

THE OLD DOG

The old dog trusts blindly
bumping into walls
stuck in corners
until I gently set him right.

18 months gone
his family moving overseas
he joined us
the forgotten puzzle piece
shaped by years to fill their needs
dropped off at a strange house
now the odd one out
welcomed with my sigh of resignation.

Fed and walked with my dogs
he felt for a fit
sunning on the summer deck
by the winter wood stove
out of the way at first
then gradually underfoot
tripped over more often than not.

The months ground his age up a year
and again
clouding his eyes dark
distilling him to knobby bones
bowed like the uncomfortable arch of the grave
his gait marionette stiff.

His dependency looped strings to me
tugging my attention
first the steps outside
then the cycle of diapers washed and dried
stretching soft fleece over his cold frame
each new task another hook in my chest.

Now, the dark hour before dawn
I lift him
cradled to my breast
safe from resentful nips
of the sleeping host

And carry him outside
standing vigil as he
presses his back legs down
a stream of liquid staining the ground
then curls further to eliminate
before wide turning
a boat adrift from its mooring
to face the steps

Entering the house
I gather him close
whispering in his deafness
that I recognize his goodness
and refastening his diaper
I take a moment to rub spine and ears
then turn to climb back to my slumber
as he circles once and collapses onto his bed

For how can I not love
the one who needs so much
yet asks for nothing.

PAINT SET

You find the set of gouache at the bottom of a drawer of
miscellaneous art supplies,
the rubber band, that holds closed the plastic cover, long decayed,
But the tubes of colored pigments still line up proudly,
their chests puffed out.

You wonder who owned it last,
if visions swirled in their eyes, and if they felt the same anticipation that dances in you
as you pry the lid off,
water, brush, and paper at the ready

To find the tubes hard, stiffened by time's passage,
not squeezing readily onto the palette.
Though hopefully re-purposed by cutting the foiled covers back
to expose their insides.

You rub water laden bristles over the dried bellies,
and ponder if the previous painter has also hardened,
underground somewhere, perhaps,
slowly dissolving.

Is their ghost looking on now, placing a smudged hand over yours as you work the brush
back and forth
back and forth
over the exposed pigments, coaxing the colors to release?

You think about your own body's gradual
petrification and how good a massage might feel,
sinking belly down, your shirt peeled back,
letting warm oiled weight
touch press and smooth
touch press and smooth.

And you think about
her brittle silences,
lined up over calendar days

and what possible lubricant you might find
to saturate them.

If only emotion's armor were as easily removed
so that you could somehow work the tangled knots free.

You would gladly swim in all its shades:
from abrasive orange, painful violet, pale pink hope,
green sorrow, red laughter...

If only they would flow into words again.

COCOON

This morning as she leaned into his hug,
his chest cushioning hers,
she realized, "I am safe here."

Dipping open hands into that feeling,
she started spinning threads of affirmations,
casting them up and around,
giving herself plenty of room for growth.

She thought of her past cocoons,
their tightened husks sloughed off.
sometimes the emergence had been abrupt -
sometimes slow and laborious.

She remembered first the fantasy inflated bubble,
gleaned from flashlight-lit pages,
popped by a mother's sharp tongue,
then the collapsed scaffolding of schoolbooks,
the buzz-thrum of busy-always-busy work,
ah, those comforting biases of belonging,
and the careful rituals,
the dampening of drink,
all these spent casings swept into
the compost of her past.

Some she had constructed dutifully,
following prescribed blueprints.
others, she hastily slapped up with
desperate instinct,
compelled by the ache of her biology,
or the push of society, of fear, of pain, of bitterness,
each shell infused with its own flavor.

But this morning, the weft is sweet,
and she knows she will savor the weaving.

Perhaps the next time she bursts free,
even her very flesh,
webbed with stories,
will fall away.

THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

I look up from the road's curve,
rimmed with stone walls, leaning trees,
and history

to see your bumper in my rear-view mirror
muscled as a bully,
the proud logo centered.

And I wish you wouldn't.
crowd and push me faster
with your impatience.

Don't you realize how hard I've worked at slowing down?
on these country lanes in this
small community,

the struggle to unclench lists of expectations
propelling me always past the now,
to fight free of the hurry-up current
and find the quiet, unique, drift
of a hometown,

to look up, allowing my gaze to be an invitation,
and listen for the layered notes of the story
outside my head -
a shared harmony.

to notice that connection is as necessary
and profound as breath.
I am opening a space inside myself, expansive enough to hold us all,
with room for conversation and kindness,
for messiness and reverence,
a cathedral of stillness and wonder.

Please do not hurry me.
I am going the speed limit.

BOOKKEEPING

When I do my bookkeeping,
I feel a great weight in my chest.
I start with January 1st,
not this January, but the January hidden back
behind more than twelve moon cycles -
reasoning long erased.

When I do my bookkeeping,
I clean the refrigerator, scour the sink,
re-pot the plants struggling in winter's window light.
I organize the piles of clothes,
accumulated piles of confusion to wade through
before I sink into early-dark sleep.

When I do my bookkeeping,
each line item – laboriously unlocked -
opens memories:
a child in crisis, reckless decisions,
impulse buys, project supplies,
a child in crisis, impulse buys.

When I do my bookkeeping,
I enter my failings, one by one,
and my columns crumble into the chasm
like spent and discarded Band-Aids.

When I was a child, polishing the accomplishments that garnered
my parents notice – coin held and with-held –
If someone had told me that sorrow cannot be bought off, would I have understood?

And now?

As I tally up those one-click, phone-swipe mirages hastily thrown at the wounds,
do I understand now?