

What We Do to Ourselves (5 Poems)

The First Tattoo

My whole life I've been afraid
to stain my body, insisting
no mark is meaningful enough
for ink's permanence. Still here
I find myself: sitting backwards
in Aaron's chair, as he engraves
palm fronds on my scapula. A gift
from my husband—to mark
the threshold of my fiftieth year:
palms trees and grackles, a Florida
upbringing merged with adults-only
Mexican getaways. With six hours
to kill, I'm nose-deep in a hardback
memoir (Springsteen's) as massive
as *Moby-Dick*. Eyeballs distracted
by Aaron's pin-ups of arabesque
biceps, I think of Queequeg,
the Pequod's nude harpooner,
stunning Ishmael with his aboriginal
tattoo-treatise on the universe
no longer legible; how, in college,
I winced at the keloidal make-up
of Maori warriors—irritated with ash
to highlight youth's passage
into pain, warfare, marriage, labor.
It taught me how history could live
under the skin—indelible yet invisible
until teased out with a stylus.
Like in last week's episode of *Nova*
on the tattoo's origin: fresh evidence
of ochre and charcoal pulverized
a hundred thousand years ago
by Homo sapiens rounding the Cape
of Good Hope. (From the same cave
came Earth's first graffiti, a crayon-
red hashtag on a granite slab—
our meaty brain already impatient
to make something of itself.)

As Aaron's needle probes the V-
shaped convergence of palm-trunks, I
almost faint; this vertebral crux
is my tattoo's darkest part. I squint
to refocus on the open book, Springsteen
guiding followers into the crevasse
of his depression—no more the Boss
than Ahab was captain on the trail
of a lost leg; than I was, all those years
I didn't write, fearing the itch
of the past like a wound too buried
to be scratchable. Not until
Aaron smears my scars with aloe gel
and hands me a mirror, do I see
all that's behind me. Like the Boss says:
we're born to run. No wonder we need
such painful, beautiful reminders
of what we can do to ourselves.

Object Lesson

Much as I failed
to grasp it at the time,
my threadbare silk
security blanket
must've posed a threat
(however veiled) to Dad
that snow-piled night
in the Midwest, when Cronkite
veered from an oil crisis
to a solar eclipse
while Mom laid the table.
Dad snatched
the fistful of rag
from my hand—
flashing that big-brotherly
half sneer, half smile
I knew meant trouble—
and opened the front door
to throw it
to the howling weather.
I wailed, ran
straight into the maelstrom
to save my blankie. And maybe
that was all
Dad needed to see: a spark
of opposition, his only son
demanding love—knowing
how hard it was
to come by that year,
how little there was
between him and me
and the ice.

Boiling Point 2020

Dear Mike, news of your death finds me
on one of those days in July
when the sliding door opens

to a porridge of steam, and all of Wisconsin
takes shade. Slogging through Facebook,
I'd been pondering how to respond

to paranoid memes, shared by cousins
I barely know—insinuations
that COVID is a deep-state hoax,

that Blacks are racist too, that Emperor Trump
will rescue the nation
from godless conspiracy—when Dad calls

to report that you, retired doctor and father
of six, close friend of 45 years,
have braced a gun to the roof of your mouth

and left this world in a wreath of smoke.
A survivor of stroke, dragging one leg at 83
through Gods knows what humiliations,

maybe you faltered in Florida's sweltering heat,
or stopped noticing the horizon,
or couldn't bear to be seen

as one more terminal patient—opting instead
for permanent anesthesia. I seize
my pen, wondering what to write

to your children, who once were like siblings
to me: that love may not be enough
to save us? that despair

thinks only of itself
and should therefore be pitied? that privilege
is no cure for extinction?

How different your leave-taking

from this morning's
more celebrated casualty: Congressman John

Lewis, who, departing amid his people's
cries of defiance, must have felt he was riding a wave
of history—the only antidote

to life's cancers. I imagine
your sons flying home
from Afghanistan, from Portland

(where the government's bungled crackdown
is sure to incite protest)
while I'm out walking the dog

in the late afternoon. Maybe like you
we've all felt a little abandoned
by God this year. A lone officer

on a motorcycle, strapped in his gear,
passes me at the corner and wheels around
to the curb for a serious chat

with his headset. Watching him
beneath leaden clouds, I begin to hear
a chant working its way up the street: "WHAT

do we WANT?" Tomorrow I will lie still
in corpse pose, thinking *I am but a witness*
to these restless impositions of body and mind,

but today? With the dog pulling his leash,
with a hot breeze
whapping the American flag like a parachute

outside the nursing home—signs everywhere
urging "Wash your hands"—
and demonstrators shouting

through surgical masks, I can only think
Something must be done!
And with a feeling almost
of deliverance, Mike, I give in

with tears of welcome
to a gusting wind.

The People Who Served

From home or office they communed
via satellite, pawing at tiny keyboards
as they scrolled, scrolled
through templates of emoticons.
Seeking the perfect balance
of earnestness and insouciance,
they settled on the tone
of a precocious child.

Their days were spent cautiously
opening attachments, drafting proposals
for committee approval,
sending polite requests
to leave feedback—along with reminders
of forthcoming galas and improvements
to their policies. They downloaded
upgrades, and notified each other
of precious discounts
soon to expire from their reward plans.

Occasionally they complained
to a confidant: progress was tiring.
Their devices came with so many
conveniences, one constantly had to re-learn
how easy life had become.
The truly helpless, frustrated
by a glitch or malfunction, found solace
in the cheerful, scripted replies
of their call-center counterparts in Manila.

Naturally they were asked to fill out surveys,
letting their providers know
how satisfied they were, on a scale of 1 to 5.
Their wallets grew fat with enrollments
in loyalty programs, with advantage cards
and other emblems of belonging.

In an environment foaming
with options, even the most trivial
acts (buying toothpaste, ordering coffee)
became occasions

for self-searching. And the future,
when it crossed their minds at all,
seemed a vertiginous
and vaguely unsettling
expansion of opportunity.

So they stayed focused, ticking
items off schedules and lists, shuffling
documents in the nervous company
of a billion others: the lord-less
smiling vassals, dutifully
serving each other to death.

The Pelican

Let me fly serenely
above the silver bay,
no rival birds between me
and a deep, elusive prey.

Let there be no distractions
when, following the course
of myriad refractions,
I stalk their moving source.

Then let me wheel in silence
on my angelic span.
With concentrated violence,
let me fold my fan

and dive without detection
toward a silver meal—
piercing my reflection
to feed upon the real.