

The Secret Language of Trees

Initials and arrow-pierced hearts and  
the promises of lovers - though I wonder, how many  
have left for another - etched into brittle scales at  
the base of a trunk. Trace the tales eternally  
latticed on the face of old abscission.  
I don't believe in the practice of carving trees,  
but when one bares her scars to me,  
I'm obliged to listen.

These timber bodies have their own histories,  
displayed like a perpetual broken heart on  
a tattered sleeve. Wisdom to be imparted upon  
only those who dare to see beyond  
preconceived notions of the stasis of nature -  
such is the basis of mankind's erasure.  
Do you know the secret language of trees?  
I can interpret:

A Southern Sugar Maple,  
sable arms poised lackadaisical, torso perforated  
by holes of bullets, punctuated.  
*Tap. Tap. Tap.* peppers the sapsucker,  
wings aflutter, belly sun-feathered. And the sap  
*drip. drip. drips.* saccharine, amber, and slick  
enshrining insects insufficiently quick to  
flee a tongue's turgid licks.

The Maples selected are often already sick. Such  
predilections manifest as generous benefactions  
born from the intersection of ants and  
sugar-rich blood. The confectionary nectar flows.  
The birds flock in droves, each drills their dose  
'till the flood runs dry, solidified into amber crusts  
that flake like rust and dust and skin in the  
rustles of restless wind.

Who is this conical colossus that looms  
well above her peers? Whose skirt has erupted  
in alabaster blooms?  
Whose perfume - citrusy sweet - and shade cast  
a protective, maternal aura?  
Not an Ash infested with emerald borers,  
nor a second-best beauty, but Miss Southern  
Belle, herself: *grandiflora*.

Magnolia trees, pollinated not by bees  
but by beetles,  
ancient scarabs that scuttle between  
bustles of petals or - my apologies - tepals,  
mandibles munching on ostentatious stamens  
and ovules,  
staples of cretaceous consociation.

More petulant are the Batula -  
the birches riverine,  
the hornbeams - with their skin as thin  
as paper. Scrape or tear away that peripheral  
layer and find eyes that memorize  
the visage of a vandal,  
eyes that have witnessed the pillage of  
labor's fruits and seeds.

The eyes of the birches follow  
those wandering the hollows of the canopy -  
where the sun's lust seeps and percolates,  
illuminating serrated leaves,  
glowing green exaggerate, corinthian ornamentation  
atop a pallid column, where the swallows  
flock and sing in vibrato.

Elms - debilitated, too - crippled,  
skin riddled with arachnid designs that  
mime the mystique of Nazcan lines.  
Yet such divine tattoos come not from Peru  
nor from those who weave sinuous, diaphanous tapestries  
that bridge the sagging flags yielding green  
to yellow to brown - a crown wilting  
before summer's last bow.

No, the maladies that afflict these trees  
have crossed the seas on the backs  
of beetle babes - larvae that leech, that  
burrow into the vasculature, halting  
the flow in xylem, starving the phloem,  
apertures rupture. Here, scarabs are the vector  
of Dikarya's extirpation. Scarce is the care for an Elm  
whose bark bares the scars of inevitable expiration.

Doomed to surrender her foliar plumage, while sisters,  
cousins, and brothers still bloom viridian.  
Hunger will consume her and soil's  
cradle will entomb her.

A once-fertile girth left after death an estate,  
a gift to the earth, worth the nitrates and sulfates  
and carbonates fated to facilitate rebirth. Such  
is a quick addendum to life's ceaseless agenda.

I am no Lorax, though perhaps I am a  
tree-hugging hippie but I ask not for salvation,  
instead that you open your vision to arboreal erudition.  
From the arbor, echoes chatter of ardor:  
anecdotes exact, tall tales grandiose,  
but only for those who know to stop and listen.  
Will you learn the secret language of trees?  
Will you guard their histories, their expertise?

Thinking of Something Dumb I Said Two Years Ago

I must've been built wrong,  
skull attached backwards, mind scattered, possessed by thoughts of nothing that matters.  
Sleep claws at my eyelids,  
but the moment repeats itself, faster and faster  
and there's nothing I can do to change it -  
it's in the past now.

I survived.

I'm still in tact, but as a matter of fact  
every time I try to forget, I'm  
constantly reminded – in bed,  
in the bathroom, walking to classes.  
It's psychosomatically symptomatic:

First, there's a shaking and quaking and aching in my hands,  
and I anxiously wait for the palm palpitations to pass.

