

The Reader

The reader opens the door to the diner
like it weighs a thousand pounds, partly
because she has a knack for making things
difficult and partly because the door is heavy
in all this rain. She does her best to stomp the mud
from her boots. A trail of footprints follows her
down the aisle anyway. At the back corner booth
she orders a coffee and the cobbler since,
as she explains to the waitress, *sweet starts*
is the theme of today's game of Strands,
and when the universe speaks she likes to think
she listens. The waitress smiles like maybe
she's got another nutter on her hands, and why
do they always pick the back corner booth.
The reader buries her head in her purse and
emerges with a book that is part-shield, part-lookout.
She circles some words while a woman in a pencil skirt
walks to the bathroom. The bills of all three hats
at the countertop turn. In another booth a couple
with a young child is starting to raise their voices.
She scrawls some notes in the margins.
The waitress returns with her coffee but a Cobb
salad: its sickly tomatoes, a Pollock of bacon bits,
only half an egg. The reader doesn't mind.
She holds the egg in her open palm as if
considering its weight, wondering at the marvel
that, at this very moment, she must be sharing
the other half with a perfect stranger.

Mamba

You drag her by the foot,
 but tenderly, to the kitchen chair
 where another version of her waits,
plastic thumb in plastic mouth,
 to be tucked like a football
 beneath your other arm.

You've loved the skin right off them
 in places. Diaper cream caked
 into the folds of an upturned nose,
thin crust of egg over one eye,
 eyelashes as long and hard
 as toothbrush bristles, lids stuck
halfway open, eyes fixed
 on the middle distance.

 A gift from my own mother to you
before one of her prolonged
 and bitter silences (my love found
 wanting once again). Still, you love her
like your own child, this homunculus
 with its jointless limbs and pillow middle,
 soft belly fabric bulging like bloomers
from a pink cotton jumper.

 You call her Mamba, a name
 from the borderland between
mama and baby. I like it because
 it means you still live there.

 At one point she got so ragamuffin
that we bought you a second
 thinking you'd trade her in,
 but toddler logic prevailed and
you made one the baby of the other—
 an infinite regress of babies
 that will require, I'm sure,
more babies down the line.

 You put them in my lap and
 wrap my arms around them
the way I wrap you into me
 (the way my mother wrapped me into her)

and tug my shirt to nurse them.
I oblige, like the mother I want to be.
 You make happy little sucking sounds
 when I give them each a nipple
until jealousy overcomes you
 and you fling them both away,
 eyeing them like any moment
they could rise to take your place,
 your mouth fixing on my breast
 as if you might have lost it.

Marigolds

"What that?"

A skeleton, baby.

In morning light,
the bones hang
from the neighbor's tree
like they're ashamed
of themselves.

"What kelton?"

It's us, on the inside.

Where our bones are.

"What bone?"

The things that hold
our bodies up.

They shiver a little
in the October wind.

Watching them
we shiver too.

"What body?"

The parts of us
we can touch.

"Touch kelton?"

No, I guess you can't
really touch it. Except
your teeth. Or if
something breaks.

"Why break?"

Well, an accident maybe.

Otherwise it all stays
inside your skin.

Her cheek on my lips
is so soft it feels like
nothing at all.

"Ask-dent?"

Don't worry, baby.

I'll always be here.

The lie grows legs and
walks over to the skeleton,
climbs it bone by bone.

“Always?”

All along the street
the marigolds are
blooming. The shadowed
silhouette of our house
on the lawn is still
wet with dew.

“Mama, always?”

I tuck a curl
behind her ear.
The long-fingered
wind ruffles it
loose again.

Arrival

As birds fill up on emerging cicadas, caterpillar populations explode. We are in for a spectacular butterfly season!

~"The Earth Is About to Feast on Dead Cicadas," Wired News

After you were born I shut off the news feed you were enough information at the time
and it was a simple thing, really, disallowing the world Settings > News >
Notifications > Allow [Toggle Off] and poof no more teachers in Ukraine learning
how to load automatics no more mothers washing the scorched bodies of children
no more interactive exhibits of the campground massacre with bullet-pocked
portable toilets no more climate change or landslides or swollen famine bellies
you were plenty of news for this simple life and I let myself have it, a big bowl
of oxytocin soup and the world only as big as the one you could see from your face
to mine dreaming in the bardo of the hungerless but the world
seeps in through the groundwater through the sap of trees that translate the sun
into time and nudge the cicadas awake the way headlines creep into
the commercial break the way politics needle the algorithm and I sing
the lullaby louder to drown out the racket still I hear the cicadas just outside
the screen grating new wings like teeth in protest of so much crowded,
touchless space sensing somehow the danger in their numbers each raising
its voice to be heard over the next oblivious to the fact that they are not the only
hungry ones all their self-centered trilling: a dinner bell
for beaks and claws in every direction but these days you are learning
how to use a fork and you insist on feeding me too waving half-chewed
ravioli at my mouth with a smile and an *mmm* and I swallow the thing before it
falls apart, satisfied that if the earth is about to feast on the bodies of the loud
for a time it might be full enough to ignore the quiet arrival
of brighter wings

On Seeing Dennis Quaid at the Pizza Parlor

Well well well if it isn't my VHS childhood in the flesh, posing like a wax replica of himself, a little melted, holding the hand of a woman forty years his junior over the checkered tablecloth at Toscana's while I bounce a sugar-high toddler in a splash zone of red sauce and loose parm, all of us trying to see him out of the corner of our eyes as he walks to the bathroom, trying to remember whether or not he found Jesus and was it him who dropped that gospel album, which is a nice little something to hang over his head as we watch him swagger to the toilets in the back, smiling the tight smile of someone who knows we will remember it for the rest of our lives, but he got the timing wrong and now he's stuck in line just behind our table where I can feel his eyes on us as I bounce bounce bounce my feral child, and we do our best to be worthy of his interest or boredom, just to be held by those A-list eyes, straining to see ourselves as he might see us, or as we want to be seen: Madonna and babe, the beaming rabble, tomatoes turning in every hidden hand, our faces shining in their halos of grease.