

West Side Girl & Other Poems
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Para mi familia

Good Bread

Good woman, good bread,
snug in waxed paper,
clean sheets on the bed.

Soft hands worn dry by years
of kneading and folding.
Little spurs catch flesh on fabric.

The arts are not wholly lost,
the hearth secrets.

To know the heft of things,
as well as scent and flavor.

We were the ones who looked at the moon
and baked bread round.

The Minotaur's Daughter

A man cut out for slaughterhouse work
he'd come home invigorated, bellowing for meat
no meal complete without some blood-
or gravy-smothered dish.

Split-toed creature of excess,
his bulk scrubbed porcine pink
smooth as a penis tip after
his daily dip au jus. Hairy lord,
trailing the stench of untold arenas and altars,
lurid god of shambles and abattoirs,
rabid disembowler.
Fresh viscera gleaming
between steel watchband links
and beneath nails
thick as horns.

At the table, he'd nudge me
daring me to eat.
I thought it was an act of defiance
to swallow something raw.

At night I dream him red-eyed
steer head black as a butcher's heart
Beringed nostrils exhale twin plumes of heat.
Now my eyes avert, breath comes short
when I am in the presence of a beefcake
desiring heavy hooves in my back
pin me beneath haunches thick and marbled.

Shuddering, I deny my tastes
I run the hair-pin turns, slippery desire's chute,
Recalling too late that I am
a quarter goddess, a quarter cow.

Wholly his: Daughter. Child.
Blood.

Crescent crown and star
hides beneath this sleek hair.
I dream myself wielder of the spear,
stunner, tanner, carrier of the bolt-gun.

Stripped to my barest components

I am left lowing in the pit.
Forced to drive alone the lions
and after to dye the red linens
before waving them again.

My Father: Shame. Gall.
Guts.

Am forced to surrender
again and again
my throat, my heart
and everything below.

I am his china shop.

The Studio

Maze of canvases
Carousels of pens and
fat, sharp-smelling markers
Razors and scissors, pastels and brushes
T-square on a rickety old drafting table

My grandfather at his easel
In a faded blue work shirt dappled with paint,
Hands nicked and chapped,
Concrete floor splattered with the run-off of his labors

The artist craves light.
Screen door opening out onto the side garden
Stone steps and a winding path
The low, tulip-lined wall, the flowering tree,

Hands held out, saying,

Come see--

At the jigsaw, he cuts me a carousel horse
out of scrap plywood. Painted dapple gray in quick strokes,
a red saddle, scratchy between my fingers
I, nevertheless, gallop it across the window sill

On the grounds below, we toss apples
And watch at dawn for the deer to come,
We paint them, poised at the tree line, tawny and white.
For the foxes, we throw chicken bones, like a conjurer's trick
The foxes are far less trusting. One appeared to me only once
and froze, brown paw raised as our eyes met over the tiny carcass.

His were greener than anything I could imagine.

Look.

You must see it--

To create is this constant give-and-take
Gifted with petals and stone, fur and grass,
Your senses compel you to return it in
ink or watercolor or lines,

Only your medium is your own.

I Got Me a Soul at Wal-Mart

I went to Wal-Mart
Got me a plastic soul
Sam's brand

I saw a woman there
Carrying a big-name bag
With a worn handle
Buying her little girl some shoes

I went to Wal-Mart
Got me a denim soul
Made in Bangladesh

I saw a man in the toy aisle
Scolding his son
"You don't want a doll.
Stop crying! Be a man."

I went to Wal-Mart
Got my soul some pills
Four dollars for a piece of mind

I saw an old couple at the pharmacy
In slippers and his-and-her pajamas
Wheeling an oxygen tank between them

I went to Wal-Mart
To feed my soul
Choice Beef, \$2.99 a pound

Price check on Aisle 5
How much is this economy pack,
This family pack, this jumbo-size, this 20% more can
Boxes and bags full of chemicals
To hook you and leave you hungry

I went to Wal-Mart
Got me a soul on credit.
There is no more lay-away

I saw my neighbor in the nursery
Buying a flowering tree
In a drought year

I went to Wal-Mart
Got me a twelve-gauge soul
To protect myself and all the shit
I bought at Wal-Mart.

This carton of milk, this Pepto Bismal.
This box of wine, this bottle of motor oil,
These tube socks, this can of chew.
This King James Bible, this Johnson's Baby Shampoo.

