

No Longer Useful

In the predawn push of rush hour traffic,
the open-eyed doe on the highway shoulder
meets my eye as if still taut and breathing,
her soul already abandoning
the heavy cage of her body
as she rests like a shattered statue
on the side of the road,
and I, late to work, swarm among
the masses trapped on this thoroughfare
of horns and flashing lights,
streams of people surging towards
what exactly -
fast and tumbling, restless and rolling
as a river over rocks.

Her forest is lost somewhere far beyond
the steaming asphalt,
flaming stoplights,
screeching sirens,
peeling tires,
belching exhaust
when her sudden frantic stride
toward safety
meets with metal
and a crushing thud -
spine on hood and legs
briefly a ballerina's
against a moonless sky
before spiraling off
to the side, breath breaking
like a dam emptying into its source
as I bridge the exit ramp curve
to witness the moment after.

Her black disks still catch light,
throw it to me before the sun spills
its way over this pulsing street,
crawling across her heaving
breast, holding the slightest sliver
of recognition before flattening black
and unseeing, utterly abandoned,
so if I move her to the grass,
she will still be warm, perhaps
a second heart beating
inside, and I think of the phone,
the police, the raging rush of emergency
to cut her open in the last release of blood
through veins quickening with cold before it is too late -
why her eyes flickered to me, begging me
to stop, to weigh what she asks,
my own womb empty but for futile bleeding.

But on this side of our human hell
where every thrust of traffic poisons us
in swells of smoke, we gasp like animals
called to our deaths much too early,
can I pull over? Save what remains
so I can tell myself I did everything
I could before it all rots, decays,
must be carted away by thick-gloved men
with unshaven beards wordlessly arriving
too late in a rusty pick-up piled with blood-stained
shovels saved solely for this purpose -
this disposing of what was once achingly beautiful
lost now somewhere under an overpass
on a cold curve of highway where things
no longer useful linger until finally slipping away

as if never there at all?

I am late and do not stop.

The Right Kind of Woman

Here is the hard truth of it:

the bitch who lives in my skin
has carved her way into my heart
claws sharpened to pristine points
that glint and sparkle when dragged
across the frozen terrain of hesitant
beating muscle

Yesterday when your hand brushed mine
on the sun-dappled gravel trail
she bucked and slammed into my rib cage
like a wild animal trapped in an attic
throwing itself against walls and windows
until blood puddled deep enough to leak
three floors down to the dirt

I have always been a bird shit marble bust
my body: a betrayal of near-boyhood,
breastbone curved outward like the bend
of an archery bow so any alluring swells
fell into the cavern of my chest, illiciting
apologies and red-faced shame.
Sharp-fanged braces, dried-out perms,
stub-toed feet that next to yours look
like fish fins. *I'm sorry, so sorry*

I learned that loving men is a live minefield
a white-knuckled life and death dance
I enter into with teeth bared like a rabid tiger rushing headlong
into a battle of torn flesh and shattered bone.
Love me anyway, I'd beg as I stripped naked for shock
the skinny-dip not to be denied, all the flat planes
and deadly edges hidden in darkness and the shadows of water

And as I'd kneel against the night sky, it'd drink itself down
to cloak me, my head heavy as a wrecking ball
how can I touch your hand in the innocent curve of
can-we-start-again when I always thought
I'd be the right kind of woman: the loving, loyal wife
not this wicked hag, this blackened pearl, this broken-winged
crow beating itself to death on the side of the road
the same thin-hipped girl who grew faint from starvation
veins pumped with revulsion, rejection, a self sabotaged by hate
but as you turn to face me now, eyes filled with forgiveness,
fingers gently placed in my bleeding palms,

instead of wondering *WHY?* in the screaming rush
of vulnerability laid bare, I whisper *how?*
as you apply the tourniquet and lay me down.

Layout From the High Dive

When my father launched a layout
from the high dive, the lake drew up its heels -
sandcastle constructions, splashing contests,
lifeguard training runs, can't-put-down beach reads,
utterly forgotten.

Hands palm up in supplication,
in communion,
in the hard steel confidence
of man at his most powerful,
he'd pause before the pump upward,
his toes on the board,
the crouch before take-off,
and I'd sucked in my breath,
hold it like a secret when his thighs,
chiseled as a marble god,
extended up so his raised hands reached
to catch clouds playing chase, hopeless
in the face of his IT, while the full extension
of his body against the sky's blue canvas
made its own shadow on the afternoon,
a spread-eagled savior on the cross
as his perfectly timed arc brought his feet
around toward the water and he sank
without a splash, water swallowing him
as time resumed its ceaseless surge forward
and I watched for his break through the surface.

