“In Jezero Crater” and Three Other Poems

Kate Gaskin

In Jezero Crater

Whatever was there has gone
to three and a half billion years
of dust. On Mars

a rover picks up a rock
and turns it over
in a river delta webbed

with dried arteries cauterized
by the sun. Daughter,
who lived for only an hour,

I too search for you
in the most barren places,
a vein that rolls before

a needle, a dawn that breaks
dim and drawn. I wish for you
an emerald canopy,

sapphire water, a world
where belief is a fact
that can be held

in my palm like a stone.
Here on Earth, you disappear
star-ash, sun-soot, moon-glow

while somewhere above
in the red star of another planet,
a robot measures

ancient silt into a vial
for human hands to touch
with wonder. What do I do now

with all this love?
Diagnosis in Reverse

First, the witch turning from the door
made of spiced cake

and sugared almonds. Then the birds
offering the bread back

to the forest floor, the children
skipping backwards into the gaunt

yawn of the house as the mother’s
long hunger begins

to soften, her hearth dark with smoke.
And then a spark,

the children in the back orchard
eating apricots heavy

with juice. Pale cream in a bowl. A vase
of primroses. Foxglove stirring

outside the open window. The father
coming up the summer path, easy

with evening. Hansel humming.
Fresh bread and long light, long light.
Snow

That was the winter of two snowfalls—flat stretches of dry roadside sedge hard with frost, and then

a slow accumulation of snow falling on the steaming streets of Montgomery, Alabama

into potholes, over the roof of the corner store, its meat and three buffet wafting fried chicken

and okra with every warm, humid swing of the door opening into a frigid December noon.

I had been gone so long, lived in another flat city on the edge of a patchwork of prairie

under a July sky, bluest over never-ending rows of corn. But what I meant to say about snow in Alabama is that it came twice that winter, unusual, heavy and wet, weighting the camellias

until they bowed to the ground, their thin stalks like broken necks. That was my winter of crying
each day on the short trip to my son’s kindergarten past rows of bougainvillea planted so close to the road

their green fronds brushed the sides of the car I had to pry him from after I parked behind the school.

That year we took him to a succession of medical offices, each one beiger than the last,

for test after test, while doctors with blank faces offered shrugging shoulders and stimulants

and antipsychotics that made him better and then suddenly worse. Once, he bit me so hard

I slapped him. This isn’t about my son being a little shit, or every time he kicked me in the shins,
or how once I had to drag him from a children’s museum back to the car where he hit me for half an hour. Understand, this is a child who could barely talk, who walked around bleeding and rarely noticed, who ran from us as soon and as fast as he could for the sheer joy of running. If I close my eyes I can see him in his snowsuit, pulling his sled, the year we moved back to Omaha, my husband helping him build a snow fort so big that, beside it, he seemed a tiny red dot in a vast field of white. I’m taking you forward in time now. I’m showing you he probably gets better. But first he got worse, my mother a social worker—35 years—for the poorest county in Alabama, sitting at our kitchen table in Montgomery saying, he’s the kind of child I removed from homes he’s the kind of child people abuse, a bright blur of Vyvanse chewables, drops of Dyanavel, Risperdal. But the snow! Two times it snowed that winter as I staggered to my neighborhood one-screen movie theater to sit in the dark and cry while beautiful men kissed in a sunny Italian villa or a former Lakota-Sioux rodeo star cared for his autistic sister in the Badlands of South Dakota. On my walk home, snow burdened branches of sweet olive, their deep glossy green buckling beneath a heavy crust that by morning was hard and sparkling. Snow is not rare in Alabama, but it’s novel enough that when 13 inches fell in 1993 everyone called it The Great Blizzard. We didn’t have power
for weeks. I was barely older than my son, falling and falling in snow that soaked my jeans

as I rolled the body of a snowman and then finished it with charcoal briquette eyes, a carrot nose,

my dead grandfather’s black fedora. I kept the photo my mother took on my bedside table, kissing it each night, promising myself as soon as I could I would leave for good. Even at ten I wanted less heat, fewer shrub pines, more snow, city lights glinting in an icy North I could only imagine back when I was sure a new place, a new life would fix me. It snowed twice that Alabama winter.

In the summer I taught him how to pull stamens clear from honeysuckle blossoms, touch the drops of nectar to his tongue. What does it mean to get better? Now, in our yard, he falls backward into a snowdrift, makes an angel. Listen—there are church bells in the distance. A pair of cedar waxwings tut-tut back and forth across holly cupping small pillows of snow.
Lightning Dragons

It’s a terrible thing to say,
    but imagining my son’s death
    comes as naturally to me

as watching a cat trot off
    with a bird clenched in its jaws.
    Today, there is a crushed

cedar waxwing in the street,
    its golden tail feathers splayed,
    the red cherry of its chest

popped open like a mouth.
    I found it on my run and thought
    how impossible it is

to be so small, so easily undone.
    This boy of mine runs
    away from me into busy streets.

A museum’s noisy crowd
    swallows him whole. At school
    he cannot sit still or listen.

Once, his teacher said he threatened
    another child with the sharp end
    of a pencil. I did not

believe her, but what I believe
    will not keep him safe
    from how others

inevitably perceive him,
    and so I imagine
    what it would be like to lose him

as he tells me about dragons,
    how there are four types:
    sun dragons, moon dragons,

rain dragons, and, his favorite,
    lightning dragons that hatch
    from eggs that erupt
in shocks of electromagnetic
radiation. See them flying now?
He points to the night sky,

its feathery moon and stars
like puncture wounds, while above us
heat lightning unsettles

the dark.