle,

stripping her of a ball at foot in one quick breath,  
nor have I generally used my advantage

of momentum in everyday foot-races:  
usually, I would feign a fall to foster

her sense of imperviousness to ill fortune;  
in most cases, I would give her a head-start, but

if I saw Aidan Turner walking down the street,  
I would at once utterly forget her youthful



sighs, her earnest blushing, her sweet, redolent gaze  
transfixed in goofy stupefaction, innocent

through and through—the beauty of watching her feel  
herself becoming a woman (through watching him

make love to cameras in a perfect balance  
of feigned humility and stunning sex-appeal)

would extinguish in less than a blink of an eye.  
The frightful scene that would ensue would estrange us,

my daughter and me, for a lifetime and a day—  
such would be the nature of the abject horror

my actions would exact upon her fragile mien:  
she would learn for certain that determination

does, in fact, pay handsomely... As for the handsome  
Aidan Turner, hypothetically spotted

strutting blithely down the street by the likes of me—  
the assault would surely mark a milestone for him.