Then an icy finger of recollection slides up my spine and from the line it draws,  
goosebumps ripple, dappling skin with gaggles of imperfections.

Next, my legs.

They go numb – ghosts of limbs composed of needles and pins and  
I begin to wonder if I've become a mere torso.

Now, hot bubbles percolate behind my freckles,  
speckles of shame blossoming into a flushed flame of troubled humiliation.

But the most visible sign is the contortion of my face,  
an expression laced with traces of disgust and regret  
and sorrow  
at how I know I'll be fixated on something dumb I said two years ago for the rest of the  
day,  
and for tomorrow,  
and for years to come.

Coffee Breath

Curling from lips, tendrils unfurling  
the earliest of mornings.  
Silenced by mints, mint gum,  
minced by the plume and pop of opalescent, wintergreen bubbles  
settling onto the tongue.  
Exhaled, exiled, exhumed  
from sunrise until noon,  
serpentine scent scything every room.  
Trickling through teeth, nostrils held hostage  
by draconic consequences of trying not to be exhausted.  
Depositing saccharine geodes onto plush pink gums,  
weaving through sticky stalactites in the throat with each cough, hum.  
Panted out at the stroke of 4 am  
over shaky hands punctuating hasty papers  
(the perpetual effluvium of masochistic time-wasters).  
From bean to breath, the breadth of its flavor;  
Turkish, mocha, Americano  
bittersweet tastes accustomed to one's favor,  
all create the same acidity -  
  
so I'll take the shame  
that accompanies the java  
for the sake of caffeine I need  
energy lost to entropy.

Things I Swallow

I swallow algae,  
methamphetamines, benzodiazepines  
mushrooms and plants - for and out of empathy

I swallow words  
I swallow my pride  
I swallow probiotics and osmotics to shed my insides

I swallow semen that tastes of salt  
and salt for the electrolytes

I swallow powders and pills, crushed  
by crystals and inhaled through scrolls of dollar bills

I swallow antacid tablets,  
not because they make it easier to get drunk,  
but because my anxiety upon occasion manifests as acid reflux

I swallow antihistamines to fall asleep,  
caffeine to stay awake or to make my heart race,  
and LSD tabs when I feel the urge to escape

I swallow fruit-flavored nicotine  
and a palmful of pomegranate seeds  
à la Persephone

I swallow smoke to get stoned  
and then I swallow stones -  
hoping that they will fill me up,  
weigh me down,  
and I'll wither into bare bone

Where Did All The Nymphets Go?

Where did all the nymphets go?  
swallowing teeth in chattering snow  
blow kissed from glittery, wiggling toes  
souls billowing weak in the winds like  
the arms of a dying willow tree.

Pillow talk comes so easily  
to those who brazenly  
parade through fields of daisies stealing  
pleasures of little ladies -  
paisleys, peonies, panties hemmed with Queen Anne's Lace.

Where did all the coquettes go?  
dancing merrily below a cherry tree  
bearing her blossoms to the fairies orbiting  
planetarily. Pixie toes tipping on mossy clouds,  
loudly, proudly singing a sanguine melody.

They used to bathe in a basin  
in the woods guarded by mazes  
of azaleas. Planting kisses among flowers,  
velvet petals satin to the tongue  
and her bee-stung lips - static and slacken.

Where did all the fawnlets go?  
all doe-eyed and pigeon-toed,  
honeyed skin glowing golden  
and tonguing nectar from bells of honeysuckles ringing,  
legs folded beneath one wavering waifish in the grass.

Wailing, wade into the meadow,  
what was once Eden's haven now  
withered dead and fallen farrow.  
Skeletal trees stooping gloomily, resigning to doom -  
fall to your knees and ask,

"Where did all the young girls go?  
What becomes of them when they grow old,  
& can no longer be goaded or told what to do?  
Are they discarded like fruits - dried, molded, mildewed?"

A lone crow cries upon landing,  
"I am the last of the maidens - now a croan roaming the shadows,"  
with a cough and a caw, she moans  
"I protect those who wander the world alone, like you,  
with eyes babyed blue, beguiling lovers 'til the last sunset of twenty-two."

In its heyday, the fruits of lithesome trees in the mead ripened  
by the first eve of May, but upon infiltration of  
greedy hands plucking ovaries still green, skin peeling back  
teeth lasciviously gnawing and gleaming, claiming “The fruit is sweetest  
taken virginal from the hand of Venus, metamorphosis not yet completed.”