

Confession

And finally, after months of this new baby, the oxygen tubes catching in the door frames, tripping us up at night, the fear like electricity cracking in our bedroom, finally you confess. We'd done a ritual. Purification. Consumption. Medicine. We vomited for hours in the sourdark. Singing. To hitch a ride on. Singing to pull out your demons. And the dreams came like hyperspace, like some loco driving in our heads. You dreamed crazy. Saw yourself in a crazy house, walking in and out of bodies, losing yourself. Like your mama did and probably her mama before her. A bindweed choking your family history. You had always been afraid of that weed, had always hacked at it with your machete, had spent your life running like a dog. It was later that you told me, after you'd returned, after your eyes lost their ghostliness. *When he was born, you said, I was afraid that it was me. I was afraid that you'd know that something was sour in me, the water was bad, that I was the one who shifted our boy's chromosomes. I was the one who made him slow.*

Hush

Before making my way into the intubated hush
of the Intensive Care Unit,
I pass a hallway of teenagers,
their spines pressed collectively against white walls, dark eyes
pinned to the long stretch of linoleum on which I'm walking.

The boy with a mass of tangled Afro glances
up as I pass, his eyes naked with the kind of vulnerability
that only comes from the wounded - did I know Her?
the girl with the gunshot wound to the head
who, my doctor friend would later tell me
would end her seventeen years on this earth
with bone fragments sprayed into the soft gel
of her brain, the hand forgetting it's a hand,
the heartbeat flying the caged coup
of the body.

I'm reminded of the time I watched my four-day-old
son stretched out on a warming slab in a Neonatal
Intensive Care Unit. His tiny hand lay palm up
under the lights, curled and red as a bird claw.
Standing there, my breasts sick with milk,
I saw his life counted out in measured beats
and felt each alarm as if it was my own -
my breath shortening with his, my heart slowing
as his dipped and swayed.

I'm amazed at how wounded we are with the sudden awareness
not of our own mortality, but of the ones we love.

Does it hurt?

Yes, it still hurts.

And back then, I wanted it to keep hurting
because with each wound I'd feel that he was still alive,
as if I could be his Sisyphus, as if I could hold the suffering
for both of us so he'd take just one more breath,
just one more,
just another.

Mint Leaf for David Foster Wallace

Often there are times when I am staring off
into the skim line of horizon, where the soft peach
of sky folds into the earth's body,
and I find myself comparing my son
to David Foster Wallace.

I remember reading about Mr. Wallace's suicide,
about his parents knowing that there was something wrong
with their bright boy, about his starry rise
amongst the intellectual literati
and his depression so debilitating that, like Kafka,
the disease that tormented was life itself.

And I couldn't help feeling sad that in my love
of Wallace's brilliant articulations,
and my appreciation for his infinite, witty jests
I too had jumped up to clap my soft hands,
and did not see his overwhelming sadness.

And today, as I watch my two year-old son,
diagnosed with Down Syndrome at just five days old,
I can't help but wonder at the quality of *his* intelligence
and what he might have passed
on to Mr. Wallace? Because there are days
when I feel a particular loneliness
and I am tempted to recline into the cynic's
tattered and yellow-stained armchair to cast dispersions at life's
false pageantry, and to mutter perhaps, a diatribe or two about the state
of the world.

And on these days, I come home to my son,
who greets me just as he does on every other day,
lifting his small arms into the hallelujah air
and clapping fervently, as if I'd scored yet
another touchdown in our touchdown of days.

And when he crawls forward, stopping briefly
to thumb a mint leaf or to laugh himself to tears,
I bend, grateful for his arms around my neck,
grateful for the reminder that some forms of intelligence break
the world into pieces of beautiful ugliness,
and some do not break the world at all.

Now You See It

My mother cups my uterus
to her mouth and blows.
The uterine balloon she hangs
like a trophy in her bedroom,
nailed to the far wall like an animal
skin.

At parties she fills it with wine,
places a nozzle on it and pours.
The guests are enchanted. They tell me
what a good girl I am. How lucky
to have a mother so intimate. I tell
them that my mother loves
tricks, loves the jigsaw puzzle
of my spine, love to pull my heart
from her ear and make it disappear
into her mouth. What a mother, they say.
What a magician.
Soon, she'll be able to make you
disappear altogether.

Freud's Asparagus

She tries to sublimate
a hot Sunday at 8 a.m.,
but he pounds at her door,
repressed, Freudian
and hungry.

She cooks him sweet butter eggs
and asparagus
and he looks at her.
“Sometimes an asparagus is just
an asparagus,” she says, placing
the green, feathery tip deep
into her mouth.

She hands him a swollen, red
plum, a fat, hairy peach.
She says, “Eat.”
She says, “Read to me. Tell me of Plato’s
Republic. I want to see a civilization come
from between your lips.”

They practice sword fighting
in the garden. She has better footwork
but his shaft is longer, bright red
and she laughs at him.
He pins her again and again in the garden
with swollen red fruit and thick
leaves and she laughs at him.
He does not know what the woman wants.

She leads him to the bath.
“Here. Play with the toy boat—
the small fringed sails, the wet hull ...”

He is nearly hysterical when she takes him
(as she knew she would)
and hours later, in the lingering flame of his sleeping body,
she smokes.