

Stellar's Jay the Week of the Boston Marathon Bombings

The young cat whose life I saved carries
a Stellar's jay in his mouth, the blue
form limp on either side of his jaws.
He runs, tail bristled and tabby fur
a wild, brown streak into the azaleas.
The red of the azaleas, the blue of the bird
almost beautiful – until the jay's mate
dives after them in a cacophony
of grief and bravery and alarm. And now
a ghost-jay settles on my shoulder:
I am in part responsible for this rending.

Some woman births the murderer.
The shooter. The bomber. The one who
shatters lives like a shockwave pulsing
from his center as he walks into this classroom,
that theater, this crowd. Maybe someone
tried to save him. Maybe someone tried
to patch him up, fed him a good meal,
raised him up into this world with her hands.
She would still run to him now, still gather
him into her arms, rock him like a child –
no matter what is lashed to his chest.
No matter what he has done. No matter
what he still may do.

My young cat is just a cat. He is supposed
to hunt. He is supposed to take lives
daily, licking his snout and preening his fur.
But on this day, my heart presses wildly
at the walls of my chest as the jay-mate whirls
and paces the air. Screeching. Crying.
Somewhere below him in the azaleas
the she-bird is broken open by a creature
I tended and released. Somewhere behind
him in the trees the little jays call from their nest:
their blue mouths open. The blue sky
falling all around them through the leaves.

Falling Teeth

My daughter, five, seesaws her first loose tooth –
small, slick finger hooking, tongue pressing at the new,
larger tooth blooming behind. Excitement lifts
from her face like spores into wind, alights on everyone
she tells her secret to. We lean together, imagine
what the Tooth Fairy must do with all the teeth.
Her Fairy – surely pink-gowned, awash with glitter,
bedecked with wand and bells – shapes jewelry
and studs her combs, collects teeth in rows of dainty boxes
decoupled with flowers, padded in velveteen.

My Fairy is more twigs-in-her-hair fay – barefoot,
dark-haired, shimmering limbs circled in vines. Winged
and sounding like autumn in dappled sunlight, flourished
with birds. She revels in the macabre, grinds teeth to powder
to rub into her skin. Teeth dangle everywhere: a many-looped
necklace quivers at her breast, clattering wind chimes entangle
in her garden. Teeth nestle with tree roots and mouse-bone
filigree to form the arcing mosaic around her door.

My pixie-haired girl-child wiggles and worries the tooth,
first with constant attention, then gradually without
notice. She draws elaborate castles with her left hand,
one right finger working the tooth as it teeters and clings.
After the mother-loss moment of disbelief that my daughter
is old enough to lose a tooth, I go back to the horrific
and raw. They come often, the dreams of falling teeth.
Teeth crumble en masse, or drop out in slow motion,
one by one. Or I touch them and they peel from my gums,
slip through my fingers, tumble down and away.

Dreams of falling teeth, common, are always
about fear. Aging, uglification, survival, what
we reach for – devoured. My daughter at the table,
colors spreading out before her in wild, bright lines.
I can hear the Fairy's breath as she hovers
nearby, stalking her next pebbled prize. Whether
rose-satined or mossy-toed, it is all the same. She took
mine, she'll take my daughter's, she'll take mine again.
I smile to taunt her, pass my tongue over each firm stone.
Root in as she shifts her gaze. She jangles coins
in her pocket, choosing what she'll leave behind.
My daughter holds up her drawing, wobbly tooth flashing
as she grins, and the sunlight from the window filters through.

Not Burning Down the House

First the smolder, then the catch. The scorch
and blaze. A bloom of fire: orange
and the flickering blue. Floorboards raise
their splinters like hackles, enkindle
and morph into torch. Shingles incinerate; their ashes
lift into the air like pale ghost-birds. Doors detach
from their hinges, fall into bright peals of flame.
Windows throw shards at the walls. Stairs collapse
and dangle like broken limbs.

Look what could happen.

Arrow-shaped thermostat buttons entrance
our son, tempt him to lean in and press while
we are elsewhere with our attention. The temperature
climbs to 90 while we are away at work and school.
Hours later, we ascend the stairs into a push of heat,
throw the windows wide, find the remains
of the thermostat charred to the wall, burn marks
spidering black against the still-standing room.

And again, months later, the forgotten toaster oven
elements continue to redden and glow. Crumbs
of breakfast cook all day down to delicate carbon husks,
an adjacent cord melts and destroys the radio, the stench
of smoke lingers in the thickening air. The kitchen
sits back on its haunches. Does not bother to ignite
and spread its molten crackling through our rooms.
Blinks its eyes at us slowly as we walk through the door.

Breath-catching, how we were so careless, and so
spared. We could have come home to a steaming
wreck. All of it ablaze and then extinguished. All
of it scalded and soaking. All of it gone.
The dog, confined upstairs in his crate: plastic
seared onto his white-brown fur, singe marks
from the bars against his nose. The soot-dark kitten
sleeping on our daughter's bed: now cinders, withered
and soft. The sister-rats smothered in their tinderbox cage.
What of the quilts my husband's grandmother
stitched from clothes worn down to scraps?
The paper on which our son first wrote his name?

And yet, we continue to leave and leave.
In the driveway, stocky green weeds shoot
through each crack. The flowering vine flings
thorny tendrils outward from our porch. Overgrown
shrubbery converges to follow us each time we turn
our backs on the house. Where we step,
our footprints wisp and shine to ember. Small beads
of flame drip from the pads of our fingers, alight
harmlessly in the street. We call back reassurances
with parched mouths. When the fires leap
from our chests, the sparks land just shy of the lawn.