

Optative Dreaming and Other Poems

Optative Dreaming

Oh that I may become a corpse, my child, instead of you!
—Euripides, *Hippolytus*

Who invented the wish,
the desire for a thing that cannot or will not happen?

And who created regret,
those shameful second guesses born of haste and rash decisions?

We live in parallels,
imagining the conditional past or present or future.
Here's a wishing well in an echo chamber,
offering shoulda woulda coulda for a penny or nothing.

Floating forward from the past,
insincere platitudes can proliferate safely.
Letter to an angry lover: I wish I had been a kinder, gentler person.

Camped in the present,
useless thoughts may safely marry things that cannot be true.
Postcard from Hawai'i: Wish you were here

Leaning into the future,
desperation finds an impossible voice.
News of my child: If I could reach him, I might save him.

Nothing but futile desire and nostalgic regret,
powerless prayer dismissed by the gods.

The cat is both alive and dead until someone opens the box.
If I knew her name, I would tell you.

Snake in My Garden

Pulling out weeds and pushing in bulbs
I'm startled by a slither of glossed black muscle
knowing I hadn't left the garden hose
stretched out there under the roses.

The black snake has returned
from haunting the hens' nest boxes.
I saw him yesterday morning
coiled around a freckled brown egg, while
hens clucked and fussed in the shadows.

I have my rose-pruning gauntlet gloves
at hand. Sewn from faded green canvas
and stiff caramel leather, they serve me well
as armor against both thorns and fangs.
The snake has never bitten me. The roses always do.

Gently I lift
the long heavy rope of solid snake muscle
one hand just behind the head and
the other somewhere midway.
The snake is warm, heavy, dense,
black scales above and pale cream below.
His eyes are amber and ebony
and vertical, like a goat.

I carry him through the pasture
to the bank by the creek and
lower him into the leaves.
He winds his six-foot self around
my brown arms and bare shoulders—
protesting
holding back or
holding on.

Our Bats

Our bats moved in
when the paint was barely dry on the new house.
They must have been watching
from the pines, waiting
for the roofers and painters to gather their ladders and leave.

Our bats tuck
slender furred bodies into each narrow crevice between
clapboard and clapboard and soffit. At twilight
they appear by ones and twos, dropping
straight down from the eaves then swooping
and rising a hundred feet in a heartbeat.

Our bats stitch
pine needles to the sky, pull
the threads of night winds through their wings, pluck
knots of insects from the air.

Earthbound on the lawn in our
half-century selves, we thrill to
the sight
the idea
the pure tapestry of bats.

Bible Study Within the Flock

Uninvited, a neatly dressed
young man smiles over
my porch railing and
tells me he used to raise chickens
too.

His conversational gambit is
a cold open
a feeble hook line sinker
for delivering a long and loosely woven
fable that has nothing to do with poultry.

Idly considering the convolutions of
his rapturous ramblings
I keep a watchful eye on the frenzied hens
digging for worms in the manure heap.

I interrupt to ask
if he's seen the coyote, and
by the way
which god shall I appeal to
to protect with prayers
the hen that my son has named Evangeline?

And
if prayers fail, will Evangeline
be granted glorious everlasting life
after she's been gutted by the coyote?

He says
just shoot the coyote and in christ
all things are possible so I know
he's not listening.

Then please I said
call up that other god, the one in charge
of watching over the coyote
and explain why her orphaned pups will
starve in their den.

Because here in my backyard is all
we can ever know of this world;
everything here
in one small breath.

Shelter

My fear is this:
I will not be able to
remember the fact of your death.

Each morning
I will need to remember
(the stones, the leaves, the early sky will have to tell me):

He is dead.

Again and again and again

He is dead.

How dare you presume to step back
into the void without me?

When you die, I will build a barn
with your bones rising
as beams and joists
your lofty arms stretching tall to hold the roof.

And your dark eyes shining,
windows on the swept and windy plain.