Buzzards

Stoic, even as they strip a stray dog’s carcass, even as they autopsy its stomach, untangle the knot of intestines, and redefine the mange that once defined its skin, a wake of buzzards feed by the splinters of our backyard fence, beat their serrated wings and tails, hop from one limb to the next, pushing for their share; each as eager to burrow through maggots and meat as the landscape is to turn them into symbols for the biblical drought singed into the fields, for the acres of expired crops, for the way the heat stifles the afternoon with stasis and hallucination, a belief that this could be purgatory, and that whatever God one chooses has leased this stretch of land to pay for our ancestors’ sins, spiting every generation for still calling it home.

And yet, there I am, listening to the heresy of wind, to how steady my breathing becomes as verse upon verse of sweat nooses my neck, as my demeanor matches the buzzards’, renders me mute as I walk over, watch how they stop in mid-pluck, and how, like my parents at the kitchen table, they cock their bald and blood-wrinkled heads at an angle that demands I say something important, that waits for me to come closer, join them before they take flight and forget the scraps they left behind, those fresh and half-swallowed morsels their shadows regurgitated for mine.

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Piñata

Still, the tangled mesh and papier-mâché held, and as it hung from the branch with the chosenness of a sacrificial lamb, its body bled a stream of lollipops and mini-chocolate bars on the parched Bermuda grass, where cousins I had never met kneeled like tired field workers, bundling their cravings inside shirttails and hands. As much as I wanted to scoop my own stash, as hard as I swung, side-stepped the wrecking ball of fun till the itchy crown of sweat completed its exodus to my jaw, I kept staring up, awed at the battered lumps, at the news-printed intestines held by glue and starch, and at the angle in which the piñata dangled beneath the afternoon gallows of shade and sun, where my father, like a puppeteer merely feigning his clumsiness, orchestrated its chaos further up, and flung it toward my face even as I struck the burro’s neck and back; how the rainbow-colored hooves flew like shrapnel across the lawn, constellating near the crowd of relatives chanting for the blows I landed, applauding the swipes that ached my arms into a sense that I should stop, put the broomstick down, and touch its mangled limbs with a feeling I could almost claim as guilt.

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Seasonal

For a moment, they stand like retired scarecrows, parched decoys for the fabled birds that never came. Their distant silhouettes, gauzed by the morning fog, dilate above my windowsill, shaping into middle-aged bodies defined by every field they’ve ever migrated to, by the rows of ambiguous crops they scoop between their arms, and by the boxes they hold as they fill them to the top, stack their quotas like cinder blocks on the back of pickup trucks, and return to the harvest still occupied with a homeless drought. Like a traveling circus, they arrived unannounced, planted their portables and tarps across the ground, and because the sky, swollen with a stillborn climate, only bears a string of malnourished clouds, the seasonal hands pick what isn’t already fated to rot. I watch how quickly their foosball-figured bodies move back and forth, how they keep their spines in a perfect arc, while their sun-branded faces, stoic beyond the need for explanation, mirror the rootless scabs of dirt, and like the charred and crosshatched acres of untilled earth, they endure heat not even God or prayers to God have learned to cure, and perhaps never will so long as the newborn flares of mirages sprout, bleach the horizon from any sense of certainty, and glaze every nameless worker with a terra cotta skin, with the same fever further ossifying the fossilized soil, yielding an indifference no amount of sweat can sow itself into.

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