

a poem about mothers

Tina writes a post
because this time
this time they've gone too far
"have you heard? they're outlawing plastic bags! this is so stupid!"
it used to be we fished for compliments
but now we bait our hooks with outrage and grievances
casting from a ship called
"Entitlement"
hoping to catch loves and likes
and Tina is trolling in familiar seas
where whole schools of friends and family
churn the waters
waiting to feed and give back,
feed and give back
feed
and give back
until only the bones of their discontent remain
sinking to the bottom
forgotten

my fingers hover over the keys
fingertips at battlestations
I've got torpedo tubes full of truth
because I am an educator
I whistle past graveyards but not
teachable moments
Tina's lulled to sleep on the deck of her ship
I want to wake her up
set an alarm clock
with the sounds
of a sperm whale
beached on an Italian shore
mourning the dead calf she still carries
dying
because her stomach is packed with fifty pounds of plastic bags
packed so tightly the scientists that open her up when she dies say it was as hard as
a baseball

fifty pounds of plastic
she starved to death because she was always full
I want to ask Tina if she's ever used her teeth
to rip open a string cheese
or a freeze pop
for her daughter
if she ever accidentally swallowed that thin strip of plastic
if she could feel empathy
for a mother who tried to nourish her child
on the detritus of human convenience

instead,
I stand down
click "unfriend"
because I'd rather swallow an ocean's worth of shopping bags
than waste one more moment
teachable or otherwise
trying to convince a mother
that her convenience isn't worth the price
of dying whales mourning dead calves on the beaches of Italy.

the boy achilles

Greg was the most dangerous kid in the world

I grew up next door to a boy made of skinned knees and curse words
daredevil bruises and dirt
who never heard a double-dare
that scared him
because the truth was
books bored him
and if he ever cracked a dictionary
he never got far enough to learn the definition of “fear”

I worshipped him

to me he was everything I wanted to be
to me he was everything I was afraid to be

the summer we were ten Greg never stopped wearing camouflage
every day - army boots, camo pants, camo jacket, camo hat
he was a boy painted with Rambo’s palette
drew inspiration from sketches of Arnold
hunting predators in alien jungles
because that summer - he was at war
this was not our usual game
where we donned grease paint
and ran through the woods firing toy guns -
our enemies were not the soldiers of our imaginations
nor the teachers that vexed him even during summer vacation
vexed him so much he drew their mugshots
just to shoot with bb guns

our enemy
was the humble honey bee
you see
Greg’s mom got some intel that spring
handed him some new marching orders
handed me an epipen
told him he couldn’t go outside without covering up

turned his camouflage into a suit of armor
turned my hero into a mortal
and suddenly
I understood what Patroclus probably felt
when folks would cough
and mumble that maybe Achilles shouldn't take his boots off

Greg didn't take his newfound mortality lightly
he hated his mother for revealing this weakness
hated me for knowing it
hated the bees for owning it
for no creature had ever had power over him
and despite his mother's demands
he planned
plotted and schemed
he built Trojan horses from the skeletons of old tree forts
tore them down again because
subterfuge was beneath him
he wanted the bees to know his naked aggression
so he ripped the sleeves from his jacket
bared his freckled arms and
dared them
made a torch from a broom and some tool shed gasoline
tried to sack a buzzing Troy and was grounded until he was seventeen

he was the bravest person I have ever known

today, I understand that Greg was not a boy at all
he was boyhood
an avatar
the living embodiment of what it meant
to be the boy sketching with unsteady hands
the blueprint of the man
the architect of my adolescence
he was the rights and the wrongs
the stolen beer and filthy songs
the eggs thrown at cars on halloween
the lies you told your mom so she wouldn't ground you
the lies you told your mom so she wouldn't lose faith in you

the bravery that etches itself into your skin
telling the epic poem of your childhood
so that when the time comes
when the demands of manhood call on you to be more than you are
you can look down at those scars
find inspiration in old heroism
when you ran through the Elysian fields of your childhood
chasing the slings and arrows on the backs of bees
with a sleeveless boy Achilles.

sleeping sickness

Sometimes, when we sleep together
I wake up in the middle of the night
and stare at where you lay
your soft form cloaked
in twisted sheets and shadow
unmoving
lifeless
dead?
suddenly my love for you manifests itself
in worst-case scenarios
I invent aneurysms and blood clots
murderous robots sent back in time to
break my heart
undiagnosed heart defects and
asphyxiation - did you go out like Hendrix?
or maybe Rumpelstiltskin came to collect on an old debt
vampires, assassins, a ghost child crawling on the ceiling
my love is the fear I'll lose you
my fear is that you have succumbed to every horror of my imagination
and I slept through it
until
my eyes adjust
and I see the gentle rise and fall of your chest
only then
when I know you've survived the worst of my nightmares
can I fall back to sleep.

summer school

In summer school
I teach barbarians
I wave novels like white flags
at 8th grade berzerkers
who come to class with their own tales
boasting of broken noses in backyard brawls
fist fights during bathroom breaks
gang-style beatdowns
on empty playgrounds
they hype win-loss records like
they are prize fighters
and not middle school boys
failing English

my syllabus says English
but I practice anthropology
studying this warrior culture in our midst
where how many hits you've got on your fight video
is far more important than whether
Simon
on that island
was a Christ-figure
all they say is
"he's a pussy for not fighting back"
so I try a different tack
appeal to their violent natures
I offer up slam poetry
toss it into the fighting pits
maybe I can trick them
with something that sounds violent
but I'm wasting my breath
words are for those without the courage
to come down from the stands
these boys are gladiators
content to let the weak write stories about them