

Five Pieces to Assemble After the Pandemic

1.

The intimate partner who decides to stay
understands—like you, standing too close on the train—
It's all about the distance we keep, or give away.

2.

At the roadside shrine (an ATM) the cash machines' eyes
spy our indulgences, our withdrawals, and confessions.
Masking-up becomes escaping-down-into-disguise.

3.

We say to the faith healer—there are some situations
a sense of humor cannot help.
We say to the traveler—be careful, transience can be transformation.

4.

From a plane, you glimpse fireworks from the top,
like dandelions, they blow and spread.
Like a near-death experience, illuminated, you wonder where it stops.

5.

How long do you allow, to catalogue loss?
How long will you wait, to do what comes next?
You climb out of the furrow, spit out the dirt, and plant what it costs.

I Keep Looking Even After They Find Your Body

Blurry, stuttering sightings I create of you tonight,
As I pedal through a rancid underpass in the dusk, preoccupied
with trivialities that magnify and sizzle each time
My wheels spin out into the late-slanting sunlight.

In thirsty confusion, rolling through odd commerce,
a beach boardwalk trafficking in visions, I scan the flimsy pastel booths, expecting
in the glimpse of an open face, to glimpse you: in the incense vendor,
the turbaned chair masseuse, in the sad-eyed seller of silk scarves.

Sand covered sidewalks crowded with ersatz beach-types: personas pasted up
with pasty fried dough, elevated by catechisms of candy. And the goddesses
of antiquity, faded but somehow still all-powerful—are they here too,
for a limited time, stripped of clout and street clothes?

I long for an orange but find auras, tarot cards, or just tourists,
lost in place after following their GPS. Watching the suspended performers,
a parody of crucifixion or worse. A curious circus-echo,
these slackline, slack-eyed kids. Yes, maybe, you linger here.

But you've multiplied, a hoard, since I last pedaled through.
Poking in the trash, lighting fires. And how had you, all of you,
grown younger? In a chorus of voices you ask questions of yourself,
of each other: Who do they think? Am I?

I straggle through the stalls, among yarn crafts and kombucha, watching
for you sidelong. All the hangers-on have drifted. No one lingers for the show
except for police. I picture us rolling along on wide, clean tires,
possessing every confidence without obstacle.

Where did you end up, after all? The question keeps me looking.
The twilight breaks deeper. Where will you, where will I rest tonight?
I cup your last luminous words in my hands. But there are no lightning bugs
floating along this shore. I spread my fingers: they still in there?

People, the real and the immaterial, are all behind now and I am left
with my notions of pristine seascape, and escape: a rhythmic, sparkling aqua
from some past perception that conjures safe harbor. Oh, I thought
I might just spot you on this beach! Is that really too much to ask?

284th Day of Quarantine [Social Distancing] (Self-Isolation)

She woke as if waking were ageing
alone in her sheet like a swaddle
or a shroud

And if only she could swim back down
into that unconscious possibility
of blue depth and flickering sunlit green
of still-could-happen
of knowing-but-not-remembering
of enfolding fern and velveteen moss

Wandering through fragrant decay
in the woods behind her childhood home
where no one ever looked or wondered
where had she gone?
because all was familiar
and, even small, even a girl
she could kick through a brook
climb an ancient boulder
sail it along the ocean of dead leaves
swept forward by the swoosh of pines
the heaviness of other people lifted
a solitude unspoiled by knowledge
unspooled by imagination

So unlike this morning's aloneness
that the memory like a cherished grief
prompts her to sit up
leaden but awake.

The Last War, Cranberry Island

Dusty in their faded shorts of summer salmon
Barefoot children eye the puddles that stand
Where the drainage ditch thundered, a stream only yesterday
When yesterday's rain rushed leaves through the sand.

Vivid bikers pass, spilled by the morning boat
On rough, rutted roads, raising clouds, popping stones
Vacant-gazed, voices rising on air that felt vacant there
When the children with sticks beat the path alone.

Cobalt refractions callow the light, color the pace
Dawdle in the road, like the girls and the dogs
Wandering unleashed as if the century hadn't blown by
Like a toxic spill or a distant city's smog.

Run your finger round the rim and whiff
Summer's music lingering in a cola cup
Remember deep fat and fish and food in boxes
At the boarded up shack where the bikes pull up.

Remember how the last war, and the one before
Set so much motion, gave us meaning
And every painting, film reel, every unearthed pyramid chamber
Feeds evidence of endless states of grieving.

A girl on her own in the breakers kicks water
Dances on sunburnt legs, far from the path
Screams and splashes at the dogs in the sand
That run off, but are coming back.

Each Tender Pepper in the Tijuana Jail

I am still climbing the metal stairs of the Tijuana jail,
dishing out watery beans with rice.
I dipped the ladle decades ago
but imagine serving still,
Imagine men locked in,
the jail full now as then.

While prepping the soup
the boy said
“It’s dangerous.
I had to take a volunteer to the hospital once.”
He meant the #10 cans of jalapeño peppers,
green missiles floating in toxic brine.
“Squirted her right in the face;
the ER was maybe scarier than the jail.”

So when I pressed the knife
into the flesh
of each tender pepper
I closed my eyes hard.