

To Be Unprotected

Alone, under a blue cloud backlit
by a quarter moon in a dry wash,
I wanted starlight to bend low
brush my face and bare arms.
There's a thirst inside syntax
for what can't be told: night breaking
against a bowl of mountains, heart
ticking each unit of flux.
When I say I heard it, I mean
I felt its song on my skin in needles
in shards raining like flakes
from a hammerstone.
Feathered, rippled, stroke-struck.
Inside my body, a hum or tremble
in a place where I keep fear,
outside, a glister, a lilt, falling
as sound from stars
like tin, like salt, like silt. Words
can't mean the same thing twice.
When I say I thought I might die
of beauty, I mean it broke me apart.
I had to give in, let night drape
a garment of sound over my human
form. Let words yearn toward
silence, under the piano of starlight.
Its soft percussion.
If wild is psalm and singer, let
it wash over, empty me, and
make use of my emptiness,
I am willing.

My father died in the fullness of spring

as petals began to brown. New buds were forming, but not many.
Was it glorious? It was.
Our backyard, like an aging showgirl.

He nourished himself with light like any other plant.
He would raise his chin and close his eyes.

He sang snatches of Bing Crosby ballads, could whistle
on-key. He did not admit that he loved me.

I never saw him cry until very late. He could keep it soundless.
Control his breath. Be silent,
as a tear rolled down his cheek.
Then another, and another.

In this drought, I save every drop for my flowers. Some last only a day.

He didn't acknowledge weakness. Or complain.
But, over years, would not tend himself,

body and mind, a forgotten garden.

Horses Resting

The horses gather beneath the oak, maybe curious
about the wagon and the man, or his horse. They sense
still-tender green shoots in the mottled shade

But don't stretch their long necks down, now that quiet
has taken them, held in each other's presence,
their bodies close in shadow.

Sunlight collects in pools on the open road, yet in shade
falls like bits of mosaic glass, the smell of heat and dust
and light-seared grass, scent of the world wanting its water
on this parched earth.

They look to be bays in the photo, though the far one,
a chestnut, has turned to nuzzle the flank of the gray
gelding in harness between cart shafts. The gray
gently rolls the snaffle bit in his tender mouth.

The shared being of herd animals ripens into quietude
that even the driver leaning against the tree can feel—
horses drowsing together, as if drowsing were wisdom
or fullness, and he wonders

How it is that being among beasts of burden could feel like
sharing company with languid angels. And thinks that
such closeness is also spacious, and their quiet involves
the silence of the oak and its gracious shadow, as though

Peace were part of the water table at the roots of the tree.

What It Sounded Like on The Way to Calvary

Sparrows bathing in puddles

As the sun passes behind a cloud

The scrape when the wheel heaves

On its wooden pin

Slough brimming

Gold roof of water, plash of bare feet

Her blue shift hitched up

Baby sister milking their mother, jaw pulsing

These small things changed her

Meat-birds on the scaffold

A woman turning her back

A woman sobbing into her apron

Brick-red earth

Trail of One Hundred Giants

Whitethorn, in heat-struck flower—
as for the grove, it stands
 like scaffolding under the city of heaven
 some men still imagine.

Loneliness does not destroy the possibility of loneliness.

And the mind this past year has moved
 to another place
where what was once strength and withstood,
 became suddenly fragile.

As if the soul were being forced to choose
in the presence of a demon explaining that yes, you have to
do it all again in exactly the same way.

Now the wind in the sequoias
 plays its infinite cantata, now many tongues
in the small bells of the largest lives
 roll and resound;
their sound an invisible river.

Suppose god exists, and they are wind
 in consort with evergreens.
The sighing body, singing body. Roar and
hush, motion and stillness that enters the breastbone.

The giants declare their holiness
by living. Their roots spread ever outward.

I passed miles through blackened remains
 of the southern Sierras to stand here.

They're searching for water.