

This Bird is Trying to Break Your Heart

If the nuthatch could speak to you, she wouldn't.

But if she did, she would tell you
that she was not born but forged
by the roots of a dying Ponderosa.

She is the acrobat of after-life.

So she will not live by your rules
or your birdhouses.

Like your father who refuses to buy furniture,
everything must be built by hand,
or beak.

All day she speaks to the trees in tongue,
a record on repeat at thirty-three speed.

She is a perfect little machine.
She is the bright bauble of the forest.

Unlike you, she cannot be bought.
Like you, she should not be a gauge of hope.

But please: she is not trying to break your heart
when she paints her doorway with secrets
and sap.

She merely understands the art of protection.

From the beginning, she has known to trust
the trees, the seed, the rain, and the sky—

but nothing that has been touched
by you.

Soapstone

My grandmother was cursed
with a too-tender heart that broke at sixty.

First, the unhappiness:
the thorny silence and indifference
grew as bindweed.

Then the splintering, like soapstone
until there were only remnants
too small to gather.

We didn't hear
what she couldn't say
because the prairie stitches women's mouths shut.

Instead, she spent years staring at the river,

her sleeves rolled to her forearms and her elbows
on her knees,
watching the geese,

wintering her loneliness
through game shows and westerns
and Lipton vodkas in plastic glasses

Disposition

--after Traci Brimhall

I will be the perfect symmetry
of the wolf spider's web,
dewy and thin. Light
like a willow flycatcher
with her one-note love song, or
the longest sigh of pine at sunrise.
I will ignore the blistering skin,
this quarry of bones, and smile
wide. Anything to distract you
from my pain, my body halved
like a waxing moon. I will quiet
my lungs, those quavering scale-winged moths,
until I am white-breasted as the nuthatch,
caching seeds in my beak until I bleed.
Until I am the stilled heart of the morning
dove, bested by glass. I will be anything,
must be anything, but the blue-black bite
of prairie rattler, the electric metric of overflow,
tectonic shift of temper, the rare fit of ill will.

Widow's Weeds

No one forages here
in the tall grasses and unkempt briars,
except the hollow-boned crows
and me, in widow's weeds,
dirty nails and knees.

On lunar nights I plant wolfsbane as a ward,
castor beans for joints rusted as hinges,
belladonna for fever,
oleander for the dreams I had of carrying children,
and nightshade as pernicious as my blood.

On the darkest nights, I slip from bed
to pull the snakeroot
by handfuls before it can strike
my lover's garden,
the one with tenacious vines of honeysuckle,
sun-faced lilies, and sage.

And in the mornings, I swallow pills
like hemlock,
like perennial poisons,

and hope they kill the right part of me.

The Art of Disappearing

My grandmother taught me the rules of sadness,
of stone hearts and game shows,
of the necessity of grease burns for the pleasure of fried chicken,
of whole galaxies in the orbit of cigarette smoke,
of empty beds and unfinished books
of unquestioning love.

And my grandfather wrote the addendum of forgetting,
the revisionist history
of hailed out wheat and hot beef sandwiches,
of coffee cups dredged for time,
of arcades and the comfort of lime sherbet,
of the prosperity in a diesel engine and fresh-cut grass.
of the weariness of bodies.

From both I learned
we are infinite until we aren't
and that it's true it begins the way you think it will end—
in silence and with a trick of the light:

a single shoulder blade slips translucent,
a wrist twists pellucid in the sunlight,
gossamer fingers slip through solid objects
until you are but a comet
trailing dust and ice,
disappeared to the world.

Before your heart flares out

a distress signal gone bad—
before it morse codes like
the flick and tick of roadside bathroom bulb,
a tight flutter of lightning wings in a sweaty fist—

you will hold the palm for sorrow,
stuck somewhere between mad-
rage, star-fade, blank page.

You will find yourself breathless
in the morning, unmoved
by her honeyed hands, thumbprints
sticky with regret.

And before you feel the absence--
a hollow where there was mass
wrapped in tissue, a present
keeping present time,

you will find yourself at church
with its Pondarosa steeples, drumbeat
of flicker beak, the magpie's pinwheel wings,
those wild raspberries ripening
under your tongue.

And will you pray: *please*,
take these cinders,
this mouth of ash,
this burning heft.

Don't let this heart go dark.

We have grown feral

in our seclusion,
but after the pandemic

we will learn not to flinch
at the goldfinch light of an open door.

We will relearn that when someone palms our hand
in theirs they are saying, *I mean no harm.*

We will ignore the recurrent dreams of
strange breath on our necks,

of bodies pressed against bodies
in the grocery line, in the refrigeration trucks,

of ghostspecked lungs,
blood washing down the drain.

But we will still remember
the bared white teeth of our sisters and brothers—

the coyote grin of the free
who decided at the very beginning

that they had loved us enough
already.

Preservation

This heart has been the wide-mouthed mackerel
and the velvet bloom of primrose,
empty boot and belly full of sadness.

This heart has been a thousand barn swallows at mid-day,
has known the humming thrum of hunger:
one hundred-forty beats per minute.

It was once a toddler heart, tantruming on the floor of your kitchen,
and though you never knew it as a sidewalk heart,
sump-pump heart, heart with a *please do not disturb* sign, heart
as hot as the attic, it was, once,
before it was a silencer,
before it was sudden like snow,
before it was a guillotine deathblow.

This heart, always the final bell
but never saved by it.

Now it is old growth oak, cancer under the skin,
but before, *before*, it was beebalm,
a smoke bomb, napalm:
always begging for your touch.

Pioneer Species

There's a wilderness in me
that has been tempered by sacrifice.
Here, peel me back like birch paper
and read my ribs as rings.
This is as honest as I get:

Here is where the pain was wasp-fire and hiss.
Here is where the buzzards came in threes to feed.
Here is where, fevered, I stepped into the bear's den
and waited for splinter and snap.

Count the wounds, the blackened earth, the fissures
through thickets where the blaze ran hot. But look:
here where I covered my wounds in blanket flower and pasque.
Here is where I followed dizzy monarchs down white-tail trails.
Here is where, in summer swelter, I walked barefoot
up the creek, rocks slipping beneath my feet.
Here is where I, once a sweet green thing drowsing underground,
woke to the sweet Junco song in the fullness of morning.

Gravity

The magpies came when we were low,
so low we couldn't see sky, only scrub brush
oak burs, those towering purple torches
of hound's tongue. We had no fight, no flight left
and in the silence we could hear the long draw
of tap roots: oxygen, phosphorus, water.
Dry-mouthed, bad lucked, broken mirrors,
I hooked my pinky with yours
in the dark. We longed for light,
but furrow spiders spun us dream catchers
and evening turned off colors of the day,
the crescent moon a broken nightlight.

We heard their song first, the raspy rattle
and chatter, and then they descended,
stringless kites. They fell like shadows.
For hours they studied us sideways,
jabbering quietly. Then they turned the forest
floor, hunting. They tried to feed us earwigs
and slugs. They cracked black walnuts,
delivered beakfulls of chokecherries.
But we could not swallow.

They bedded us down in feathers
and sweet grass, sheltered us with dead
branches and sticks. They fetched juniper
berries and mullein, clover honey and creek water,
and for forty days they tended the wound
that felled us.

Until one morning grief finally broke,
and our voices returned, new—
like whistle and click—
and they pulled us up and out,
tail and feather, to feast on the sun.