

Siesta

I do errands early
on a day this hot,
putting the groceries
away before noon
cutting lemons,
arranged on a
plate like a sun
burst. I wear my wide
brimmed hat and tip
it back with the first
shot of Cuervo.

In this wooden
chair I read thin
books, the flat boards
of the porch
scorched and dry,
the way I imagine
it is in Arizona
or New Mexico—
there, the heat is un-
beatable and young
men grow skin
like leather to protect,
squinting occasionally
at the horizon
between swallows
of beer.

Now it is two,
and three lemons
are left. The line
of sun cuts the tips
of my toes, makes
my eyes crackle
like two thin leaves.
Turning the page
I find a note
in the margin
about forgiving
and rise to brush
the salt from my lap.

October

Somewhere in central Florida
my father lies buried, and with him
a fair part of my changing heart,
milling restless in the soil
of that hot state, its crab
grass and sand so unlike Pittsburgh—
leaves ripe with the will
scatter and fall

If I could, I would bring him home,
back to the chill morning
that hoisted him up telephone poles
as a Bell lineman, hovering in a harness
above the street, leaning against
the sky like a casual visitor. He knew
which wires to cut, where to find
a weak connection.

At night, beneath an old Plymouth
he would work, slim and angular
with scoured blue eyes, skin rugged
and worn as I stood still in the damp
garage air—the smell of oil, the backward
silence of the October night claiming
its place between my breath
and the concrete floor. Dressed

in pajamas and without prayers,
I held the caged lantern light
so he could see, his knuckles
chapped and scraped
as he forced a piece of metal
into place and waved me closer,
greased the base of the thing
that would make the car run.
Then lighting a cigarette and wiping
the grease from his hands,
he slipped the denim jacket over
my shoulders, shut the light,
wandered off to a warmer place.

Ten Years in The Cage

Mostly I am good
with Jack, offering to get
him coffee or a coke,
to call a taxi or a friend.
But nights when the gin
takes a back seat in his mouth
and he waves his glass,
spitting “pussycat” in that tired
late-shift slur, I turn and wait
for him to leave; the tide
of regret rising like the sharp
corner of a table—his belch
as he stumbles on the way out.

And it's thick some days,
the way you only hear
the baseline on the jukebox,
the air draped with that flat
fryer-smoke smell. Billy
in his sixth year of six nights
a week behind the bar,
6 p.m. to 2 a.m.
The revolving door
of waitresses—all writers
or dead heads, lesbians
or psych majors—struggling
to pay rent, to get laid;
too bored to figure tax
on a 2-dollar hoagie, sharp
as tin at totaling tips:
they *never* get stiffed twice.

Me, I take it on both
sides of the bar, stragglers
and sophists knee to knee
on a plowed row of stools,
straddling an Iron and a shot
of Windsor. Friday nights I find
my place in line, drink
for free; bathroom graffiti
like “my karma ran over
your dogma,” rescued
from tiled obscurity,
old lovers dropping by
with memories as soft
as their bellies, kisses weary

as the fading neon,
last call rising
like the moon
over Forbes Avenue.

1965

One lay inside her womb,
two others already clinging
to her leg and breast.
Relentless, I imagine,
this kicking and bumping
from inside and out.

And without a silk dress
or a willing husband
to slide it from
her shoulders
in the hour
before plates
begin their clattering
and fingers reach
out to be filled.

The feeding, the petting,
the fixing, the patting,
until one morning,
she can't any more.

Let her husband sleep
far from her
in another room,
in another state
altogether, in a
weaker woman's arms.

Let the children eat
caramels and play
way past the hour
of street lights
leaving their pink coats
neglected on the stairs,
running like
some crazy
cartoon animals
in the dusk.
And she will lay
her head down
on this pillow,
hung to dry
in the August sun;
the tears in her eyes,
lightning in the sky

threatening
the kind of promise
that drenches.

Big Tongue

Everything was big about the night,
the backdrop of the city sprawling
lazy, it's three-river arms and bracelet
bridges beneath the big wet sky.
Big drinks filling big voids
around the bar—tumblers full
of the unrequited. The British
soccer boys lining the deck
looking beyond the city of steel
to the next round of Bass
and Budweisers. And your body,
as solid as the girders that buoy
the bridges in their relentless
coming and going, hovering
close, scraping the midnight stars
as I toyed brilliant in small
desires and leather.

Simple really, the immediate
press of bone to bone balanced
over the hood of the car.
You with leverage, me licentious
beneath the banister of banter
that paced this curious coupling.
I could have fucked you right then,
but you said in a breath
of bewilderment, in the guise
of frank civility, that I had a big tongue,
the very shock of the discovery
blocking the next opening,
forcing me to light a cigarette
in the midst of my abandon
and consider my freakish nature.

Just imagine a big man like you
gagging on my small-girl tongue.
It would make the news, make
the *Guinness Book of World Records*,
the morning a bit more difficult
to rationalize; me having swallowed
hard all these years without choking.

Rare Space

“Where did you learn that?”
you ask, and I can’t remember
learning anything—
walking, talking, spitting—

Your cock in my mouth
is water in a glass
and like a long-distance runner
I drink deep at the seventh mile,
the quench filling
the space
between the mouth
and the heart.

Goodbye, Valentine

I have begged the angels
to appear, calling
out through fevered
skies, sins revisited
and halos half-cocked—
I can hear them whispering
that this is only practice.

I have asked them
to come on Sundays
when loneliness
takes its bath,
emerging clean
and vital. Naked,
a little girl, she drips
and picks the scab
from her knee;
like last week
and next week
it bleeds again.

Today Michelangelo
says a prayer,
alone on the scaffolding
high in the air:
when the angels rise—
flushed cheeks
and open jackets—
that he might put away
his red paint
having finished the heart.