

Georgia's Advent

We laughed about it two years back
when I first saw cotton, white hot in the field.
Cicadas were sizzling in August heat
as my heart jumped up at blankets of snow.
I drove my car off the backwoods road
to find my thrill melted in heatstroke air.

You thumped the table with your hand, Philly-boy,
when I told you what I thought I'd seen,
belched over your Coke can, winking and teasing:
*How'd you get mixed up between snow and cotton?
Such a Northern-girl, you know you're in Georgia?
We need to get you out for a change.*

In fall, I drive us out past the fields.
We sing together, you're tuneless but joyful.
It's four o'clock, flrid, last sky-blues, gold.
We talk about hometowns, how down south is different,
share coffee and stories,
the pink sun in my mirrors.

My nails turn wood-smoke grey on the wheel,
I pull my sleeves down at the end of our songs.
You point at cotton through shadows of pecans,
then smile at me, saying: *It looks just like our snow.
Looks almost like Christmas.
It looks almost like home.*

That Old Spark

That first time, lightning hit the tallest pine tree,
the one I could see from school
and say, "That one is mine."
The charge ran from branch to roof to wire.
A long blue spark shot out at my feet,
leaving a dark scar on the hardwood.
My mother threw us in the car, and
begged us not to touch its metal sides,
we watched firemen come
to cut smoldering plaster from the walls.

The second time, we woke, the four of us,
and watched the night scud over with clouds
from the opening in our platform tent.
We rubbed our arms, asking each other,
"Are you cold? I have goose bumps."
As fine hairs stood on our cheeks
the world exploded over us, steaming,
flying, hot shards of wood,
the least of our problems, really,
as half the tree landed across our canvas.

The third time, days later, we ran for cover
down the side of a New York mountain.
Over tree roots, over rock bridges,
through curved dirt sluiceways,
shortly to be filled with water.
The last gasp dash across the open field.
We ran, one at a time. Young, fast, lithe,
my turn came, and the jolt gave me wings,
throwing me from the charred circle that
washed from the grass as I shook myself.

The fourth time, that same field, a week later.
They say that lightning doesn't strike
the same place twice. They're wrong.

The fifth time, watching flashing night from the kitchen,
my two eldest children eating dinner beside me.
I counted the space between lightning and thunder,
adrenaline and safety,
until there wasn't time between them to count.
The oven screamed that its circuits were cooked,
well done, while the house suddenly heaved
back to purring life, and light. My youngest slept on,
still sprawled across the oak floor
where Sesame Street had left her.

The sixth time I said it wasn't that bad,
and slipped my sandals into my fist
so I could run through the rain in bare feet.
As I stood outside the store I twisted my bags
closed, pulled my bra in place, took my glasses off,
and raised one foot,
as lightning shattered the sign above my head.
And I dove inside, the dark shop loud with voices,
apologizing to the clerk next to me. "My bad,"
I said, "that was probably my fault."

The seventh time happens on nights I sleep
without the covers, and in the nude.
I maintain it's the goose bumps on my back
that start my old dream reel flickering.
Hairs stand up, and my body knows
that my bright friend has come to visit.
I've died so many times in bed.
My husband thinks I'm always cold,
blankets to my chin, even in summer,
but it's because in my dreams, I want to live.

Bittersweet

For years
I've said I could give my heart
to a man who gave me a box of crayons.
There's something precious
about ninety-six
clean blooms of color,
in bouquets of violet
and leaf green.

And for years I waited.
He gave a gold ring
that I paid for, a little,
which broke in our fifth year.
He gave cups of umber tea.
Gave me five children,
three of whom lived, beautiful,
with deep cornflower eyes
and carnation cheeks.
He gave a brick red house to hold me still,
and palettes of laundry
in a never-ending landscape
of sky blues and pinks.

But with all these things,
I wanted crayons, the waxy,
sour scent of a new fall,
a new page, a new start,
fresh and bright as the first day of school.
Burnt sienna and mahogany,
orange and scarlet,
a blaze of potential
rolling in my palm.

And this year,
my eldest daughter,
with a new woman-smile
gave me a brown paper bag
and said not to look, but
just smell it.

I inhaled,
and the colors poured back in me.