

Late summer linger

Look up at the sunflower
towering, thin petals
bonding into strength--
singular mane, corona
head nodding toward
tangled tomato vines,
morning glories creeping
up metal fences, wild
mint spreads surreptitious.

Never mind the shadow
of withered stalks looming,
the weight of unused seeds
gravity commanding that
beauty toward earth.

The crown disassembles--
petals fall faint as eyelashes
crack open the dark heart,
peel back pseudanthium,
reveal the seeds, arranged
in their own geometry,
hiding a whole summer.

Slip them into waiting pockets.
Imagine a future spring.

How to dive with sharks

1

When you enter the water,
in the usual way, backrolling off the boat,
one hand on your mask and reg--
it will be too rough to surface. Try not to remember
that time at the Great Barrier Reef, when, after steaming
on the liveaboard boat all day and night,
you realized why they were teaching you
how to inflate the emergency dive flag:
that you might get separated
under the murky depth, be forced
to rise, take your safety stop
alone, hanging twenty feet below,
and when you came up, the current
might have swept you too far from the boat
to be seen, your dark head bobbing
like a sea turtle swimming or an aging buoy,
and you would need that strip of orange
to guide the boat toward your helpless soul.

2

Focus on the technical skill:
negative entry--empty air from your vest,
roll off the boat, tip your head toward the bottom.
Trust the weights in your pockets, your long exhale,
the slow kicking of your finned feet.
Watch for the flash of fins ahead--
divemaster in yellow, your husband
in blue, other divers descending with you.

3

Try not to panic when the small French woman
loses air spectacularly, bubbles surrounding
like champagne exploding. Don't worry when another
fails to equalize, must rise, squeezing his nose.
Stay calm as you hang in between with the group,
wait for your guide's return
against a wall of silvered fish.

4

Remember you have nitrox, giving you 100 feet to sink,
giving you time to reach the bottom. Once you are there,
hold the rocks against surge, bring your breath under control.
Pretend you are resting on your living room couch. Watch
as bull sharks emerge, their wide heads, rows of teeth, pushing
through the sand you've just disturbed. Try not to think
of your seal-like body. Forget what you know of the bull shark's
testosterone, famous in the animal kingdom--
Forget it is mating season. Dismiss the thought of
electroreceptors honed for hunting, sensing
the field of the current, prey, your heartbeat and breath.
Stay still as eight, ten, twelve sharks emerge. Nine feet long,
future mothers all. Notice holes hiding ear stones,
sensing gravity, depth, every vibration.

5

Rely on your efforts to still your body.
Surrender to surge, rocking you gently.
Release the rock. Stop checking your depth.
The only work left now to drift and to breathe.

Mosquito Bay, Vieques

*As if we emerged from the ocean,
as if from the shipwreck
we returned wounded
among the stones and the red seaweed.*

- "Not only the fire," Pablo Neruda

On the dark bay, your eyes shone as
bright as the bioluminescence--if
the new moon allowed and we
remembered ourselves, emerged
from our chemical haze, divorced from
our protective sheen, slipped into kayaks, the
water beneath us, so separate from its ocean
mother, dinoflagellates congregating as
a single organism, only briefly disturbed if,
for instance, Hurricane Maria ripped everything from
the island--briefly darkened the bay, but the
blue light surged, despite the shipwreck
state of things--power outages, the malecon destroyed as we
watched from our perch on the mainland, and never returned.

You were too young to trust memory. Now wounded,
adolescent, your child self sloughed off, left among
piles of stuffed animals, picture books, detritus of the
past. One night, you worry the stones
of memory, unstick your voice and
ask: "Did I dream it, or did we float on the
water sparkling like stars?" Your face flushes red.
"We did," I answer, and see your eyes flash the color of seaweed.

Boy, rising

Long years, sinking together,
you strapped to my chest
as we rebreathed each other's air--
my heartbeat, the sound of the world,
trying to drown out bullies, principals,
doctors, authorities.

Down we sank, surrounded
by angelfish or sharks,
more often just the usual
triggerfish, parrotfish, blue tangs,
mildly curious as we passed.

We never stopped to check
our depth and I don't know
when we started to ascend,
when the light became
less filtered, the lightness
in my body as atmospheres
began to lift.

Maybe you were kicking all along,
legs and lungs strengthening
even as I felt us sink. Now finally
your body almost equal to the task
of carrying us both toward surface--
the strange air of the arid world.

The ocean explains herself

You think you know me--
on shore, observing
armed with cameras, devices--
my sweat, the mother of hurricanes.

What you feel, the currents in your reach,
make up just eight percent of me.
At depth, I am cold--so cold in fact,
I change the water's density,
make its swirl entirely new.

You post signs, warn your little ones of undertow,
but you confuse my playful rip currents
for the constant pull of my lifeblood--
always calling, even when I seem benign.

It is impossible, you see,
to push and push forever
to shoal and breach for your amusement
carry you always toward sandy strand
on an infinity of crests.

What you know in your darkest dreams
is that I must pull back what is mine
drag everything with me, pull and pull
until I reclaim everything
you owe me.