

The Bird Eaters

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for Boots

“We ate the birds. We ate them. We wanted their songs to flow up through our throats and burst out of our mouths, and so we ate them.”

- Margaret Atwood

We Ate the Birds

This morning
the cat left a body on the porch.
It was a yellow songbird,
the size and shape of a fist.

The cat wasn't hungry.
I understand. This morning
I dipped my pinky finger into a cup of hot tea
just past the fingernail so
I could feel the heat from all angles.

Lately, the cat and I share matte black pupils.
We hunch over the body
of the bird, plucking feathers to reveal
a sheet of transparent skin and

delicate, hollow bones.
Though neither of us have an appetite,
the cat and I make a meal of his body.
We leave behind only keratin:

beak, two feet,
a bundle of saffron feathers.

Radishes

In the dark,
a ghost who claims to be my mother
is pulling up radishes.

She is in a dress, though
I haven't seen my mother in a dress in years.
I can hear her panting, big erratic breaths
through my open bedroom window.

It's too early to be harvesting roots.
This morning in the kitchen my mother sliced tomatoes into
two karat rubies, their juices running down her wrists.
I told her in Mexico they carve portraits
out of taproots to celebrate Christmas,
radish-animals and dancers and girls in long dresses.

My ghost-mother is taking everything.
From across the yard, I can see
the roots tangled around her ankles, threatening to pull her under.
I ask her why she has come back now,
why so early but

my lips aren't moving.
Instead, I hear her murmuring species
as she plucks each from the dirt,
her voice so similar to mine
that on the phone we are indistinguishable

April cross. French breakfast.
Plum purple. Cherry-belle.

The Balcony Collapses and I Become a Bird

after "Metamorphosis 2" by Thomas Terceira

I can't remember the question, exactly.
It was August, dead season,
only blooms fat and angry
and sharp if you tried to touch them.
I had tiled the floors with geography.
Angelo was white and useless in the heat.

Next door, the fields were on fire.
We would watch the rain not falling,
the bodies of teenagers rolling in the dirt.
Down the road the earth had pulled apart
the asphalt into a deep crevasse that children
flipped quarters across, back and forth until
one went clinking into the darkness.

Angelo was sure he was dying.
He hiked his shorts up his blue calves
so the sun could heat his thighs.
I was too busy watching the squirrels move,
evolving rapidly to flit from branch to branch
like birds, stretching their extra skin.
Angelo had asked me something

about the forecast, maybe. I didn't respond.
He was so high and certain. That it would rain eventually.
That our bodies would collapse, but only after a suitable
number of years together. I let a glass of water sweat
a translucent ring into my skirt and ignored him.

What did I know? That a fault-line could open
underneath you and swallow everything.
I pictured it again and again: Angelo's blue legs
clinging to the veranda. My body
sprouting the thick black wings of a devil-worshipper
from the sore nubs of my shoulders.

Mouth

The kitten and I
spend the afternoon watching
videos of glaciers the size of lower Manhattan
calving into the sea.

The ice can be up to 600 feet thick.
When it rolls in the churning arctic
it looks like the thick black neck
of a plesiosaur rising from the deep.

I tell Boots, *Soon we'll live underwater.*
There will be one long, hot season.
She opens her mouth to yawn
and I put my finger on her pink tongue,

her most durable and delicate muscle,
specially grooved to lap.
Our bodies aren't made for this, I tell her.
She stretches her back and naps.

Scenery in a Dream

Life is not merely the struggling at present, there is also the poetry and distant fields

- Zhongwen Yu

I cracked youth open. It was an accident.
It came rushing out, all over our bodies
sticky and wet and breathing our own words back at us

ones we thought had come while dreaming.
I had been dancing. You were sleeping with your head
pressed against the cold, white wall

mouthings sleep words into the sheet rock,
the same words

long and slow so the plaster could hear you.

*

I smelled something burning.
It was the house we lived in, but nobody had hands
to douse the fire or lips to spit it out.

It was evening, and all the boys and girls had gathered in our kitchen.
I watched their hips and hands swaying to a distant music,
their arms wrapped around each others' waists.

A little girl emerged from the rubble
of our bedroom. She was thin but
not burnt. Her skin had the matte black sheen

of wrought-iron. The smoke
had made her heavy.

*

Why we drift into
a certain scent.

We are wandering now in a garden
where you lift your dress so I can touch the tops
of your thighs.

I remember only your legs and
your hands, possibly

the aftertaste of
one guess

on your mouth, just
what could have been there
Not even your long hair

which I loved
to run through, that distant
field

a long, thin
winding

curtain.

This Hunger

Somehow, I said
I will get to the bottom of this hunger.
You do not hear me. You are busy
murmuring the names of hummingbirds into the nest of my hair.

I am telling you this growling is unnatural,
I open my mouth so you can hear it better.
Sparkling violetear, you say. *Little sunangel*.

I am ravenous. I do not understand
this hunger. At night it opens my belly like a mouth
and you dance your fingers along the raw pink brim

while I suck in everything around you.
In the morning, I cough shards of wooden desk chairs,
coffee cups, newspapers.

