

Brittany Winland

the dirt and the bone

1.

High summer, evenings like cats
stretching to lap up the last of the sun.
Warm bath, bubbles sticking to the baby's soft
fontanelle, his little barnacle body. This hushed half
hour at the end of this long day which is spilling
its last golden gift through the slats of the blinds
and I am heavy, slow and weary in both
body and brain. The door opens downstairs, the dogs
bark and skitter across the wood floor, their toenails
typewriter clacks breaking silence. The baby slides
slippery through my arms and laughs as his hands
splash the water. Your boots hit the floor below
one-two
their heft familiar, landmark of now, these dirty
days in the thick of running noses and children
crying out their needs to us, who are suddenly
mute.

2.

The kids find a stray zucchini in the overgrowth of the garden box
ripening unseen, untended. Long, swollen with its secrets.
They take pictures of it lying on their arms for scale. *You
are a survivor*, my daughter praises it. Dirt on its skin, dirt
on her hands, dirt on the kitchen floor.

3.

My grandmother's ghost sits in my closet,
toward the back, where the dresses bloom, half-
forgotten flowers on the cracked plaster wall. Her
perfume is the perfume of dust, old furs we pretend
belong to a discarded savagery, and the petals of violets
pressed between two yellowing pages.

On my knees, a puddle of old shoes around me, I touch

Kestrel

the skirt of my green dress, stroke my fingers over the silk slide of the material, the slight snag where your fingers once dug, once pulled it higher on my thigh. I remember my grandmother kneeling on the padded rail at mass, the thick hose covering her lower legs, a slight run appearing occasionally over the ankle bone. Always looking somewhere above ourselves, always ready to receive the holy fire, that burning away of everything extraneous—the dirt and the bones and all our small strivings. Mouths always open, waiting for the flesh.

4.

You prefer older gods. One-eyed, crow-crowned, hanging nine days from a tree god, a sailor from his own body until drifting home again, waking with the Words like blood on his lips.

You expected the screaming, you expected a slammed door and a number dialed three times, fingers shaking on the keys. You love, you burn with it, a stone striking sparks against another. You didn't expect the blinking hours, the long grey afternoons blunted like ceasefire knives. You never anticipated boredom.

And you are no good at sitting still. No good.

5.

We come crawling out of the sea
all four limbs
& then two legs
singing
filled with salt and brine
crying
We dream of light filtered through
tides tumbling, whale
psalms & starfish
curling into fists
laughing
I can smell the sea on you
your sweat drying on your skin

your body dreaming in pearls
We want the rock-rock-rocking
again
all our land-locked lives, our
mouths so open, our fingers
pressing into palms we are so
hungry
all the time, all of time

6.

I used to know the word that unlocked your shoulder
blades, from the collarbone, from each of your arms, that unstrung
muscles tense and lined like soldiers up
the column of your neck. The small syllable pushed
into the dent at the base of your skull that sent
your breath running from you, out between your tombstone
teeth and turned soil mouth. Used to unhook your rib cage
and whisper directly to your lungs. Tell me about oxygen, I'd say.
Talk to me about
drowning.

7.

The older kids light leftover sparklers out in the driveway, their bare
feet pulling phantom heat up from the now-shadowed
concrete, their faces following the sun sinking
pink and flamed behind the hills. Roadside flowers,
wild & disordered. From his chair, the baby opens
his mouth to me, small featherless bird, and I place
smashed bits of banana on his tongue.
Through the screen, crickets are crying and the children are laughing and
sulphur fizzes on the air.

I could go outside, walk to nowhere on a night like this, in nothing
but my green dress, until the night
presses its fingers to the closed eyes of the world and I leave
the fabric on the grass. You could stand behind me, unzip me at my
spine. Watch my bruises
glow.

Kestrel

8.

Love is crouching over your own heart with a stone—
cracking open its shell over and over, again and
again.

9.

We lumber from the bathtub, the baby and me. I dry
the memory of oceans from his legs and his round
belly. Moon face, watch face ticking through seconds, threading
together hours. The day is over. I will find you
downstairs in the kitchen, your uniform jacket
flung over a chair. Imagine I am saying
amen to all your smudges. If we kneel, we'll kneel in mud
and touch our lips to mortal flesh. The miracle is this temporary
flowering, the flare of glee out in the yard, the moth pushing white
wings against the screen door. The way your palm
lies open to me, calloused shell— the grit
inside it, the seed spinning
slow and milky into nacreous gem, a sea sleight of hand.
Pearl, the injurious turned
treasure. What is left without the dirt and the bone and the small
strivings?

Our loves are all that save us.

