

Someone's Ashes

Maybe it hurts to be someone
and the sky is a lung
viewed from the inside. She smokes
because she can. She's stupid
because she smokes. He digs
in his pocket for love
but all he has is a lighter.
There are better breaths
than truth. Companionship
comes equipped with holes
for lies. Better to be burnt
by those little spurts of steam
than boil down to dark forever.
The days drift like leaves
that no one rakes.
Our lives hitch along
like sleepy embers.
The wick of time
burns hot at our heels.
When here it comes *ouch*
and there it goes *ooh*,
what do we expect of ash?

If I Painted the American Dream

It would have to be something dark, dingy,
a piece of furniture or machinery once built
to last and now nothing if not disposable,
and it would tend to occur at an hour past twilight,
when the drunks and dumb kids are just starting
to erase the day, and the sense of danger lurks
as much within the pedestrian's head as in
the sound of gunfire echoing down the alleys.

And as night comes into bloom it would glitter
with sparks that turn out to be hallucinations
when you go to unscrew them, fear crawling
up your legs as you stand on shaky ladders
and discover holes the size of bullets
in the saggy, neon tubes, aging wires
that crumble at the touch of a human hand.

It would be an alien cocktail of chemicals
made for sleep, words like Ambien and Lunesta,
butterflies that cause nightmares, medication
for depression that dulls your ability to respond,
think clearly, fight the men who hold you down.

It would be a circle of people in cheap plastic
chairs discussing the bitter reality of side effects,
the fantasy of invented comfort shattered
with each swallow of the pill, the party line,
your pulse grown quiet and hard to detect.

It would be a search party swinging lanterns
and torches for the hint of prosperity whose
golden lady went missing at the moment
an honest accounting was called for,
rumors of dark souls in suits who have
created warehouses of idiots eager
to pretend they are her, she isn't missing,
nothing's wrong, it couldn't be, not ever.

It would be dogs chewing stretches of bone
that could be somebody's leg. It would be hogs
fed hogs and slop, and given no choice to refuse.

And it would be, if you make it through to morning,
the god-awful morning after, when the belly aches

and the eyes are bloodshot and the greasy excrement
comes streaming in glops and the instant coffee comes
out of the microwave and scalds the impatient tongue.

It would be the crumpled pants, the dirty collar,
the groggy-eyed wait for the bus when you overhear
a group of teenagers playing Russian roulette with
finger pistols, and playing dead when they lose,
because they know they were born to lose and eat
pavement, they know they have to pretend
that a dream could be enough, they know
that the real potential in hope is a sliver of gold
in the rock down the mine where fate is more
likely to swallow you than let you emerge alive.

They know fate is the foul-mouthed truth-spewer
at the heart of the lie that things will get better,
a steady stream of threats from armed criminals,
they know the odds are stacked against them,
they know they're up against a gang of ruthless
cutthroats who don't take chances or play fair,
they know from experience and evidence
and the violent love mounting inside them
that unbridled ambition rarely amounts to
anything more than frayed rope, pulled teeth,
broken promises, heartache and split, raw nerves.

The Undying Head of a Cockroach

I

On an extermination campaign against the cockroaches—
to protect our food, pets,
books from pretty little specks of shit—

while tossing my afterdinner stream up from penis down to bowl,
a young roach 'bout the size of two long grains of rice
crawls from behind the tank into my sights

and first I thump him, or her—*how the hell tell such things*—
and then, its body still writhing, I take pity on us
and send a thumbnail for decapitation.

To my horror and wonder and surprise,
the head sticks to the wall and the body falls away
and the antennae rage against the loss

at speeds I imagine my nerves are always traveling,
and this race down death's road goes on
for ten seconds, twenty, a minute

and a half, and I'm still staring, urine slowly splattering
on the edge of the bowl, splashing my leg, the floor,
its music an artifact of too much meditation,

stupid by the fact of it, so I lift my grown man little kid
finger and touch it, feck knows why, and it rages
harder, faster: what apparition of the reaper

am I to leave it struggling against...against what?

