

Hope is Alive

Black asphalt
hot in the sun.
We're turning the ropes,
chanting the rhymes:
I like coffee, and tea, and
lemonade;
Who do you want?
The girl with the braid.
1... 2... 3...
So much hope for all that is
and all that will be.
We fly on the swings,
higher and higher,
over the girls
playing hopscotch,
rock thrown just so,
hopping on one foot,
flawless balance.
Over the girls clapping
in perfect rhythm,
all the world singing harmony and
the sky close enough to kiss.
Miss Susie and Miss Lucy,
Miss Mary Mack and
Big Mac, Filet o Fish.
Lemonade. Crunchy ice.
We'll try anything once or twice.
Tricks on the monkey bars,
upside-down, spin and flip,
jump to the ground, arms outstretched.
We are the girls who rule
our world, and we can
do anything,
be anything.
Maybe even president.
So Much Life ahead of us.

And the blood pours red

from the head of another boy.
Another king has fallen.
Long live the king.
And the ambulance sirens scream
away from the playground.

Bird Bones

Something about the bones of a bird,
how they're hollow and so small.

Imagine catching a sparrow.
Enclose fingers over feathers,
and marvel as you cup warm, soft life,
the wonder of the sky,
in the palm of your hand.
When the snap startles wide eyes open
it's too late to hear the cajoling of the wind.

Never hold Life but with an open hand.

Delicate bones could not withstand your ideal.
Hollow bones were not made to be held.
Their strength is in their freedom.
Their freedom is in their flight.

Ode to Government Cheese

Fancy wall sconces on a faux brick accent wall...
green polyester curtains open to a summer day...
Lying on brown shag carpet,
a cool rag gone lukewarm on my chest, a fan blowing over,
DIY air conditioning,
as I watch Scooby-Doo and wait for dinner.

Homemade noodles—flour, water, salt, and one egg.
They are my favorite.
Does life really get better than this?

Every third Thursday,
we pick up our government cheese—
other food too, in off-label, nondescript packaging—
but the prize is the giant block of sliced cheese.
Sliced.

Everyone knows that block cheese is the only affordable way to buy cheese.
And then you fight the slicer,
cut it thin enough to be enough for everyone
but thick enough to hold together.
It never holds together.
Too thick at the top, too thin at the bottom.
Or worse, you fight the grater, for pizza or tacos,
and it will inevitably take a small chunk of skin.
Plus, the block is so small, only 8 oz, 16 if on sale,
and there are 8 of us.
But every third Thursday,
72 slices of heaven!
It will last a week.
Two if we're careful.

Bird Bones, Re-examined

There's something about the bones of a bird.
They seem so delicate, so fragile and small.
Light as a feather to fly high and so easily broken.

But the thing about the bones of a bird is that
flying is damn hard.
For every tailwind,
there are a half-dozen crosswinds, and
while bird bones were made to soar,
easily riding the waves of the sky,
they were also made to climb,

their wings a beating roar
as they push back against the obstacles
that are wind and gravity.

The thing I have learned about the bones of a bird
is that not only are they not nearly as fragile and delicate as they seem,
but more—they are mighty.
Fierce in their resolve.
Ferocious in their strength.

Raised

The day I realized my father was gone forever, the top of my head reached the bottom
of the doorknob of the bathroom door, the only room in our house we could go to for privacy.
My privacy lasted for hours, until I heard the sound of the snowmobile, unmistakable
through silent winter air.
Quick snuffing the last of despondency,
I wriggled into my red, white, and blue snowsuit and boots.
It was 1984, and I was Mary Lou Retton.
My grandpa paid for my tumbling class, and I cartwheeled to him in the snow.

Grandpa was the toughest man I knew, leader of a pack of hunting dogs that would put meat
on our table through all the hard winters of our lives.
Sadie and Lucy Bell and Cookie and Rex. “Stay back from Rex, now.”
Sometimes, Rex got loose and ran, snarling, lunging at anyone who got in his way.
I ran too. Snarled at two-bedroom trailers that were never big enough,
at small town cliques that whispered, at a dirt yard and a well that ran dry every summer.
Lunged for a future with water that would ripple and flow,
fruits and vegetables that weren’t worm-infested, core-rotted ripped from hardscrabble dirt,
for more than small-pond big fish who tittered and slithered their way through my life.

That’s Loretta Lynn, Grandpa would say,
every time she came on the wire-hanger rigged radio in the shop.
He fixed motors, and I fetched his tools.
I listened with the ears of someone who had never heard music,
with the mind of someone who knew there was more of the world to know,
with the heart of someone who knew she was being *raised*.

Ms. Loretta Lynn came from the same place as Grandma,
a holler on a mountain, and her daddy mined coal, just like Grandma's daddy.
My daddy was gone forever, but my Grandpa could fix anything, fixed everything,
and I knew if Loretta Lynn could do it—
if she could escape that hardscrabble life and learn to look back on it with love and pride—
I could too.
That's Jenny. That's my granddaughter.