

FOLKWAYS

I see the sea
getting closer. I read
we'll soon run out
of drinking water.
I floss the steak
out of my teeth.
I should be vegan—even
the teenager told me so.
She said I had the right
sandals and earrings.
I step off the plane, look up
my carbon footprint. Greenland
is melting due, in part, to my recent
Google search. All my dead
iPhones, along with scraps
of bologna and turkey bones,
add to the landfill
populated by vultures
in some countries, child
scavengers in others.

I buy South American fruit
in North American groceries.
Sustainability is a hoax,
the article says, but I recycle
anyway, cycle instead of drive
when I can. Emma evacuates
Santa Barbara, wild fire
in her rearview mirror,
a laptop covered in ash
and a few books in her
trunk. I say goodbye
to my furniture and clothes
whenever I evacuate for yet
another hurricane, decide
what to bring, what to leave
behind. My friend's favorite joke:

What is the population of Bombay?
Wait a second. Let me check
my watch. When I was young
and naïve, I had a foster child
from Bangladesh. This was before
before I knew how much
the charity's CEO was making.
I was an adjunct in NYC
with three jobs but knew I was rich
by comparison. I could pretend
I was a good person, my sanitized
love and concern reflected
in the drawings the child sent.
I started to volunteer instead
at The Catholic Worker,
ladling soup and oatmeal
into plastic bowls. The homeless
smelled like I would
have smelled if I didn't have
running water or a toothbrush
or quarters for the Laundromat.
Eileen Myles slept outside
their NYC apartment
with the homeless but was sure
not to use any resources
the displaced needed.
Myles took their own food
so that the truly needy could
get first dibs on dumpster bagels.

Until you have no toilet paper
you can't imagine how precious
it is. No tampons or moisturizer
or shampoo. I live in Florida now
where a graying man makes his home
on the beach. He is a war vet,
my neighbors say, but I am not sure

which war. There have been
so many. He showers where others
simply rinse off sand. He waited
out Irma in a shelter while I
drove away with friends. Now
he sleeps near the restrooms
in the park and shuffles
down to the surf, takes his
morning swim. When he catches
me leaving him
half a roasted chicken,
he says *thanks for the delivery*.
He says maybe his luck is changing,
maybe one day soon
the ocean will come to him.

POKER HANDS

The day you left us, you almost forgot to wave goodbye,
as you followed the anesthesiologist to the operating room,
scuffing along in nonskid slipper socks, one of those surgical caps
on your head. You were going to a sterile and cold place,
when mom said, “Wait a minute. What about my kiss?”
You came back, and then turned and waved goodbye
with both hands, hands that could pull out pies from the oven
without potholders, hands that could shovel and make snowballs
without gloves. All those years of baking, from the freezer
to the proof rack to the ovens, made your hands what they were.
Your poker hands, which dealt the cards for Pitch and 21.
You were serious when you played, tapping the table
so we’d pay attention. You had nicks and cuts and burns
you shrugged off, just like you shrugged off the surgery.
We were so sure you would come around—sore yes, depressed
maybe. We’d read up on all the side effects of the procedure,
but you were ready, fearless, man of Bayer and Vicks,
the only medicines you really believed in. I know it’s too late—
but I’m sorry I was a jerk so much of the time. I’m sorry
I was such a spoiled brat. You only bought one luxury
your whole life—a leather lounge chair—while I wanted
a guitar, a new coat like the other girls’, brand name jeans,
a bike, and money for the movies. I grabbed everything
with my weak hands that turn blue in a cold room,
ricochet when the faucet runs too hot, hands that get chapped
doing simple things like dishes. Now that you are no longer here,
sometimes my hands are your hands, when they are empty
and still and grateful, when I fold them to pray
the way you did, when I help someone
like you helped me the morning I woke up with a hangover
after a high school party. You poured me a glass of orange juice
and plucked a pickle from the jar and put it on a saucer.
The combination worked, our very own father and daughter dance.
Soon after we went to the airport so I could
board my first plane to travel farther than you or mom
had ever been. I stooped, having second thoughts,
my paisley suitcase suddenly too heavy.

Mom told me we could turn around, that I could stay home,
and you told mom: *honey, you've got to let her go.*
After the agent took my ticket, I turned and waved,
my pudgy fingers, my purple polish already starting to chip.
Then I followed the other travelers to the rest of my life,
scuffing along in my sneakers, one of your baseball caps on my head.

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY

I crossed the wooden steps to the hot sand and ran into the rip current, each toss and tumble, the opposite of the massages you used to give. The fish and rocks, the sudden cold spots, the seaweed slaps, a mouthful of salt. I flung myself into the plunging breakers, their fierceness and froth, the terrible twinkle of sun. *Batter my heart, backwash and trough. Fling me to the ocean floor.* The surfers were out for kicks. The lifeguard blew a whistle—shark alert. I fought the plunges and swells, kicking you again though you had left me for good. I stewed, angry in this angry womb. A board flew over my head. All went black, and then I was reborn, Deborah Kerr ashore without her Burt Lancaster. Embarrassment. Melodrama. Mouth-to-mouth with a stranger. I crossed the hot sand and the wooden steps and wrapped myself in a towel, having taken the beating, having sought it. Thank you, sea, for spitting me back, delivering me.

QUESTIONS OF FAITH

What is so awful about being alone? Might it even be preferable so that you are better prepared for death, to which everyone must travel alone anyway? Is there a greeter or not on the other side? If there is a greeter, is she like the midwife who met us at birth? Or is he more like the greeter at Walmart? Does he say, “Welcome to eternity. The carts are over there . . .”? And why do I always get the cart with the stuck/squeaky wheel? Why don’t I ever call it quits and return the cart immediately? (Why did I keep pushing through life with a defective cart, thinking it would unlock/unsqueak if I pushed gingerly? Or if I pushed much harder?) Why do I grow exasperated in electronics? Why is it only at the back of the store that I admit to myself the cart will only get worse? How do I abandon it? How will I carry all my intended purchases—paper towels, jars of jam, a patio chair, mixing bowls, and socks—in my arms? How will I make it past Sporting Goods and Domestic? How will I make it to the eternal cash register? How will I stop myself from bawling when my jam slips to the tiles, the glass splintering and slicing me in the shin? How will I distinguish my blood from the strawberry preserves? How will I not think back to the wreck, the windshield bits? How will I clean up the mess? With my Great Value paper towels? How will I hide my guilt? Am I in hell? Not according to the sign above the toaster ovens. Why do I ruin everything, even heaven?

INTIMACY OF HAIR

Once Peter snuck up behind me
putting his fingers ever so lightly
over my hair as though he was my aura.
He didn't comb my curls—he barely
touched them. His fingers felt
a bit like wind, or silent wind chimes.
I thought I was in love with him
but he loved the girl with a pin
straight bob. So why did he almost
caress me, his palms electric
with twenty-something magic?
And why do I remember this?
So much time has passed—
the girl with the straight hair
married to someone else, Peter
married to someone else. I'm alone
at Christmas, my hair full of silver
linings, my hair full of tinsel.