

The Ancestors Are Here

“Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?

Isaiah 8:19.

From faded sepia prints

down.

From gods of Mount Olympus

down.

From unspeakable saints

down.

From innocent sinners

down.

From pebbles on tombstones

down.

From ovens, yeast,

yarn and stitchery,

from Masai hunting

on the Serengeti,

From covens of red

Scottish witchery,

From forgotten mothers

suckled by their babes,

From unknown fathers

fled after rapes,

From old lies

your grandparents concocted,

From new truths

DNA testing unlocked,

From an odd mole

on my ass or your thigh,

From the sky from the ground
down.

They only rise
into this lost world
because a blood line calls them
from the hollows of our hearts
to rescue us,
repulsive as we seem,
in our smooth bodies
and tempered minds.
We have no family
besides this to teach us

how we will abide,
if we ever did,
in those darkneses divided
by the light flash of life.
The ancestors are not just dead.
Our faces are etched to
their funeral masks.
So set heel to shovel,
burn incense and scatter
ashes, leave fresh lavender
on their graves.
Why consult the dead
on behalf of the living?
Make altars out of this life.
Save them, the ancestors.

Nature's God

A reflection on Thomas Jefferson

Hold this truth
and cast your words
over the water like Jesus.

Your hooks
seek minds to snare
in a power illuminating
and hot as a new sun.

Later your form stands
at the door of Sally Hemings's quarters,
casting a shadow
between enlightenment and terror.

Only the two of you know in full
your honed guilt,
your bone-built lies
your failings
before Nature's God's
steady eyes.

You wake with the ache
of the hollow world in your head.

Like Moses,
you want to lead your people
to Canaan,
standing on a false bottom,
conscience cut at the joint.

You seek to be kind,
you stroke her shoulder,
like a wolf petting a dog.

Knowing that all are born
equal,
you can sense
a twisted helix of cord,
running through every knotted fiber,
tying each to all,
sewn into the kind,
the dull,
and a special breed of mean.

One night you dream that she left you,
fleeing across the plantation fields
With your child in her arms.
Like Solomon, you stand
paralyzed,
as your foreman raises his musket.
The moment before the shot claps out
you burn with the answer
to a question
posed by Nature's God.

The Ancestors Go Night Fishing

We depart at ebb tide, old sailors to a dim lit sea.
Cast the ancient trolling lines deep
to find what night trawling reaps.

Hope, like a Mako shark
hunting in the hungry dark,
steers its thoughts by ageless lies
that light in jade imagined skies.

Truth, caught in drifting nets
winched up to drowning air,
steals from starlight quiet secrets
limpid in each lucid stare.

Our children wait in the starving seaport.
Back from sea we throw a match
and flame emblazons on ship and catch.

The Good Witch of the West Side

Into the rattling subway silence
came her familiar moonlit pitch,
her worn smile always
on like an occult crown,
her thoughts radiated
outward, saturated inward
the crevices of her mind.
The songs that rang out from her
nonsensical and deeply true, echoed
off the walls of headlines
to be long remembered by some,
like certain moments

with small children.
When she ended her chirping and
hopped away to the next car,
she left unspoken
words, caught like flies
in flypaper, in a swaying breeze
of silent straphanging passengers.

Some days she reached
into her rumpled bag for
the clay bowl
from her lost daughter.

She told a gray man in a gray hat
on the Number 3 train
how she swept the cars with her invisible broom,
he asked if that meant she was

the Good Witch of the West Side,
and they laughed together.
she saw him often on the train after that
and traded smiles.

Once she showed him the holy letters
from her children,
telling of their lives in foster care.
She wanted to fly to them
But her wings were trapped in glue.
Instead
she asked him
if he could,
he said
he was sorry
but,
her glance wandered
from his face
like a ghost of a bird
and somehow

she flew to the next car
on stumps of broken wings.
He never saw her again after that.
Mornings later he was dozing in his seat.
he opened his eyes at his stop.
Next to him he found
a small bowl of dead flies.

The Ancestors Don't Like Our Driving

The ancestors simmer in the back
and refuse to strap their seat belts.
They say the air blows too cold
then they say they're having heat melt.
They ask "what is GPS?"
and "how horses under hood?"
But when it comes to our mistakes
their discernment is quite good.

They complain that you missed the exit ramp
they want to play with the keys,
they find headlights at night quite frivolous
though dead, they need to pee.
They hit the horn and then complain
about the loudness of the beep.
They tell the radio to shut up
so they can get some sleep.
They say we raised our children wrong
to pick one case in point.
We didn't think through Plan B
And that's why we disappoint.

But when they try to grab the wheel
with their withered mitts
don't scream or vomit one little bit
as they veer straight toward a ditch.
Instead, let's take a shot
to get our lives in order.
Those unbuckled clucks need a boot
onto the blacktop shoulder.