



TINA M. JOHNSON

Every November My Father Visited Me

In the afternoon, we would drive out to Starrigavan to find the swans
tacked against a bolt of sky
as if winter's gray needle held them there.
Strings of darkness gathered, swans our last light.
At home there was cooking to do, but here,
only my father and me, our lives trailing out like rope behind a skiff.
And if we dreamed of flight as evening fluttered down,
the fields and rivers turning below like plates passed around a table,
we knew our un-winged arms would never skim the clouds.
Our hands, as if to prove, lay silent on the seat between us.

In April

In April the bears come down Mount Verstovia
and the neighbor's trash can drops to its knees in the middle of the night
flinging a line of garbage into the road because the roots
of skunk cabbage have not yet sweetened in the muskeg.

In April the Golden-crowned Sparrows return,
tossing their fluting song against the asphalt sky,
notes that bounce into the boney unleavened berry bushes
and ping the wet rug of a bear traveling the sleeve of Indian river

where the white-fronted geese stop for the night
picking shelled meals from the rocks in the shallows.
The canvasbacks blink glass eyes and dip
their heads in the current, the bear sniffs the bank,
leaving pigeon-toed prints in the mud.

All winter this place was concatenated by darkness, yoked
by snow and hunger, but now, in April,
the yellow flames of swamp lantern begin to flicker,
fiddlehead ferns unfurl their necks,
berry bushes light their red and purple lanterns.

When I wake at night I hear them grow outside my window.

A Split Mind

I wish I had been kinder
the night I found you carving your name into the table
rough letters gouged deep against the grain was that
the first lick
of spiraled runners along the mesolimbic pathway, a cutting
trail of blighted tendrils,
the apprehension of a mind inflamed

I believe in balance and order, in chemicals and queues,
but also in
sparks misfired,
the degradation of tissue dissipation of clarity
suffering in the mind uprooted
for I have navigated enough
the darkened doorways of the mind
woken to slivers of dread, a weight
that topples beneath the rank and brutal saw

and today the police
arrive at your home, talk to your father where he pauses
beside the chopping block, ax and wedge gone silent, while inside,
inside your head voices smolder and electrify, an obscenity endured
again every morning when

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you wake up the same, the same,
impoverished signals sending roots into hard soil,
twisted branches and burls of sap that drip mouthfuls of despair

I wish I had been kind that night I wish I had truly seen you
I wish I had said, let us sit down at this table together
pick up the sharp edge
and I will wipe the surface clean
make your mark.

Geraniums

All summer my grandmother tended a picket
of roses in her front yard,
kneeling in her housedress to weed crabgrass and clover,
watering in the evening so the sun would not burn
through beads of water that turned to glass on the leaves,
heeding my grandfather
who shouted from the house not to get water on the porch.
At dusk her Los Angeles neighborhood finally
ticked down to cool
and her yard became an oasis, the roses like palms
bending toward little pools of water at their roots.

In the backyard
along the cinder block wall of the neighbor's garage
a cascade of wild geraniums grew.
In the evening, after tucking in the roses,
after cupping their pink faces in both hands,
she walked back to that green tangle,
catacomb for black widow spiders,
and leaning forward with both arms over her head
as if she were hanging clothes on a line,
clipped the blossoms and carried them inside.
Her skirt a basket, the dropped petals
leaving a trail of flames in the grass.

She made a bouquet for the dinner table
and after we had eaten, long after we had gone to bed,
on the broad and darkened desert of my grandmother's table,
geraniums burned.