

The Viewing

Standing in the doorway,
I am a bent reed
alongside the river of mourners
drifting towards you.

You alone.

You, in a terrible sleep,
atop the satin lining
of the shrunken wooden boat
they laid you in.

If there weren't so many roses
the room would smell like your hands:

stale sweat,
folds of skin,
plastic food trays
and bedpans;
the scales
acquired from a year
of barely moving at all.

You, a lame bird,
mouth open,
eyes roving
behind a thin film--
hands weak as they pull
at your mouth
and your shrunken belly.

I fed you.
I thumbed away the
drool from your chin.
I lifted your thinnest nightgown
and washed the whittled rungs
of your ribs.
I stared back
into the haze
of your eyes.

They set you right
before laying you out.

They bought you a sky blue suit
and a gold brooch
in the shape of a palm tree.
You look like you might be going on vacation.
Everyone says
you look the best you have in years.

I take my sister's hand.
She takes her husband's hand.
Together,
we advance to your side.
I touch a petal of a rose
and will not look
at your closed eyes.
While you were captive in your body,
I could still sit beside you.
I could still talk.
I could still face you
in your bed,
and touch your cold hand to mine,
say goodbye for the day.
Say, I'll be back tomorrow.

At the viewing,
we all stand with each other,
shaking hands,
using our softest voices.
I can't go with you.
My mother can't go with you.
Your mother has already gone.
While we murmur from our shore,
you have begun a voyage
on an empty sea
where none of us
can follow.

Tonight

The scene:

a bonfire
struggled in the dark,
lighting up an outpost
like a proscenium.
At the meadow's edges
the trees stood at attention.
We were set in summer—
its swollen beginnings,
fresh from high school,
bold as colts,
and as easily frightened
by our own movements;
led asunder
by our own feet.

Beside me,
my favorite blonde
was thumping down
the gravel way
to where the rest waited
while their noise echoed out
and then flattened
as it hit the tree line.

She was an old pro by then,
but she walked
like a loose rope,
slackening
until each new step
jolted her back into formation.
But never did her eyes widen,
because she was accustomed.

To be part of something,
to be
on the inside--

when you are young,
inclusion
is that favored harbor,
an interior cove
where solace moors you

before you cross the threshold--
before you learn too much
and the worry
moves in
as a marine layer.

Blink
and keep it,
my fledgling self said then.
Waylay the fog.
Hold fast
to the rope
of the uncluttered
horizon.

It can secure you
for at least
tonight.

Daily Walk

Around the block this time
a squirrel lays
belly up
from the tree
she fell from.

Her eyes and mouth are open
in post-mortem wonder
at how her body has failed her.

A thousand times before
instinct had launched her
branch to branch
with primal certainty
that she would be
received.
Instead,
something in the equation
by which her body was set
has erred,
and I wonder if she made a sound
as she dropped.
I wonder if the others
had heard her
from a few trees away
as her last animal gasp
carried up through the branches
like a bubble of air
rising to the surface of water.

Nothing much will become of her body.
She will be a momentary sidewalk horror,
only a disquieting glitch
in a daily stroll.

But one life,
however small,
has been snuffed out
without ceremony.
And her body,
her remnant,
requests nothing,
only lies in repose to the stairways of branches above,
her treetop paths--

instinct having failed her,
siphoned her from transit
and diverted her
towards a final leap
to nowhere.

Lost Things

We could not have known
that the fog was coming for you.
When your table manners slackened,
or when you ate a whole tin of biscotti
in one sitting—
these odd uprisings in your behavior
seemed like affectations of age.

But your world had already blurred, hadn't it?
Your mind rushed you from your body
so that you could not understand its modes any longer,
or remember how you had once run things.

Your days became a tug of war
between what you could maintain
and what you would have to throw overboard.
Memories could capsize you.
So, over the ledge they went,
dropping into a cloud-swell,
a fog that would not settle
until all of your collections
had been seized.
And so it happened
as it had always been intended to—
your brain revealed itself
as a dormant betrayer.

But even towards the end,
when you were no heavier
than a pile of blankets
and your body had shed
all of its color—
you worked at the remaining threads,
assembling your timeline
and organizing the channels of memory.

On the brink
of a grey beyond,
you searched out
into a great fog,
weighing your chances
and considering
the worth of pressing on
or succumbing.

Armed with nothing,
at long last
you took up the mantle
of the Patron Saint of Lost Things.
Collecting what you could
while you could,
like the Saint Anthony charms
we keep finding all over the house now,
bits of wreckage
overturned
by the force
of your wake.

I saw you grasping once,
attending a final siege
as we laid face to face
on your bed
one summer afternoon.
You must have been making promises,
to buy yourself some time.

*It can't be that long ago
that I was a girl.*

*I contained no real weakness then,
only the possibility of strength.*

I don't want it to be over.

*I want to go on
and do it again.*

*I want to be aware
of all the time
that goes.*

There are no deals.
But, there is still me.

Here:
I am claiming the wreckage.
I will hold every weak thread.
I will tend the embers.

I will keep you.