

Swimming on My Side

Always the fear of drowning

but I lay my ear on the water
will my neck to soften
scissor my legs

on my side in the crib
sun plays on a beach of white sheet
first music, first dance
and the aria

my mother appearing in the doorway
curious, told not to pick me up
Don't spoil that good baby
by an old nurse in a pointed hat.
I am swimming

in light, she comes close
and talks to me, her smile
splashes my face, I fall still
in the warm sweep of this tide
and then she steps

away, I am all
undertow.

Brand

I was five and pony-tailed
when my father took me to see the yearlings
cut to steers. Spring gusts
flooded the corral, the men in thick cottons
all darker shades of sky. Blade glint
pearly glands stripped from their furred
chute, fish-plopped into the bucket.
With the first calf's bellowing, my face fled
into his starched leg. Soon I was freed to run
back to my grandmother who had clicked her tongue
in outrage *What was he thinking?*
At thirty still practically a boy
a cold fire in his blue eye, part of me

still fixed there.

When Crow Comes

I learn that all that glimmer in his wings
has the weight of mercury.

In seventh grade that would never end
I asked and was given a silver bottle
one dull afternoon. Poured on the pocked
concrete floor, pewter beads spattered apart
melded together if the dust they carried
wasn't too thick. Mother lode gathering volume
but not light: an opaque liquid gray
of something stopped, oscillating
between locked exits. Would I make it
out of here? Could a fledgling rise
from these slow gears?

Crow comes
when we have fallen from the dream,
those mutable Icarian wings turned
to sticks and feathers. “This is the other
side of the story” he says, “*not Dove, see.*”
The awful can shimmer with its own
blinding beauty. *Look me in the eye*
he says. And my father's favorite phrase
Let's test your mettle.

Courage

was my father lying there
with the phantom pain, chinning up on a bar
swung from the ceiling, getting his arms
ready for crutches. He was forty-two
when he crashed the Stinson.
Clear day after rain, a teaspoon
running into the engine. Twice
we almost lost him. When they took his leg
my knees gave way, I learned
Pray without ceasing.

He'd come through,
was home after months in a city hospital.
He didn't know I was standing there
in my summer shorts and Keds, school out
a Texas breeze chasing its tail through the house.
I was carrying my *Seventeen* magazine
and the unbearable fact of his injury: never again
the quick intelligent swing in his walk.
He kept lifting himself up and up, face frozen.
I stood there not breathing eye of a

great storm spinning

as we went forward

My Father is Making the Long Crossing

I am following,
my small canoe strangely slow.
His, like the winged Viking ships
moves with a stillness beyond speed.
His bronzed hands lie on his chest.
The leg that has carried him
in solitude nearly half his life
finds it harder and harder to make its way
under the sheet. He complains that the covers
are too heavy. I weave him a story.

*Father, your body is becoming
a boat, dense like Norse oak--but see
how the ocean carries it! It will take you
as far as it can go. Then you will go on easily
without it. The fog grows thick between us.
You answer from a long way off--yet part of me
travels with you. I am lighting the lanterns
tucking soft wool around you
reaching up to brighten the lamps of the stars.
And I am singing.
That part of us which sings
is weightless, ageless. That part of you*

*will lift and row the sweet dark air
a fledgling, buoyant at dawn
leaving the empty nest
in the top of the oak tree.*