I went to Wal-Mart
Got me a paper soul
Gonna hang it like a lantern
Over my patio.

My Belle

She was just 21 when she met him, dancing for men, all long lean body and swinging auburn hair. She was nobody then. She was a pair of boyish hips, tits and a cunt. He was a bouncer and made her feel protected, and when he spoke to her, he noticed her smile, her brown eyes.

She became his wife and he found his Aryan Brothers under their white sheets. There was so much he had to protect her from. Then he became ordained, a soldier for Christ, still protecting her from homos and black devils. She had to put on a long dress and forego mascara. There were three children by then and they had to be homeschooled. He knew better than the system. They all had to be protected. From television. From all of the wrong kinds of influences.

Then it was mysticism, discovering their Celtic and Teutonic roots and she was to paint herself with henna and show her legs again, because there was nothing shameful about the body (except the bruises). And all these things that should have brought him peace only made him distrust the world and its intentions towards them.

Then they were living in a house somewhere in an ex-Dust Bowl state, growing marijuana, and peering out through slitted window blinds. And those fists and that temper that had once intervened with slaving patrons and would-be rapists seemed more and more eager to correct her sins, even though she thought they had left sin behind when they transcended Christ.

She had found a friend, a dubious friend, who whispered, *Leave him*.

But how could she leave? Their oldest girl was grown and he would not allow her even to go to college. He wanted to keep the family close. The world is not a trustworthy place. He had his guns and his pit bulls. He had his size. There is no god, he said, he is bigger than God, and it's not the blacks anymore, but the damn wetbacks, stealing all the honest work. In this day and age, there's no justice for white men.

He thinks they are watching him. In a fit of paranoia, he flushes all the plants. Then it's money, he says, money money money. She has to go back to dancing. Even at her age, she is still beautiful. The lights in the club will be dim, and anyway, they won't be looking at her face. The family is counting on her. But she has come too far to take her clothes off for strange men again. What sort of example would that be setting for her girls? For such defiance, he throws a table at her, pinning her to the floor.

If her pelvis is broken, how can she dance?

Subcutaneous

Every 27 days you grow new skin.
I am never the same river twice when you dip into me
Six quarts of blood flowing through this single heart
Enough salt in this body to flavor your meals through the season of Lent,
to ease the weeks of your fast.
Enough water in this body to slake the thirst of a pair of desert sojourners for a day.

1,000 skins in a lifetime.
Let us talk of beauty and the relative nature of depths and shallows.
Three layers we're constantly trying to plumb to get at the person within.
Symmetry is beauty and that's the real myth:
One breast smaller than the other, one leg shorter,
one eye squintier.
The right lung smaller to make room for the heart,
one-sided beast beating the bars of its ribcage.
I sometimes wonder if it casts its shadow on the left lung
and that's why it's so hard to breathe.

Skin cells flake off one at a time and turn to dust on the air,
Tiny motes that drift around our room are pieces of us.
I blink more often than you by virtue of my sex,
probably because I am continuously astonished by this need,
this release of flesh, piling up in corners and collecting on bookshelves.
By virtue of my sex, my heart beats faster. Breast milk full of toxins
I've taken in from a spoiled world. I'd be more upset about that
if there were any eventuality besides a child growing up
to pick his own poison.

The skin is considered the largest organ.
You've seen all of mine, though I'm finding it hard
to separate the me from these parts. I am more than teeth
and a jawbone. I am more, even, than these glands,
this amygdala. I am the memories it stores.
I am breath. I am a voice.

No one can seem to agree on how much we dream or how long,
seconds or minutes departing ourselves, once a night, or a thousand and one times—
sleep tales we tell ourselves like Scheherazade to vouchsafe our happiness.
Let us drop the nonessential things: tonsils, appendix,
uterus, spleen, and get to the meat of the matter.
You'd be amazed at what can be waylaid, what can be traded away or given freely.

Scars form anytime we are damaged beyond the first layer.
We strip ourselves down and admire each other's patch jobs,

but we won't settle for anything less than soul and bone.
We will give of ourselves until there is nothing essential left individually,
only the essential *us*. Three hundred million cells are dying inside as you read this.
I am constantly learning that this is all there is, we are a brush of fingers,
the joining of palms, a connection at the place where the skin grows the thickest.

