

Birthmark

And then the wisdom of the world
calved off and drifted out to sea,
a lonely floe melting its way
toward the horizon line.
We heard the tiniest of plops,
squinted toward the shrinking slick,
then went about our usual day.

In its place a thing rose up
deformed, a cardboard gargoyle son.
Alarms rang out: a beast had come.
Old people warned of their world wars,
but cooler heads said not to fear:
they'd put it in a cage and it
would disappear, no damage done.

But as you know, the thing broke free
to wallow in misshapen power
and harbor in our history.

Now it commands a mythic peak
where it sprays out an acid bile
corroding the struts and scaffolding
that underpin the old glass case
holding the letters of our books.

It's really not about the son
or even outrage at the rage
missing in our former friends.
It's what we've learned about ourselves
that we can never put away again.

A weakness of the world exposed,
the flesh pulled back we've seen the worms
feeding on the heart and brain,
compassion and generosity,
what we once thought we knew as love.

Now even if the day survives
we know the choices that were made.
Some say they lodge in blood and soil,
on flags that fly above the roofs

across the seven continents.

Perhaps they're buried deeper still,
a birthmark on the human heart,
a story of forgotten days:
be killed or be the one who kills.

The Eight Percent

At *Meshuga 4 Sushi* on La Brea
I ask the waiter about kosher fish.
He calls a senior colleague to explain
that fishing has no special kosher laws
since fish die out of water on their own.

You can't begrudge my curiosity.
The DNA reported eight percent
Ashkenazi on the map of Europe.
An old friend raised a glass, said *mazel tov*.

I do appreciate a mystery.

It might have been the mitochondria
though never would have crossed my mother's mind.
But had her "Catholic" father never heard
the whispers of a missing history?

Identifying badges on the clothes,
Medieval yellow *Judenhuts* decreed
so Christians couldn't claim as accident
miscegenation at the Carnival
in masks with massive beaks or dangling bells.

I do appreciate a mystery.

His people *had* emerged from borderlands.
Trieste! Where Venetians, Habsburgs, Jews
met Serbs and Croats on the market days
and in the melting pot of careless love.

I do appreciate a mystery.

My granddad knew his Yankee son-in-law,
my dad, was chasing Nazis in the Alps
just provinces from where he'd herded sheep.
But not that it was shrouding hidden blood.

If Pennsylvania hadn't beckoned him
to mine the coal and turn the century,
if he had never sailed from Italy,
would Mussolini's men have rooted out
the story of our passing mystery?

Coal

1.

Was it a taking or a losing of control
to flee the rolling hills of central Italy
to peer into darkness on a seam of coal?

You'd disappear in pairs on foot into the hole,
the oil wick cap lamps hanging so that you could see:
was it a taking or a losing of control?

Absence of air and light, the dust, they'd take a toll –
as would the fear of methane fires you couldn't flee –
while peering into darkness on that seam of coal.

The Pennsylvania anthracite a test of soul,
you mined the shadowlands of opportunity.
Was it a taking or a losing of control?

You saw the tapestry of future days unroll
with silhouettes of your grandchildren's destiny
while peering into darkness on that seam of coal.

You knew it as a way to make your history whole,
a family future rife with possibility.
Was it a taking or a losing of control
to peer into darkness on a seam of coal?

2.

Deep in the mine your eyes were open wide,
with time to figure out what mattered most.
But in the end history would decide.

You'd come to love your Ellis Island bride,
the way she never feared ancestral ghosts.
When she arrived, your eyes were open wide.

No choice but to weather, shelter, and abide
while witnessing your story, tempest-tost,
being re-told as history would decide.

Your children caught the dream that never died:
even the mines could be a goal, almost.

Along the seam your eyes were open wide.

Your DNA was split and scattered wide
from Tuscany to the Upper Midwest
and rearranged as history would decide.

The coal paycheck was not to be denied.
The family never wondered at the cost.
Deep in the mine your eyes were open wide,
the way revealed as history would decide.

3.

A desperate generation may not see the signs.
Your grandsons never worked a mine but won't forget
and cast their votes to save the dying mines.

They've seen the solar cells and heard the windmill whine
but doubt that Rust Belt lives will know the benefit.
A desperate generation may not see the signs.

The TV shrieks of wildfires, floods, and hurricanes
but they know Coal Country's disaster will be debt.
They cast their votes to save the dying mines.

As elephants and donkeys shove to realign,
they see the coal Hail Mary as a final bet.
A desperate generation may not see the signs.

Losing the thread of their own family's storyline,
they curse newcomers as an economic threat
and cast their votes to save the dying mines.

They navigate the shifting facts and changing times.
Still, auto loan and mortgage payments must be met.
A desperate generation may not see the signs.
They cast their votes to save the dying mines.