

Harvest

We have so many stories already written around us
like a safety net, like a straightjacket. When I say,
“Once upon a time,” you know what sort of house I’m building.
When we say, “Boys will be boys,” we know it really means,
“Boys will be men, men will be weapons, after all
they were raised in an arsenal. Praised for the height
of their walls. Taught that a hero holds a gun,
and does not need to be held while he cries, because power
is taken and not shared, and a hero does not cry.
That disarmament is weakness, and a hero must fear
the flowers that bloom in the open fields of his heart.
The power in telling his lover what he is afraid of.
That a soldier is a hero, and a gardener is not.”

I am writing a new story inside myself.
In this one, manhood means believing that a garden
may not be as dramatic as a missile, but it lasts longer.

I have learned that loving the women
in my life means walking through the crowd
of hungry ghosts that other men have left behind.

I look them in the eyes: they are an ugly reflection,
for I know that I still have sharp edges
better suited to cutting skin than breaking soil.
But this I swear: to be a battlefield overgrown with violets,
tomato vines, and runner beans. To plant orchards in my violence.
To remember that my fear of the hurt
I can cause is a map of the work I must do.

I know I have left ghosts of my own behind
from the days when my love was not brave enough
to drop the clothes it was given and stare at itself naked.

How it was told that manhood means to take
before it means to hold, was taught that love looks
like a precious golden ring, a guarded thing.
That it is romantic to say “You are mine.”
That somewhere in the architecture of love lies ownership.

One morning my lover and I sat in bed
with sex indenting the mattress between us,
heavy stone it can sometimes be. We stared

at each other across the weight of it.
They have been taught that sharing their body
is betraying it. I have been taught that a partner's body
is a belonging that should be shared. We have both
been taught that shame is an inheritance we deserve,
that we should blame ourselves for sometimes
being the string that breaks in the middle of a love song.

We have chosen to make a different way.

We are standing around a campfire fed with the torn out pages
of an old children's book. It's the one with a tall tower
and a conveniently unrecognizable monster.
Where everyone knows their roles already, sword
and sewing needle waiting for hands that have no choice.
Where someone else saves the day.
Where "he" and "she" are locked in the mirror,
a reflection without a key. We are writing a new story.
In this one, shame is a suit of rusty armor half-buried in the soil,
with nasturtiums growing out between its gaps.

Here, the monster looks more like the ways we learned
to hurt each other. Here, victory is shaped like an embrace.
Here, wholeness holds its darker half.
He and she can leave those shapes behind
like a dress that has become too small,
a suit of armor that blocks the sunlight,
a locked up tower room.

This story is not about being saved, or safe from change.
This story is about learning to hold each other
like the mountains hold the sky, to adore
the way it never stays the same, to release
every kind of love that desires to contain.

Drift

On Westcliff, the ocean stretching
into the horizon like hammered steel,
an old man walks a Chihuahua in a tiny vest.
A few tourists pass him, speaking quickly
in a language we cannot understand.
They point at the dog, their laughter bursts
like summer fireworks, a field of poppies.
When they are gone, he turns to the dog
and says, "It's alright, they were just talking
about how beautiful you are."

What strange flotsam accumulates
in our hearts as a lifetime drifts by.

Checking In

Morning arrives like an eccentric hotel guest.
Maybe from Switzerland or some other place
with great chocolate and ice over the surface
of the water. I imagine a thick white beard
and tailored three-piece. An undercurrent
dark and iron as old blood. And what have
you got in your briefcase? Perhaps an afternoon
that opens like a piñata, all noise and color
and the gratification of simple desires.
Or lassitude, droll gray downpour. I hope
for that subtle delight that seeps under
the doorframe and through the shutters
like viscous light. Opens up the tightly locked
chest that holds wonder like a postcard
from the child you're certain you used to be.
Or one of those flowers that blooms only once
in a decade. The laughter that is its own beginning
and end. Anything but the bone-deep damp,
hopelessness that creeps quietly under
your skin like mold beneath old floorboards.
Maybe a book given by a friend who knows you
well enough to find you, Rorschach, in a landscape
bound in ink and pages. A self-contained feast.
A missed train of a day, face-full of pungent smoke,
frustration, the scramble to fit the hours together
into an acceptable puzzle. Or maybe a nap
in a swaying hammock: slow, easy, and enough.

For Ricky

It's nighttime in Montana. The fields
and buildings and streets are drowned
in powder white. Twenty degrees.
The hitchhiker is walking on the side
of the snowy highway, and her posture
says she's been walking for a while. I pass
by, and my heart shudders like an engine
in the cold. I turn around at a side street,
and pull over. She gets in. Tired face,
a lip piercing, eyes too battered to pretend.
"I'm Ricky," she says, and, "been walking
since Gallatin Gateway." "That far?
And no one stopped?" "Everyone's got
their own fears," she says, "I don't judge."

I tell her I'm a writer. Interested in people's
stories. And she tells me. Picture the broken
home. Only she knows the specifics, but
we are all familiar with the scene. Seen
it too many times before, in friends,
on screens, in the past that trails behind
people like a whipped puppy. She got married
at twenty, met her soul mate a week later.
Had a child. Had a divorce. Moved all over
the country, left the soul mate to get clean.
Couldn't stay clean. Couldn't listen to music
for six months she tells me, it hurt so much.
Weeps in the passenger seat as she speaks.

Keeps moving to stay close enough to help raise
her daughter. Sees on the news that her soul
mate died. His memory is everywhere, still,
the way things could have been. As the years
pass your life looks less and less like what
you thought it was going to be. I won't leave out
the worst parts, but I won't try to make them
sound pretty. Like some beautiful wreck,
an old pirate galleon drifting down through
watery sunlight into the blue-green deep.
This is no metaphor, poetic tragedy, just the way
it is for some people. The rape. People you trusted.
The end of trusting. Sleeping in ditches.
Getting a home, a job. Losing them. And again.

Being broken back down to only a body
that feels less and less like your own.
Selling it to survive. All this time, wanting
only to love your daughter, to be good
for her even if no one ever showed you how.
Somehow remaining the kind of person
who spends your last two hundred dollars
bailing a friend out of jail, even without
a bed to sleep in. Who gets in a car
with a young stranger, and tells him,
“I go to sleep each night hoping I don’t wake up.”

This is a kind of courage I cannot imagine.
There isn’t a reason I’m telling you this story.
Only that it was told to me. I just want
to share her storm with you for a little while.
It is all I have to prove she was ever there.
When I ask if I can hug her goodbye, she says
she doesn’t know how, but she still holds me
tight as a life raft before she walks into the motel.