I'd exhale when his otter body emerged,
ebony hair soaked and sparkling in the sun,
light playing off his shoulders and spine
as he'd stroke freestyle to the ladder.
And as he climbed onto shore,
the beach found its voice again,
laughter and splashing, shouting for
ice cream and ever-lasting summer.

But people peeked beneath their
squinting lids, shaded their eyes
with sun-dappled fingers to glance quickly
at the man who caught the clouds
in their race with time, who,
in his miraculous found-freedom,
etched himself on the sky
for the briefest of moments
before sinking down.

No Delicate Dancer

Her fury flashes with such brilliance -
visible for miles, it ricochets
off the blooming
bending oaks, letting loose
their miniature aircraft
spinning in the restless wind
like music box ballerinas
stripped of their steadfast springs
and quick-clasp lids
that let go easily to release
great swells of tinny sound
spooling out for hours
with no delicate dancer left
to shape the sweeping symphony.

It has the energy
of a camera in the dark
snapping shots in quick
succession - blackness
opaque and inky behind
but in the foreground,
her hair igniting in white flames
as she watches the wolves
spill like water in great waves,
surging up the hillside, seduced
by the bonfire at the top
where she has stilled but burns
with such radiating heat,
the night splits open with lightning -
severing the sky in jagged aftershocks,
spike-toothed seams that frame
her as a reigning, undiscovered
force of nature.

And as she slams out
the front door,
its crashing an unanswered
prayer, her brother eyes me
with a much older man's furrowed brow,
worry lines and wrinkles
I will remember later
when he whispers,
"Is she coming back?"

I admit I do not know.
The wolves are pacing
at the screen,
their breath casting
shadows on the glass,
dripping snouts dragged
across like markers on a map
I've never read
and their panting echoes
the wind at their heels,
flattening them against
the house in a stampeding
mass of animal need

and her scent hovers:
stale unwashed hair,
bitten fingernails
and unmistakable electricity -
the frenzy it causes
slamming against panes
that cannot contain it,
clawing its way in,
her wake vacant, empty
with the same wild canine
howling and in its void,
I will her where she can
abandon the beasts
to devour what they will
as her incandescence
attracts instead the softest

down of a moth's wing
bumping gently
against the light
as it tries to make
its way through the dark.

Settling, The Hudson River Valley

Before Wiltwyk and that great walled stockade that defined our borders,
we worshipped the confluence of creek to river, flooding the banks
with fertile ferns and foliage, ripening crop beds, emboldening
the oxygen in shared veins, one native, one settler,
our mothers' skirts pulled up and knotted at the thigh.
One white, one brown, Dutch and Esopus,
making twig dolls in the grass, chins dribbling the juice
of Macintosh, Empire, Granny, and laughing,
open-mouthed, teeth sparkling like ivory stars
in night sky mouths that know no difference,
no color, no trade but sweet sap sticking to
grimy earth-dusted fingers, envious crows
circling overhead like macabre halos, harbingers
of thunderheads in the West, the mad scramble
for cover, for soil, for the throne at the head of the table.

The pitch-pine oaks and rush of river over stone
smoothed the storm of resentment for days,
so that fires burned in rock rings and muzzles
hung cold on breezy barn doors.
I know we were not afraid, not yet, in that valley
of Rondout's swell into the Hudson.

The Gray's Sedge and Wild Rye pushed
through the cracks of our floorboards
and Silver Maples canopied our games of tag
and skipping stones, the stretch of afternoon
that knew only women meeting
in the stream's apex, trading secrets, stripping pelts.

Look at us there in the 17th century, our feet
filthy with the dust of another's land, appeasing
our stabs of guilt with fine white linen, the copper glint
of tea kettle, mortar and pestle already ground down
to flawless bone.

But what of trade and its mutual bounty that wanes
like sunlight over a stone wall? The river's heaving heart
pulled up as the men took sides, stood on opposite banks,
demanded concession of the water, of each other.

And when the current would not bend, massive stones
were hauled up the hill we once tumbled down like rabbits,
drilled so deeply into the dirt, my hand on the cool husk
of shale catches the same light it did then, skin so pale
it is nearly transparent.

See how the bones meet there at the wrist, each finger
a branch reaching from the same trunk, the same rush
of water, the same river bed where lives pause and swirl,
however briefly, without seams, without colors, without skin,
greed hushed as the water surges forward,
washes over us, baptizes us anew
until.