

With My Sister, In a Tornado Warning

You offer me wine, when I come to you.
Red or white. As if today it could matter.

You are the perfect hostess.
Even under a tornado warning, even when
your lip is split and bulging
like a bulb
too late for planting.
Red, I say.

Your face blooms from his hand:
fuchsia, violets, O'Keefe's dark iris,
an explosion of forget-me-nots.

I think of the photo I have
of your wedding in Carmel-by-the-Sea.
He is dipping you back, with only one hand,
in your satin. Your dark hair raking the sand.
His smile says, *look what I can do.*

My glass empty, I stare out your window.
Sky is blackening above your sunflowers.
It may be time.

First, I must stitch you up;
thread the needle's eye and
sew shut every opening: the eyes, the mouth, the heart,
the vulva. Taking care not to puncture,
before I bite the thread and tie the knot.

Then we sit, fists in our throats,
hands grasped across the rough wooden table,
splinters digging through.

Out over your garden, a funnel cloud is forming.

We are in no hurry.
You are sewn shut.
Nothing, now, will ever get in.

Last Train to New Haven

As doors slide shut, he slips through
onto the half-deserted train.

No more than a boy,
carrying the weight of a starving sparrow.
A shirt of magenta, flowered
in periwinkle blue.
Head down, hands empty,
wanting only safe passage home.

A pack of them, hyenas, laughing
as he moves, hunted, down
the lurching aisle.
Kiss, kiss. Isn't she a pretty one?
A boot out, then, or a sneaker in front of him
in his path, tangling his slender legs.

I see it fast-motion:
boy flying, broken metal seat arm rising
up to him.
Faggot hissing in the air
as the pack of them scatter, screeching,
to another car.

I have nothing. Half-empty bottle of
Poland Spring,
napkins from Ground Support Café.

Up from the floor before I can reach him,
in his seat, shoulders shaking.
Blood trickles down on periwinkle, but does not pour.

I press limp napkins into his hand, hold out the bottle.
I have no language left in me.
He turns his head away.

Ashamed, suddenly, of the smear of human stains
across the window,
I choke on my own uselessness.

A drowning boy does not cry out for water.
No one will stop this train.

On the Line

We wait behind the yellow tape.
Our own arms wrap ourselves in the sticky heat,
as if we could insulate from the heresy of words like *active shooter*.
I think about the house of women who raised me.
Voices that blanketed me with “Hold back. Be patient. You’re fine. No, you really
are fine. You require nothing”.
Words that assault me now, in this place; stinging me, like a swarm of wasps
or yellow-jackets.

And then they are coming out of the school.
Hands over heads, in single file. Some of our children.
Everyone’s children. Snaking in a grotesque conga line.
And, inexplicably, I remember the footage of the camels in Libya.
3,000 camels herded in frantic lines from the Port of Tripoli
in artillery fire.
My son urging them on the screen: *Go faster! You need to go faster.*

And I see him then. Toward the end of the snake; not lost, but here.
One sleeve of the red shirt is torn and dangling.
It may be possible to mend it. From this distance I can’t be sure.

I want to touch him. I want to lunge and break the yellow tape,
trample every living thing to get to him.
To shriek at that long line of women who wait with me, all the living
and the dead ones:
No. Remove your hands from me.
This day, I will not wait my turn.

Early Evening, Late September

You were just back from the war.
Your eyes were the color of coastal fog,
and you were lost in them.

Downstairs,
The aunts and uncles circled you,
anxious to hear news of the jungle, or of the desert.
So many battle landscapes,
who could know?

I took your hand,
and we climbed up to the roof, sat on the slope,
above the flaming trees, away from smothering embraces.
I asked if you would tell me, if you would try.
But your voice was low and level when you said
not yet.
And your eyes never left the horizon,
so I didn't ask again.

Not knowing yet
that the moment had already raced between us,
that you would be gone by Thanksgiving,
that my regrets
were already standing sentinel outside the door.

That there was only this,
this early evening, late September,
where the manes of sugar maples
tossed below us in the wind like the hair of women
who must have loved you long before,
before I loved you; before I failed to rescue,

before we sat there
on the slope line, cradling your homecoming
between us
like a broken, battered child.

Virus

In the winter of twenty-twenty
the virus
slithered through China,
 out from the wet markets
 into the heart of Wuhan
 and Hubei.

 Only ghosts rode the subway
 or walked the hutongs
 in Beijing.

In America,
we coughed into our sleeves,
scrubbed raw our fingers,
 recoiled within borders
 to accuse and sanitize.

But the virus, the other one,
was already with us.
Hatred
tunneling through air vents,
 exchanged in cold clouds
 on the avenues.

We passed it, ungloved,
in arenas
and on airwaves.
 Raised high
 our cups of steaming malice,
 shared them hand to hand; lips to lips.

And when abhorrence
pressed its filthy boot down
on human kindness,
 we drew in close,
 our mouths uncovered;
 breathed out the execrations
 and breathed them in.

Take off your face masks now.
They will do you no good.
If you have come this far,
you are already exposed.