

Coffee Stains

Sonnet for a Single Father

Vacuum-seal toys, Kirkland pretzel sticks;

banana slicers, t-shirts 3-for-1:

Father has gadgets, father has life hacks.

He watches eagles from his morning window.

Absolved agnostic—now he knows much better

that god's a ghost and women make for clutter.

His house too full for other people's stories.

Ironed eyes, he reads his daily rites:

his faith left to Darwin and the New York Times.

Father dealt and taught a proper shuffle.

On rainy days he'd let small gamblers sleep.

Rum raisin cakes and shots of half-and-half.

Doused in cologne, how could we know

that girls do not win men their boyhoods back?

Freshwater Fish

In those days you had to stoop low to see God,
because he was small enough to be caught
in the flash of a freshwater stream.

And when you got a fish
you knew the name of it,
not because of what Linnaeus said,
but because the fish told you so itself.

But on the day I bought a tilapia at the Chinatown market for \$5/lb,
rosebud scales like many sets of teeth,
dull eyes gazing beyond my perception,
something happened
—an alarm went off? a felafel exchange gone wrong?

And if the fish
spoke to me
through some whisper of its limp gills
its true name,
it was drowned out
and I did not hear it.
And if through its wax paper wrapping it tried to ask
for a second death,

by bear or by spear or
after spring's low groan had permitted it to spawn,
that plea dissolved into clattering cans of Mott Street's trash sweep.

Even in my kitchen, over scraps of white wine, spring salad, buttered leeks,
humming Joni Mitchell's "River" over the sound of running water, I did not hear that tilapia utter
one word.

The fish and I would never speak the same language.

I knew that:

because I wanted not to be one of those responsible for misunderstanding.

Babel's Fait,

I imagine the river willows called it,

a Sin of Arrogance,

worse than the Sin of Convenience,

though both offenses left us deaf and exotic to one another.

Sometimes I dreamt that I was one of those fish,
peering at God through the dappled surface of the freshwater stream,
water sliding through each of my slitted nostrils like an intuition;

then I'd hear

the call of my mother tongue,

and I'd be back on dry land.

Intimacy Pt. 1

Take two:

your words are not for us.

They are your own, blooming in Grey Milwaukee,

dotting film strips

chopped into pieces like candy

and strung from speakers

for modern-day performance art.

They are yours to cut,

to make.

Our intimacies split ways

half-flew to the Midwest

mine inclined to stay on the phone

we'd been disconnected, see dream prior

This time not for fear of telekinetics nor

did I stop trusting rather,

I knew you well.

You wanted to know me all the well or dry

No sips for dog days

Our cups poured into one and others

but never filled, never emptied

Spoons collected on sidewalks, found in dishes

I wanted notes on work:

Clinical intimacy

Catch up intimacy

I wanted to know whether

our weathers coincided or not

You said the lake effect

changes the weather anyways.

The Favored Bird

If it was true that those little birds skittered;
If it was true their little skirts flapped like feathers,
revealing peekaboo glimpses of white cotton panties,
skin consummate,
thighs like apricot;

it was equally true
 that the wide virginal eyes
 of the favored bird would shy
 years later
 from what should have been
 the birthright of her pleasure.

True that her body would assume
the morning glory's form
crimping in on itself to the tune of night's procession;
faithful to its part in that absurd ritual pollination.

 It would wait till dawn's discharge,
 bring her flitting to the streets of Paris,
 where her body would venture take bloom again
 in the asylum of her solitude.

(Here, still, the whistling of mockingbirds
would be mistaken for that of men, then forgotten.)

True enough that blame would enfold itself
in the ruffles of her duvet,
 would lounge dormant in her aesthetic distaste
 for satin kimonos and anything that squawks,
and would point erect to her downy blonde head
from its perch atop the clock,

where with night's return
her wide conscript eyes would lay wanton,
steady,
in the throes of someone else's passion.

The News

mention heartache

mention

Tomato dreams

pressed into history by a potter's hands

waste and memory inscribed in

salt-wet clay

mention, violence

no use for the needing

that distinct disgust reserved for

men not able to mask their

yellowish bloom

you looked tired of the world already

you looked young

some people don't need

to read the news