

Elegy for a Father

A single row of aunts, uncles, cousins and daughter watch a coffin
They sit, still as a clot of vultures crowded round an offering,
The mahogany box carried out like a rocket preparing for launch.
Uncle Michael sits upright, suit too large for shrunken frame,
Kindly and foolish all at once. Speaking of how we loved him,
Repeatedly bestowing his only badge of honor –
“You are your father’s daughter.”
I will my flesh to be silent, my memory transitioning to obituary.
They each chant until their comments attract the dead,
How my eyes are his blue, as if complimenting a ghost.
To the cemetery, we grow quiet, drifting deeper inward -
I look to find my hand clenched, palm soaked with blood.
I look to the trees, the pine needles quivering like skeleton fingers.
After the hour, we shall hold no more use for occupying the same room
Just as we hold no set of syllables to properly pour forth this grief.
How quiet the burial, myself awash in the weight of a reputation,
A shadow, the scar of a legacy carried in the curve of a face.
My last name an alphabet of disappointment, spelling God’s only shame.
Later, we walk back to our cars, bound solely by mourning.
Aunt Jennifer’s eulogy of how the laughter flowed from his lips -
See, what they’re really thinking is,
Give him back to me, please, we’ll do anything.
Grandmother Rosalie resumes her fragile wail, and with a shudder
I feel my heart close as my fists have.

Midwest Melancholia

I braved the harrowing one hundred and sixteen miles northwest toward home
Toward a town that settles like corruption, where farmers sweat planting tradition.
In the fields, a solitary scarecrow guards the rows overcast by crowns of sunlight-
In every direction, there is corn. No one looks to the scarecrow past nightfall,
When the lights have dimmed yet its eyes remain luminous.
(Only the fireflies would willingly walk you home.)

The liquor store is a short walk from the high school, which is situated across
From the post office, for convenience. Sunday service is an unspoken mandate,
The church itself built in the late 1800s, with a basement that creaks and whimpers-
Oh, but surely the Lord loves the company. Everything is closed on Sundays,
Stores, eyes, and minds, as the Indiana summer burns slowly.
(A father likely served in the army, a mother might be pregnant with her third child.)

Turning left at the CVS, crows perch on a powerline, gathered on buildings,
Impossible to count. In this town, every citizen knows their neighbor by name,
By occupation, by expectation. I parked to stand beneath the shade of the tree
In front of the yellow apartments where I lived as a pale, paper-like child.
Thought about the weeks of him throwing up on the kitchen floor.
(Funny, I had remembered these buildings as green.)

As I tried to speak my happiest memory, the consonants crackled.
Oh, it was the day the moving truck slithered in, how I carried our couch to the curb
All by myself. It was here on this sidewalk that I had my first kiss
From a boy three years older, who tasted like melted licorice and popcorn.
He went back to college the next day and left me with an old gym sweatshirt.
(I think I saw online that he's married now.)

Here is where my gang of boys skidded into the driveway blaring Black Sabbath
Screaming, *Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!* We left town within minutes,
Back when the bumps of a backroad didn't sting as bad as daddy's beatings would.
As senior year approached, one of them joined the army – we all cried when
News reached us that he was missing in action.

(I lost track of the other three over time.)

Here is where I babysat two delicate girls who didn't know the taste of a hot meal,
Or the feeling of a coat without patches, or a shower that outlasts a minute.
I still think back to moving day, pulling out of the parking lot and watching
A pair of pink bicycles racing the pebbles as quick as they could. My girls,
The closest I may ever come to having sisters.

Here I stood at the beginning, missing people, not places.

(Maybe I wanted to cry a little bit.)

Here is where I had folded myself out of shape time after time to better fit.
This abandoned apartment on the edge of town, sloping slightly to the left, shingles
Dappled with old paint, the windows flecked with dust. There were rules
Inside that place – do not speak after six o'clock, wash your hair in the sink.
I said one prayer that day, and only one.

(That someday, this place will be condemned.)

There was something dreamlike about passing through, knowing no one saw me,
The county line just ahead. I said goodbye to the old video store, and the diner -
To the graveyard, to my elementary school, to the scarecrow giving me the side eye,
To the library's back entrance, to the McDonald's, even to the church.
Made myself promise that there wouldn't be a next time.

(That if there is, I will survive it.)

Tend(her)

Beneath the sun's sweet caress, my mother
Spends stretches of hours in her garden.
With her tears, she summons the rain
And begs the seeds to grow thick and strong.
The only place in house or yard unkempt,
The only place without moments of distress,
Where hands that delight in reaching
May plunge, ungloved, into the open bowels of earth.
Once, I took the watering can out to her,
And found her kneecaps stained brown,
The hem of her tangerine dress soiled, saw
How her fingers were raw from the work.
She will cradle the seeds as she maps the soil,
Here carnations, there lilies, daisies by the gate.
My mother plucks the weeds from their place
Then tosses them to the side without shame.
She knows what her game of chess needs,
Just as the trees know when winter approaches.
She knows there will be days of cloudless sky, where
Thorns tear at flesh, and more work is to be done.
Yet the flowers grow wild and free, spring forth
Tall and brave if a bit crooked, stretching to greet the light.
I see her among the chrysanthemums and wish for that same tenderness.