

Wildfire as a Psychological Survey & other poems

Wildfire as a Psychological Survey

It's a wildfire but he reaches into it with bare hands
and goosebumps, like any decent brother.

He laughs as he does it, laughter like a knocked-
over ink pot spilling ink into all those crazy

flames and staining the silence like ink stains
paper or cloth or probably the underside of

your skin, if you were to peel it off like you peel
an orange and turn it inside out. Laughter

staining silence, do you see it? Do you see the
wildfire's gotten past his skin and into his meat

now, all those ligaments and chalky bones sucking
up the heat of the inferno like anemic vampires

while his twin-moon eyes wax and wane.
Crescent, gibbous, full. He looks unfamiliar

but so familiar. You could be him. He could be
your brother, any decent brother. Reaching into

that fire as if into the jagged skyline of New York
or Tokyo, skyscrapers like teeth in a maw that

swallows galaxies one by one. The heat is
reaching him now, do you see it? His laughter

trickles away like paper boats on a river as big
as this life. His moon eyes blink and you see

all their dried seas filled with opals. The craters
of his flesh brim with fire and like any good

saint he lets it rewrite him into a face
someone someday might die to kiss goodnight.

Hyacinthus

I who never gave in
 to your arms, darling,
who captured the ambrosia
 of my tenderness toward you
behind the cage of
 my teeth,
I don't know what devil
 could torment me more
than this ghoul which
 so enthralls me:
of my own will
 I stand mute,
I who used to
 melt to your sweetnesses
like a fast-burning candle,
 now I let them fall
like dead birds
 round my feet and
I keep locked the
 cage of my own sweetness.
Stone-faced, I face you
 and watch you wilt,
beloved,
 I who used to
transform your tears with
 the elixir of my company.
I—I turn
 away.

ABCs

Daddy taught me how to read, saying, "This is an A,"
before making the wooden block disappear behind his back.
When it reappears he asks, "What is this?" I gaze up at him,
toddler's brain struggling for the answer to such a riddle as this.

Before making the wooden block disappear behind his back,
he repeats: "This is an A." I fidget as it vanishes then returns.
Toddler's brain struggling for the answer to such a riddle as this,
I tip my golden-curl'd head and venture, "A?"

He repeats: "This is an A." I fidget as it vanishes then returns,
making Daddy's face break into a smile every time
I tip my golden-curl'd head and venture, "A?"
Fawn-eyed, I await the laurels or lion's den his eyes can bestow.

Making Daddy's face break into a smile every time,
I grow from ABCs to tricycle, bicycle, life cycle of *Danaus plexippus*.
Fawn-eyed, I await the laurels or lion's den his eyes can bestow,
oblivious to the potency of the spell he is weaving.

I grow from ABCs to tricycle, bicycle, life cycle of *Danaus plexippus*,
shaking like a rabbit every time he frowns in disapproval.
Oblivious to the potency of the spell he is weaving,
he tells me I am cold, and leave him lonely for affection.

Shaking like a rabbit every time he frowns in disapproval,
I fear I'll never outgrow my cowardice and dull dispassion.
He tells me I am cold, and leave him lonely for affection,
like a canary that keeps its song trapped selfishly in its breast.

I fear I'll never outgrow my cowardice and dull dispassion
when Dad says no good wife or mother is so emotionless as me.
Like a canary that keeps its song trapped selfishly in its breast,
I am not always a golden girl, though I lie to hide the fact.

When Dad says no good wife or mother is so emotionless as me
he doesn't know I wrinkle up like a smashed origami flower.
I am not always a golden girl, though I lie to hide the fact
that his anger shuts every door to my soul.

He doesn't know I wrinkle up like a smashed origami flower

at this timid age when one harsh word strikes like lightning.
That his anger shuts every door to my soul
he has no clue; he thinks my smiles are pure as rain.

At this timid age when one harsh word strikes like lightning,
he sews my doll's hands into worship of his own divinity stitch by stitch.
He has no clue; he thinks my smiles are pure as rain,
as if no fear could clip the wings of my emotionality.

He sews my doll's hands into worship of his own divinity stitch by stitch,
teaching me to walk on eggshells and sing in silence.
As if no fear could clip the wings of my emotionality,
Dad accuses me of being unequal to his vast paternal love.

Teaching me to walk on eggshells and sing in silence
while the world cartwheels by in laughing abandon,
Dad accuses me of being unequal to his vast paternal love.
Wisdom is easy, looking back, and even easier is bitterness.

While the world cartwheels by in laughing abandon,
I creep down to the basement on vacation to cry.
Wisdom is easy, looking back, and even easier is bitterness,
though I know bitterness is the coward's way out.

I creep down to the basement on vacation to cry
despite the quiet epiphany in my heart: *he is only a child himself*.
Though I know bitterness is the coward's way out,
sometimes it ambushes me like a sweet poison.

Despite the quiet epiphany in my heart—*he is only a child himself*—
fear ravages my soul like a werewolf with diamond claws.
Sometimes it ambushes me like a sweet poison:
how baffled he is when I finally tell him I'm afraid of him.

Fear ravages my soul like a werewolf with diamond claws,
though now and then my fear vanishes and I meet Dad's eye.
How baffled he is when I finally tell him I'm afraid of him!
Closing my ears to the demons' voices, I remember when.

Though now and then my fear vanishes and I meet Dad's eye,
when it reappears he asks, "What is this?" I gaze up at him,
closing my ears to the demons' voices. I remember when
Daddy taught me how to read, saying, "This is an A."

The Old Art of Neighborliness

To drive a motorcycle—I learned
among the banana trees of Rwanda,

up and over one muddy hill after another,
gasping at the treachery of single-plank bridges.

Once I broke down amid a horrific rain
and the whole village materialized to help

like robins after a downpour, heaving
my intransigent bike up a hill with such

enthusiasm I could only marvel at how
avidly the people here, without cell phones,

remember that old art of neighborliness.
And if you can only imagine the quantity

of tea you will be begged to drink
in hovels with no doors and dirt floors

you'll be obliged to ask yourself, if you're sane,
what has happened to human kindness

in that far place where you come from
called America, where more often than not

this old art of neighborliness has to be
dusted out of retired old books and people

if it's to be remembered at all.

Penelope sans Odysseus

i

Ok so
I'm young but I think I've figured out
that life is a game of waiting.

ii

And in the end whether you add or subtract
or multiply or divide or derive or discretize or
(is there another *d* word?)
when the cards are shuffled I think what matters
is what you decided you were waiting for.

iii

'Cause everyone's waiting for something.
Everyone has to wait for something.

iv

You wait for the alarm clock
or your friend to get home or your
boyfriend to leave, or maybe you wait for
your cat to get hungry.
If not that then it's waiting for the day you
pick out your plot in the local cemetery,
or the wedding ring or the doctor's call
or closing time or Greek salad with
Kalamata olives.

v

Or you wait for something vague,
dreamlike
and unattainable like Virginia Woolf or Anais Nin:
the miracle,
the epiphany of love,
joy hiding behind the merry-go-round of the traveling circus;
and all the while like a
tightrope walker
you try to keep the balance
between not waiting
for too little and not waiting
for too much.