

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 mangle
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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