II

An hour later, another beerpiss and still, as my finger-aura enters its range,
the barest revulsion, quickening of antennae,
up against the wall,
ant-swift,

asking, I imagine, in skinny, metallic insect dialect: what, why?

As I gaze and feel and ask myself: what do I know about life?

What do I know about

the depth and confluence of energy
raging in the bodyless head of a cockroach?

The little of moths, men and irresistible fires,
I mean desires, I mean if I could put
its body back, would I?

Would I?

III

The next morning: a still life in blazing light,
the antennae of creaturely magnificence
bending
not responding
to my touch,
the heat, summer's nearly forgiving
wind.

Stream cinched, bladder cooing to the ledge of pigeons,
head on the wall inhabiting the head on my shoulders,
the act of murder inhabiting the act of love—

oh that I could make love a sleepy warrior,
but bare human that I am
(at least in power, or so I feel)—

head, urine, the surge of slightly newborn repetition,
head, urine, the guilt of understanding sought too late,
head, urine, the acceptance of lifedeath's brushstroke finger,

head, urine:

the act of wiping away I leave in the future and the toilet paper
and the alcohol in the cupboard,

the act of wiping away I leave in the room of my heart
that I don't want to enter,

the act of wiping away I leave for someone
else I'll be,

the act of
 wiping away
I leave
 for later.

As the Coal Cries

A woman sings, "when I was born,
I stepped through the veil." Her mother
and father are myths she's still making.

His dark skin, whether sun or melanin,
darkens as his Harley thunders
down the highway, sweat in his beard,

a single point in his mind where
she could curl up and fall asleep.
Her mother has scars on her back

from where they removed the wings—
no angel, she studied the butterflies
and willed herself to join them.

She slept in the garden, she grew.
The woman's friends trust her with secrets.
She puts them where she came from.

She cannot reveal what she never knew.
When she waves goodbye with the light
behind her, her friends mistake her hands

for birds. They are, but she holds them in.
She's afraid of giving birth. As a child,
she couldn't find herself in the color wheel,

so she turned to soil, and in the sundown silt
where her legs became flippers in the delta,
she found her hue. She asked it, "why?"

It said something she couldn't hear.
In her dreams, the words are coming
clear as the coal cries in the mountain,

mixing men with rock as the tunnel
folds, the pressures of life
forcing us to bear diamonds.

They will be taken in blood.
She tells the birds in her to build
their nests over the shiny parts.

Cabbage Hearts

The spicy, unopened tulip-heart of the cabbage wanted to be in her mouth. She asked if I ever tried one, wanted me to join her in the secrets unlocked by teeth and tongue, and I had unlocked them many times to let them slide down my song, but the way she spoke of them sounded like love, which I hadn't heard in their singing, so I took it from the jar with my fingers, leaving the shreds of sauerkraut for the top of our salad, and carried it to her, one hand under the dripping heart to catch the falling juice, and as it passed from my hand to hers, an audible mmm left her throat, and as I felt the memory engraving itself on the place that had been prepared for it, I thought a son should spend many moments of his life like this, delivering the delicious parts of himself to his mother, who wouldn't ask for them, but would eat whatever he brought to give. Whatever he brought, except cilantro, which her senses tell her tastes like soap, so that he cuts last when he makes them both a salad, avoiding contamination, a salad to show her how he spends his nights as a man, chewing through an evening like this evening in the mountains, the trickle of the creek spilling through a crack in the window, hunger and absence no longer holding a mother and her child apart,

the fresh trout she caught—
they stocked the rivers like you stocked the earth with me—
calling to the lemon on the counter,

the fresh trout she caught—
its guts now the guts
of the sleeping, walleyed cat—

the fresh trout she caught
blackening
with the basil and the dill,

the fresh trout she caught
rolling its rainbow
up a sudden sleeve of smoke.