How Many Going to St. Ives?

Invoking holy statutes of quality of life
We implored the blue-scrubbed sawbones to remove their hands from him.
And then there was nothing to do but recount
The old folks sat in the lounge with his soon-to-be-widow, touting up the years
I remembered the old train bridge and a sign, 13 feet, 10 inches,
And we all asked ourselves, how many, how many going to St. Ives?

ICU wakes. Hospital gowns took us to christenings,
but I always misplace my faith in hospitals,
the chaplain nondenominational, neat and sanitary, harmless as a bedpan,
but versed at least in last rites.

Nobody told us that time was a plague and here was death's own August.
The interminable afternoon encircled and ensnared us like mosquito netting
in some malarial equatorial country,
Clock faces uncomfortably close to machines ticking down vital signs and
the humdrum of heart monitors made me long for little drummer boy seasons
and sugar plum fairy nights

And the soon-to-be-widow sat in the lounge
counting up the children and great-grandchildren, lining us up like jars of spices
soothing and snug as kitchen cupboards as we asked
how many, how many going to St. Ives?

The last prodigal came in on a red-eye.
He said his good-byes then sat in the corner, fiddling with that old pocketknife.
I remembered the Ficus tree, the catfish, and how every year,
the mayapples rolled down in the cellar, and how patiently he'd rake them out.

And when it was over, the obit scribblers wanted to know, *how do you spell his name?*
and *oh, whereabouts?*

While old wives bring their Tupperware and glut themselves on the rich fare of despair
Trading tales of lovers and lies.

And the widow wept in the lounge.
And when the hearse came driving up, we found it is we who are going, going to St. Ives.

We will remember how our black linen attire clung so we plucked at our seams,
and the perfect Luna moth on a red brick path, its green-white wings.
At the graveside, we thought, someone will be waiting.

The twenty-one guns made me jump
then brought me back down hard,
No body-slam like that dropping, buckling under the weight of all the things we've lost,

A tisket, a tasket, a stainless steel casket, and pour the concrete after.

And even after we've left, pondering divides,
And we go back to the bridge and unreel our fishing lines,
And sweep the cellar and the Ficus leaves,

We'll hear the rustle in the pines:

Of how many going to St. Ives?

night festival
summer city skyline
lit the same chemical orange as sunset
night air soaked naphtha smoke
trailing down oily streets
flames on a chain
swung by fire jugglers.

acrobats' bodies flicker
against the bricks
a branded man
scars crescents rings
no metal

no ink. just flesh

and he no older than that

wearily I think old-woman thoughts:

god damn, son.
if it's scars you want
I'll trade you skins.

even his ear lobes weighted with spools
there is no part of his body
that does not contort or bend.

my same height compact
curiously sensual.
I've always had a weakness
for broken things.
my first love limped.
a man who's never been hurt
can be of no use.

I want to take the scarred man home
spread the map of his obsession
out on my bed and trail my hands
along its routes

to yank at his curls
run fingertips along scalloped tissue
raised curlicues of flesh
slip my thumbs through
empty lobes stretched loops.

how I want to leave
a few marks of my own on you
(do my cannibal teeth alarm?)

aren't we a pair.

leave with imprints of my claws.
we'll render bloody dawn together.

after

name a scar for me.

A Foodie Love Song

In southern Spain
I once visited the ruins of a Moorish castle.
A stove had survived.
A small opening at the base of a wall,
surrounding stones black with fires
eight centuries burnt out.

It was the only thing that truly told
of human habitation
in what was otherwise
another heap of rock on a hillside.
And speak it did
of the creative force more precious
for the war its attendants lost.

The oven is
the undisputed anima
heating homes to life.
Where mothers gather,
and gather children to themselves.
The necessity of nurture

Fogged windows
plants writhe gleeful on crowded sills
sucking moisture from ceramic teats,
Watering cans, pitchers, teapots all
happily sweat their elixirs.

My mind runs along lists of ingredients,
recites old recipes without the aid of notes.
As well-known to me as the old stories,
the supper litanies.
I get the notes out anyway.

Pages puckered and curled
where droplets fell:
milk, blood, broth,
vinegar, oil,
wine.
Inked by the hands of my mothers
And all the spills are mine.

Eyes closed, hands on worn pages.
This is the evocation now, the incantation.

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