

The Thread

Sun strikes river ripples
lancing through to the rocky bed
my heart a thousand slivers of light
longing to flow beyond the boundary
where you called my name for the first time
so that I might know it as I plunged away
from the place where river and bed blurred in love
where we left each other.

Where are you? If you held me
in your hand would I know?
Blood pulses circling back
Seeking. I let my hands weep.
Liver and bile, nails and teeth
all sing under the silt
yearning for your answer.

Take me over that bridge finer than a hair
more precise than a weapon, over the reeking marsh.
I long to hear a sweet cry from the reeds
smell perfume warmed over an oily brazier.
I will dance to get your attention—

You, sitting in the lote tree's shade
سِدْرَةُ الْمُنْتَهَى *Sidrat al-Muntahā*
listening to all rivers.
Pain will be my vehicle while I wait.

Long Time Burning

Once 50 years ago, trying to belong, I smelled acrid smoke behind me
in the bleachers, alone, at the Garfield High School basketball home game.

I turned to the upper bleachers, brown girls snickering behind me.
Three had set my long hair on fire and were waiting – hence the smoke.

They waited to see what I would do. My hair frizzled, but I wasn't afraid.
I didn't make trouble. I knew what they wished for and all that I had.

They didn't need more trouble. I knew what they endured and all that I had.
The sulfurous stench and sizzle as bitter on plantations long ago,

Just as bitter on plantations not long ago and more than hair burning,
wafting charcoal. Guilt can relieve. The careless cruelty is almost a comfort.

The cruelty is a comfort. Guilt can smolder like an ember in moss.
Surely my ancestors inhaled such caustic smoke. I fear the worst.

They wait to see what I will do. I am not afraid of smoke, but
Bleached bones and ash, remnants of rope. 50 years. It's all behind me.

High School Students at the Pond

"A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air." H.D. Thoreau

Lichen crawls the fallen branches
morning sun pinches vivid green
against grayish wood and spotted oak leaves.
Moss nestles the north side of gnarled roots,
maples just yellow after first frost.

The pond pleats from east to northwest
as the breeze provokes it; a persuasive wind
moves the treetops back from west to east.
Sunlight streams into swags
sweeping away the slight mist of morning.

What higher laws can they practice, these young people?
as their futures rush them?

They are wise in the way of all woodland creatures
who have not lost sight of themselves.
They eat words to strengthen their bones,
balanced at the brink.

The pond is vitreous satin now.
Their images mirror over the mulm,
fertile undiscovered dark a beginning.
Tracking through their own undergrowth
they are beginning to know
how plenty rises from loss,
how rich decay teems with life.

Passage

The fresh river *Mahicantuck*,
River that Flows Two Ways
ripples down from the north but gets pushed
back by salty Atlantic tides four times a day.
Searching for a route to China or India,
Hudson sailed north on the *Half Moon*
not so much lost as bemused.

My father, also seasoned voyager,
navigated to the Hudson Valley questing to know
and claim the territory of his own mind,
even as he readied for his final voyage.

On his first birthday in the afterlife,
we stand over the Hudson at Poughkeepsie.
Weightless he flies up and out somewhere between
bridge and molten silver of early spring water.
Next by Rondout Creek in Kingston,
a slink of water slides gently towards the river,
reflections of trees suspended beneath his swirl.
Gulls paint white-winged swaths across the stream
against the gray-green canvas of afternoon.

Next morning we trudge out wind-whipped to the
lighthouse where the Esopus Creek slaps
small whitecaps against shivering reeds.
He spreads rapidly on the jostling currents,
winds out towards mid-river, and sails briskly south.
On the metal bridge in Saugerties over the falls,
we pitch the last of him; the patch of ashcloud
coasts irreversibly towards the rumbling dash.
He floats on, flux transforming him: dragon,
thunderstorm, brightly painted three-masted ship,
sailing downriver.

Out on the open sea, my father's bones find each other
and knit towards the horizon, back across the Atlantic through
the Strait of Gibraltar, froth into the deep harbor of Alexandria,
mix between the rocks where boys still dive for urchins,
as he once did. Not lost after all. Not all searches take us
from home. Not all discoveries have names.

Spring Cleaning the Attic

Clanking amidst old curtain rods and abandoned bed frames
Christmas decorations rank with dust and mice,
Boxes of slides, letters vanishing from fax paper,
notebooks and certificates devalued with time,
we find...

My father on the Corniche with his grim-faced family
planning his bolt from bitter morals and enforced sweets.
My stylish mother before she could know of the betrayal to come
relishing her escape from Lutheran hygiene to a risky life of beauty and pain.
My mother, brother and me standing on the dock in front of the *Aurelia*,
palace of my first seasickness crossing from Hoboken
to Le Havre in a misery of gurgling drains.
Meticulous Paris journal by my mother post-divorce,
mentioning sixteen-year-old me as a character in her stoic play.
Photo of my cat-eyed lover, long dead, and my father's mistress
with her bold thighs in the flowing dress, smiling at him,
always the eye behind the camera.
Dozens of images of my gawky little brother, exuberant me
with my arm often protecting his bony shoulders.

I am released from this particular story,
metamorphic in its impact.
Now I star as the grandparent of my former self,
every morning changeable and unbound.
The heap of dusty trash and recycling on the street
grows larger and larger by the day.
I curate certain tokens and words for my children and
grandchildren to find, picture them opening boxes
taken out of storage some day,
calling in wondering voices, "Oh- look at this!" or "Who is that?"

