

SALAD DAYS

How easy then, the fun house at Lincoln Park
before it grew into a field of weeds, you could buy
five tickets for a buck from a blank face in a booth
and enter the dark with your brother to be scared
by tilting floors, phony doors, corpses
bursting out of coffins, and once out into blue sky
run breathless to your mother and father, happy,
you could have called them salad days,
but why would you—no one in your family
had read Shakespeare—so you bought
French fries, doused them with malt vinegar,
the four of you, competing for your share
of potatoes improved by salt and grease,
and nothing in those early evenings free
of care could have prepared you
to be the last one left, the one
with grief to spare.

TAKE A CHANCE

From the drummer, take the cymbals, the crash, and high-hat
and walk like you're shining. From the composer take "water
under snow is weary," sung by young voices in the timbre
of wind blowing through deer antlers.

From the organ-maker take the names of the stops, night horn,
vox celeste, and chimney flute, whose reverberations
could theoretically go on forever. From the gypsy,
take any castanets offered, and play them

first thing to get you out of bed, despite the news
of nine dead in Charleston who invited a white kid
into their prayers at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church
where he repeatedly shot the gun, whose one note

is death. Take a chance. Take guns away and ask people
to hum more, to whistle, if, unlike me, they know how,
to talk often, like baby turtles, who start
vocalizing inside their eggs.

Every river's original name was water weeping, water
laughing. Take the call of a cricket or a ricochet of crickets,
each with its own thumbprint. Take the cry of a bushbaby at night
that narrows down to nothing the distance between it

and us, both our wailings scored by loneliness, shocking
the night air, calling for kin, calling for help to perpetuate
the species. Take a lesson from the bushbaby with its exotically
large eyes that see what we don't see, its paws and mouth

that eat whatever they kill.

TUESDAY

And as usual, the next-door dogs are barking
at the hyenas they hallucinate at their throats.
Upstairs organ music is playing, Duruflé's
"Prelude and Fugue on the Name of Alain,"
pipes full of loss and petals,
faith rises and fails, scarves in the wind,
while a man in the park leaves his wife for a woman
who has just given up a kidney for a stranger, and millions
of leaves and leaves and leaves fall in just half an hour.
The train blowing its signature moans
at crossroads mixes with the next howl only a death away.
What sound belongs to the children
split by the divorce, siblings thrashing,
everyone flailing. Where are the birds
that everyone knows and loves?
Some of us talk, some listen,
someone plays the role of Véra, who says gently to Igor,
sweetening his coffee, "My dear,
you are sugararing your shoe."
It's expected that a raised eyebrow will be met
with a challenge, but derision, my little doves,
deserves a reply, fountain-penned on a slip of paper
and sent tucked into the smile of a fish.

ATONEMENT

I will work in fields of fire, I will stand under our one sun
until it flames away or I burn to ashes.

You who live with me can watch me carry all the crosses
of my childhood into the ocean, the true holy water,
its saltiness the secret to being held aloft.

Imagine food without salt and spices, flavor
arriving from the east to create cravings to compete
with sex and reserved only for royal or rich tongues.
Now, our choice of red, green, or yellow curry
so casual, and so easy to heap harissa on tagines, sunny
with saffron, so prized centuries ago
a scoundrel cutting it with impurities
could be put to death.

In the realm of capital punishment, has anyone studied
what hurts more—beheading, hanging, electricity, injection?
We have a lie-detector, but will anyone ever invent
an instrument to calibrate fear?
Beaufort gave us a scale for wind, a measure my family
could have used when my father blew his stack
and we had to guess how far to run.

Saturdays as kids we went to confession
to atone for our sins, but instead of so many
Our Father's and Hail Mary's
a better penance might have been to eat a handful of dirt
or donate our lunch money to the Animal Rescue League,
where we biked on Sundays when it was closed
to hang around cages of dogs we figured
would go to other homes, pets an idea
too exotic or expensive for our own parents.

In grammar school and we knew
each step to the Crucifixion, but no one had ever
taught us the word *euthanize*, saintly sounding, perhaps,
but it would pain us later to discover it meant
killing off the extra animals, those barking, bounding
bodies that kids like us would have loved to love.

FLAGS

For some reason we chose an island off Italy to bring a typewriter
for repair, and meanwhile, chianti and lounging on the balcony, pondering
if Kafka had in fact invented the hard hat, and who came up with the idea
of hotel maids folding toilet paper into triangles, pointless points.
Imagine the cumulative moments the world bloody wide spent thus,
instead of indulging in a decent foot soak, thinking perhaps about
a grandmother in the village, her mother's mother who greets her
by taking both her hands and rubbing them long enough
to wring out hundreds of secrets. "Never forget the names of our breads,"
she will say, and together they'll sit, staring at the horizon, one thing
we have in common, seeing as we, too, are looking out at it now,
the horizon, holding up the entire sky, all day pulling down the sun,
that golden child reluctant to go to bed, and when there is wind,
sending rolls of whipped cream to our shores. But forget flags,
the horizon refuses flags, none of that vain flattery,
whether the Saltire of Scotland, the eagles of Albania, the wounded
sheet of Latvia, flags flown in theaters, colonies, operations,
flags carried in the Children's Crusade, rags, no doubt, flags for
genocide after genocide after genocide
we find it humanly possible to abide.