

We Other Americans

Disclaimer

In the spirit of penmanship, I confess:

This poem is not mine.

It is my hand that types it.

It is my hand that carves it in stone.

It is my mind that wonders why I ever left home.

But as much as I am not one,

this poem is not mine. Until I can reunite

with the street corners where I vanished at dusk;

until I can in one sentence summarize

all three things I learned from an old pamphlet,

this thing of answering true: name, place, purpose.

Then, in the spirit of penmanship, I confess:

this poem is never to be mine.

We Other Americans

Citizenship for bodies like ours is transient,
dependent on the keepers' gaze, their way
of measuring our worth by the pound.
How can we be seen, I say, seen, not fossilized

in a ledger merely accounted for & forgotten,
shelved until it's too late to be salvaged
& then what? We sour like curd,
another word for rotting life?

Of course, we are told: keep your eyes
wide open watch what burns atop the hill. Yes,
we say, and yet to call our bodies
into the clearing light, we run

Against being what doesn't belong, won't be seen.
And the act of seeing the opposite end
of breathing under the shepherds' cold gaze
is not-passive. It stems

from bearing witness to dread, a political act
our bodies must remember creation
is a thing of little girls and fawn.
In truth, no nation

can this land birth
when at processing plant's checkout counter,

at the metal cages they keep what must rot
to appreciate what is shelved

for sale, bodies like ours conditional
citizens, other Americans,
still wait for the shore's delayed promise of property,
a debt we still service each spring.

But once we decide to act, creative accounting
can never ensnare us. If only we remember,
what the grassroots taught: our kinship
to black matter, this way of reclaiming our colors
still buried by those who won't look up.

Colonization

I

A man once landed on a green beach,
and sorry he could not
in his stern hands hold
the beauty of the land
without crushing it,
called it virgin
to justify his desire to abuse it.
He had no name
for the pau-brasil and jatobá,
he knew trees fell when hammered,
so he hammered them
until they were short
like him, dry
like him, dead
like him,
and he called that progress.

II

A man once wrecked on my coast
and sorry he crossed my valleys
without asking claimed me
for his nation. He ached
for something to quell his hunger.
His wandering mouth,
through no fault of its own,
carved canyons on my skin.

I assume, he smelled the gold
I kept under my tongue, I assume,
he only wanted to taste the fruits
borne on my shores,
so starving from sailing
whence nothing good
had before blossomed
and was that not proof
of his God-like kindness?

III

A man, the same man with other faces,
a father, a conquistador,
looks at the grove that houses
my black eyes and asks:
is it okay
to take & take & take
but he already has the answer
and I no longer have a tongue
I am land; he is White,
we both know the role
we came to play. I assume
he doesn't want to be reminded
of the flesh
behind the fruit, I assume,
of the bones dusting
under his fingernails. Instead,
he asks what I call the tall palms
he aches to lumber.

Perhaps too beaten,
Perhaps too virgin and green,
I say: whatever you like,
and he smiles, like I gave him
something worth holding.

Damned

Because he thought he was not watched,
the man bent the hills and caged our tongues
into a dome of his own doing.

As if he were the water wasting
through the valley of our brownness,
the man damned us to mud, then vanished.

How could we,
the land who birthed the man,
the land who fed his starving hands,

How could we,
the ore that bound in place his flesh,
be washed away into nothing?

We gave everything to the man:
with open mouths, we laid bare our bodies,
an open vein for his undoing.

Did we not let him,
like a New World vulture,
nest in our copper chests?

Did we not let him,
like an unknown mammal,
pig out the beans we saved for winter?

Because he thought we could not stop
his grayness from growing in our wombs,
the man forgot to dam the children,

who coiled in their serpent skins,
and slithered through his legacy,
to overcome his tradition of silence.

National Dream

I once wrote an anthem
in the tongue you taught me
I once built a shelter
for the smallness of our bodies.
But what is left of this dream?

Of the poem, an open wound
where iron buried our child skin.
Of the house, without you
never a home, respite in the Atlantic's
warm mouth.

You pray: "Recall the spell
cast on our skin! They do not own
the letters of our name."

I ask: "Does their myth manifest
the wasting of our golden kingdom?
Or, once fed to the mangueira
for christening, am I local?"

It's a national struggle: becoming
a bird whose song is ridden with roots,
whose flesh is made from red dirt,
that can change the fate of nations,
fill our bellies with room,
quench our thirst like a king.