

What The Doctors Forget To Tell You About Morphine

That you have to reason it out, punching
 needles into his dying
 flesh, your father, that illusion
 of peace with the body.
 That you know you are killing him,
 left unconscious for hours, his amber urine ticking
 in the drip-bag. How he eventually cannot speak
 through the bliss, and when he says your name
 it sounds like a wet towel.

How he wakes up the neighbors every three hours
 with the moan. How the empty syringe
 makes you wish for your own.
 That you have to inject it straight
 into his heart, and that makes his eyes smile,
 makes them glisten and roll,
 and how your love gets replaced

by the fixed drum in his body.
 How he looks at you like a God
 when you open the vein.
 How it makes him feel as if he were flying.
 How he is, for a time, an angel.

My Father's Absence In Africa

It is familiar now, this sane petition:
*For only twelve cents a day you can feed
 this child*, and then one appears, a girl lifting her dress
 to show her warped ribs. I am not convinced she is dying

until the camera pans to the naked boy
 held up next to her, the glossy black stone
 of his head shining in the lens.
 Today I think of my father losing his hair—clumps of it
 floating in the bathtub, the sink—strands I found littering his bed
 that I swept out like an obedient maid.

This boy is the effigy of my father, a year ago, dying.
 He lay like this boy, naked, the knots
 of his knees protruding from roped legs.
 I heard him breathe this boy's labored, interrupted
 breath. He clung to the same hollow needles.
 He slept in the same black stool.

If my father were in Africa, he and the boy could compare
 the size of their inflated stomachs, their distended bowels
 announcing the bravado of sickness, the swollen meat
 eating itself. They could trade the crooked tattoos
 of bone showing through, they could exchange
 the pale globes of their eyes like marbles.

This boy is in my living room. This boy is somewhere
 in Ghana, starving. I want to pull out his dry tongue and peer
 down his body with a flashlight. I want to knock on his bones
 like a doctor, inspect the slick apartment of his belly.

This absence in the boy's stomach
 is a place where my father could hide.

In Memory Of A Girl

Perhaps in ten years I will look at this picture of a girl,
her face twisted across an album page
and say, *not that I didn't know her,*
but that something in her is dead.

And not that what is dead will be an innocence, or a hope,
but closer to a thought, a sentence trailing off
between words, a thing half-formed in her body
but still hard, a stone.

Perhaps I will look at this picture and laugh back
at the girl, at her blue-jeaned expression,
at the faint smile caught
between her lips like a lie.

Perhaps it will be that she forgot
her own story, stopped
the language of her name, discovered
the place where laughing began to hurt.

Perhaps I will look at this picture and say,
this is the face of a girl who thought too much.
Perhaps it will be that she fell in love
with her own body.

Perhaps, in the end, this picture will remind me
of something else: the tired wheel of a woman's laughter,
a boy's kiss that held no promise, the night the moon spilled
her life on the bed sheets.

And what of her unfinished heart, the history
of her knee, the year she saw her father die?
There is not enough room in the earth to bury
all of this dead reason.

Perhaps the girl is waiting
for someone to tell her this life is not a test.
Perhaps she is tired of her show, the accidental world
of the frame, her grin.

This girl is someone, anyone
who can stand still.
But her arrest cannot break the fact
that she is, all the time, spinning.

Tonight I look at this picture and say,
this girl is moving from center.
Perhaps what I want to ask is
who decides what things will fall off
the end of this world?

The Gift

He was a November boy, sign of Scorpio,
fifteen and with smile like James Dean's.

It was all there for us:

his father gone out for the evening and a king-sized bed free
and the T.V. on in the other room
and us so young we could taste each other
sitting five feet apart on the couch.

I had picked him up

from school that afternoon; it was ring day,
and I showed him the clunky gold band in the car.

He said it was beautiful, led my hand

to his mouth and kissed the ring

there on my hand, there in the car,

there at three p.m. on a September afternoon

when I didn't know he was a virgin

and wouldn't learn it for two more years.

I could feel the ghost of his body for days afterwards:

the tattoo of his skin underneath my thigh,

the hair on his belly pricking up

like small fires, the innocent rise

of his hips coming to meet me.

I held the blue cusp of his eyes

between my hands as his head dropped

and his chest shuddered

and things were done

and all that sweet boy could say was

Thank you, thank you, thank you.