One night, this hunger becomes unbearable.
Please, I say. *I am afraid I will hurt someone*.
You respond to me in Italian.
I can't understand you.

You say when you dream of me I am a little bird.
I fly into your coat pockets and live there for decades.
At night, I wake myself up whimpering
like a feral child and you are beside me,

sleeping peacefully. In my dreams,
I'm covered in hair. You nestle your head
into the hollow of my belly and rarely come up for air.

I Have Let the Doctor Cut Open

I have let the doctor cut open
my cat's belly to pull her organs out.

Is your diet regular? The nurse asks. *Excuse me,*
I say. I'm confused. This wasn't supposed to be another poem about my body.
I said, is her diet regular? I'm relieved. I nod vigorously, over and over.

On the surgical table, my cat looks tired
and too small. The doctor opens her belly, and
inside her is everything we have ever eaten together:
birds and buttons and the gamey flesh of a deer.
The doctor puts these items on the table,
half-digested, for cataloging later.
Am I supposed to be seeing this? I say.
Nobody seems to hear.

Later, when my cat is asleep in the bed I made her,
I touch the scab on my stomach where she drew her claws against my skin
to show me where they cut her. The flesh is raised and puckered,
the area around it tender. *After this*, I tell her,

we will be different in all the good ways.
That's what they told me, even though
it hurts now. We won't wander, we'll worry less
about being beautiful. In her bed, my cat is dreaming.
Her paws move in her sleep, erratic.
She pushes and pushes against nothing.

Rain

You appear in the doorway. I am convinced that my body is dying. I won't last long.
You say: *I feel absolutely nothing*. I am staring at you but my mouth has disappeared.
Your feet are a nest of delicate hairs. My eyes are red and sore.

For a while, we look at each other. Your lips are one line pointed in another direction.
My hair is falling out all over the bed. Neither of us look particularly human. I say: *I would like to keep going*. You cover your face with your hand.

I stare at my toenails for a while. They are too long. They are starting to resemble talons.
You say: *At least tonight it will rain*. I open my mouth and let one long breath escape. It is the only breath I have ever taken. The exhale is a rattle like something dead. *Yes*. I say. *It should. At least. The rain.*

The China Bowl

after Tingqun Zhang

You can build a nation
on a fragile body.

We did. We filled
our bowl with gentle animals
to satiate our hunger.
We plucked the blooms from
ornamental flowers.

You can eat rose, tulip,
calendula, chrysanthemum.
In our china bowl I have gathered

the naked bodies of songbirds,
petals, lost buttons. I tell the kitchen walls

this is a family heirloom.
It has lived in a cabinet for decades.

I turn the ingredients over
with a wooden spoon. Only the cat is here
to watch me. I create
a porcelain cauldron. I make
a mother of pearl stew.

The china bowl
purrs like an animal.
It hums weakly when I enter the room.

There Was a River We Couldn't Cross

For a while, it was
very dark. I tied a ribbon
to your wrist and we wandered together
through the blackness

until you turned your belly into a lantern
and we glowed from the inside out.

There was a river we couldn't cross.
An old man lowered constellations with a net
into the water. He wouldn't look at us.
He knew that we were stumbling,
half-blind, trying to make meaning

of something we would forget before morning.
At dawn I told you where we were —
covered in ash, wading through

a river thick with the shadows of fish
moving too fast but all vaguely familiar.

I was damp from the waist down.
You touched my hand and laughed.

Poppy

The car goes slowly down the freeway.
We are talking, some of us,
about who is here and who is not.

I am thinking about the old man at the tire store.
How old are you? he said. *You look maybe sixteen.*
He asked me if I had been to the river.
He used to pan for gold.

The car misses its exit.
I am suddenly in the place we used to live.
Out here, men live in treehouses with lanterns in the windows.
You would bike home along this road
even when it was raining.

I am home too late again.
You are already asleep
and I think probably angry.

I put a poppy in a jar.
I put the jar on the kitchen table.
I think, *does Katie love poppies or peonies?*
I think, *what is the difference?*

This flower is orange and limp. It does not smell like a flower.
It smells like a shovel blade in the too-shallow earth.
It smells like licking dirt off of iron.

It is December Again

for my Pepere

It is December again and
I am standing on the porch with a suitcase
full of all my old dresses. The cold has put a sheet
over my father's backyard, like the furniture
in a house where no one lives anymore.

In December, the pigeons flee the old sewing factory
and cover my body in downy feathers. My Pepere says
it has been too warm for the winter birds,
the red cardinal in one low branch across the yard
so small he could be a mailbox,
blood on the road, the flash
of a red reflector.

I stand on the sloping porch with my suitcase
and the air is cold enough to paint with one finger.
I breathe out and a ghost escapes --

my mother's ghosts, my father's,
the ghosts that still haunt my brother.
It does not matter that they are not my ghosts.
It does not matter that this suitcase is too heavy,
that it is too cold to linger, that the cows
have left the back field and I have
nothing useful left to cover up my body.

A rabbit stands in the yard,
ear cocked, so pale he is barely there.
When I blink, my breath has evaporated
into a motion light blinking code above the doorway,
a pair of lips mouthing
unintelligible messages,

a single, translucent
white feather.