

Primogeniture

Michigan hometown grown small, first signs of rust.
Three restless boys pester her into fishing,
first perilous week back,
reluctant busy husband flying in Friday.
Gramma's runny eggs half-eaten, T-shirts inside out,
all under-ten-eager piling into the Chevy wagon,
oblivious to dangling fishhooks, quick closeted glances.

No longer Baptist, she takes them down to the
Grand River through the humid horizon of corn,
half-submerged oak trunks grace the family farm's
muddy edge she fled at eighteen
when the slow silty thrashed
with walleye, catfish, and rumors.

Handsome youngest struggles, slow to follow,
insects pierce skin, untied sneakers
slide in steep greasy mucked grass.
Blond-best middle son
boasts his imaginary finish-line victory
besting eldest, thick-glasses-shy,
already weighed down, chaffed neck
burned by the swing of prized camera.
Records family's first trip back
since the hushed
what-her-older-brother-did
stories.

Youngest spills the tackle box in black mud,
pink iridescent salmon eggs – scattered pearls.
He looks up at her with adept innocence
and she's lost beneath anger.
Hard open palm hits
furrowed forehead;
as nervous
shutter
clicks.

Young Cousin Sam

Grapple, flail to grasp sorrow,
young Sam's brain cancer,
never to outgrow childhood.

Through prayer's fabled
promise of grounding answers,
faith approaches on soft tiger paws
then rips away doubt,
swallows and digests the unknowable.

Sobbing mother's devoted hope,
displace grief with faith:
this heavy burden of future insight
never placed on those
who cannot carry it;
a better place now, given, all taken.

Does faith explain and quell,
solace for fear and doubt,
the empty current of angry sadness
and an inevitable, palpable future:
my own love's joyous body decays,
luminous daughters' lives darkened,
excised tumor returns?

Swift flow of my doubting river
erodes prayer's human stories
that entangle and pacify, instead
scours blaming bits of flesh,
washes blood away, lays bare shiny bone.

Buckling loads from cancer and demise:
jolting shadows of life's trembling light.

By their own logic,
with faith or without,
raindrops scatter dust,
all falls that once rose.

Waiting

Horizon's sunset soaks cloud-edges deep red.
Cat gone yesterday through an opened door
while an ominous bushy gray tail
shook shrubs and the bright cloud-clear day.

Venus sets at hill's apex, fox moon yet to rise,
return less likely every dark clutching hour.

Past lessons recalled— To lose all once dear,
we live with consequences, bodies age,
illness befalls, dying our nature:
then a quiet scratching
behind the bolted door.

River's Edge

The river, unbowing brown ghost,
flows through seasons and arteries,
carries sadness and desire,
cleansing with water,
choking with silt.

Spring's swells storm the shallows
dislodge cherished debris,
fairy-tale marriages, empty beer cans
disgorge downstream
closer to sea.

Summer's humid buzz,
tepid water meanders,
in torpor movement stifled,
yet pulsates alive with each thunderstorm's
nose of earth and bone.

Fall's persistent rains overcome
quivering banks and man's inventions,
angry water extricates memories,
foaming rapids tear at life's limits,
dragging down dead trees' devoted limbs.

Winter's raw stretches of black water
pause to freeze, thaw and refreeze,
nagging dreams, repeated mistakes,
ice held in clutching eddies,
unseen life deliberates below.

Every reflected flash in each moment
new water arriving from upstream's past;
unchanging bends, narrows, and riffles,
the deception of permanence
committed by innocent maps.

Without seeming to move us,
the river deposits and destroys,
cradles and shrouds.

Flight of Blood

Before

East Baltimore, humid waypoint for the explorations of a California student wandering neglected backstreets in solitude with aspirations and athletic confidence; hearty greetings from Black neighbors on modest stoops atop white marble steps.

Icy streets ridged like dark backs of whales, famished finches on stone windowsills; then Oakland job, drinks after work – settle into down pillows, sky-blue cotton sheets, weekend trails, meadow naps, creaking pine cones opened by late summer's dry heat.

Changes

But when thirst overtakes, breath burns: the swirling dusk swell of starlings; faint yellow urine oddly foams— repeated blood test even higher, itchy skin turns sallow tan, kidney doctor proclaims “failure.”

Long waits for doctors with no time, more needles, tests yield no answers, sound waves bounce across my abdomen: show one small kidney; white rice unsalted, little else, allotted three cups of water, fist full of pills.

Unprepared

Failed surgeries to ready arm for dialysis, life's likely midpoint flies past; faulty body, caged spirit, while friends, co-workers know nothing, never call in sick but doctor says: answer your mom's questions.

Needed before but absent, her caring now chokes, inflames like sour phlegm; stumble steps sober, blackout moments off the elevator, stay upright, no one to blame for nausea, confusion, and misfortune nesting.

Persistence

Minefield through the nurses' picket line protesting for-profit dialysis wages, anemic fatigue of kidney failure, unrelenting Michael Jackson overhead in clinic; dialysis confidant, a few years older; our hearty jaded laughs harmonize into the abyss.

Huge needles through reticent skin thrice weekly to wash me free of accumulated sins, 15 minutes of action then vigilant hours chained to the faux leather easychair by plastic tubing coursing with briefly ownerless bright crimson cleaned and returned.

Plan

Escape strategy: science fiction requiring unusual patience for walking gravel barefoot; with consent: cut out another's kidney for me, recipient of sanctioned mayhem, primed by more drugs and donor transfusions, paid for by Medicare.

Bad reaction to one brother's blood still leaves the younger, not yet out of college, young sister and old parents ruled out – compel legs to bicycle up the clinic hill, plod through months inserting big needles into my arm, praying for it to end.

Gift

Distracted mother freeway near-crashes, calmly check in to admitting, hope: nearing a summit in shadowless blizzard, ready to turn back; then the miracle: bloody gift of life, brother's kidney peeing.

Not truly mine but off the machine, a starved robin eating fruit, lab tests normal; young nurses startle with attraction, though oozing raw incisions burn and swell, recurrent dreams of black cat's claws toying the live bird of nylon sutures.

Ongoing

Multiple surgical scars, more being added; disfigured in other places, too: desperate dialysis friend hot bath slits his wrist – dizzily airborne, land injured; can only offer a birdcage door to others, circle then glide to safety, wed my best friend.

Deferred calling realized, now a doctor, skeptic of doctors: memoir of nausea held down; My body, primitive altar, but the drugs, decades gnaw at sacrificed nerve endings, specter of sparrows darting within my muscles push me off balance.

Equipose

Almost fly free, struggle to wayfind with tended wings, a survivor's quirks: Apologize too much, jokes miss, positives doubted: second kidney from now ex-wife, lifespan decades longer than once deserved; grown daughters, respectable career.

Scar edges now softened but abiding sinew connects to tumors, bone that will not heal, fears at last confessed to frail father, new wife; a waiting world arrives each moment; I see how it ends: the sad road-kill beauty of bright laughter, feathers, and blood.