The Feast

My father is hosting the final picnic.
   He rolls a melon back and forth
on the slate table to steady it

and slice, each piece bleeding
   onto a white plate. The coals turn
gray but still flicker and burn, with raw

meat slung on top of the grill, oozing
   blood red to clear. In the river
bordering the grove, a lone man paddles

his arms, stomach pressed
to a blue surfboard.
Black and white ripples

radiate from him while boats knock
   against the pier. The children
gather their Frisbees from grass,

t heir volleyballs and racquets, appearing
   and disappearing
in bright shirts like confetti.

Their voices rise and fall. It is late.
   The sun shines, but not
for much longer. The golden hour
has begun. For a moment
the moss-covered trees glow
lime green, frozen in their looming
heights. My father: white shirt,
gray pants, silver wristwatch,
glasses. He always cut the melon.

The plates are ready, the food
is hot, the watermelon cold
and seedless. And our lives,

for a moment, are an untouched
meal: perishable, and delicious,
one we’ve barely begun to taste.
Then, the atrophy of appetite.
We brought your favorite stew:
potatoes, the forbidden beef. We brought
coffee with sugar and cream. Surely,
the smell of it, the steam. . . .
You would not. So we scalded
our tongues with food meant
for you. We found the coconut sweets
you liked but you would not. The insult
of their stripes: pink, brown, white—
a flag from a country to which
you couldn’t return. We slipped
the candied cubes from the wrappers
meant to keep them fresh,
innocent and useless.

A covered dish arrived—Don’t open it.
Another tray arrived—Don’t. Open.
Meal after meal you would not eat.
You could not.
The sea in you refused to cease movement.
Even the doctor’s amber pills
you heaved aside
like so much beach glass.
Outside each leaf
began to bleed yellow
like dampened saffron
as we yielded one grief to the next.
Resolution

Today I will
do better. Today
I will not return
to the airport drunk
and blame the clerk
for shortchanging me
as I pay for coffee
that will fail
to erase the haze
I’d made for myself
in those dark hours—
you know to which
I refer—when no amount
of consolation,
neither trees nor prayer,
not ocean or peak,
neither living creature
nor inanimate thing,
neither the friends
whom I adore nor
the coastal elk
that once renewed me
on a hike with my love
along the rocky beach

of another life, with all
its fog-hidden green
and promise,

one whose snags
and troubles were so small,
so small

we can hardly see them now
from this new horizon
with which we have been left

one whose sweep
is nearly majestic
in its fullness—

how it swallows
everything before it
with its flatness, all

flat lines and flat sounds
of a terminal at the bedside—
the news ticker
cutting the screens
a constant source of crisis—
What was it

I wished for?
No matter. Today
I will do better.

Today I'll make good
on all promises.
It’s cancer weather: the cells

make
    and the cells break.

    In this weather my father fell ill.

Chicken Little, no use
to shout about it now
the sky’s already down.

Perhaps you, too, can sense it:
    how bitter the alcohol chill
    of winter, wicking every word
    from the mouth.
The Longest Hour

makes children of your peers, infants of superiors. The too-short gown. The catheter. The hourly scrutiny, phlegmatic lights sterilizing everything.

*

The blood suctioned beyond his skin, cleaned and returned. And the witnessing. Again, the terrible witnessing. The curtains shriek and cringe on their cogs. Will nothing be spared; will nothing remain unseen?

*

When the body undoes its beauty, will you see how shroud-like the bed sheets, how small the bones against them? How cold the clinic at night. No number of blankets could warm him.

*

So few chances to speak, it seemed, to my father, as I watched him dim in that cold white bed. In pain but not wanting to die, he tried to take his sickness in stride. White doctor Black doctor Asian doctor placing hands on his chest, a daily oracle.

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