

Just Like That

That evening I took a fifteen-minute shower.
When I came down into the kitchen,
I asked my son-in-law what happened
While I was gone. *A lot*, he said.
*Another galaxy swam through the universe
And is trailing along next to us, just like that.
Course, it's affected our gravity and all of us
Will have a better sense of humor starting now.
Other things too just becoming evident.*
I looked outside in the gloaming, my vocabulary
Changed for the better, and locked eyes
With a wild turkey perched in the tree behind the garage.
A grizzly stood on its hind legs to the west,
Beckoning me *never worry I'm on your side*
And a wolf raised a protective paw.
The moon dropped low and clucked to the turkey,
Who ran across the yard, showing off his fine legs.
Crimson clouds turned cartwheels in the yard.
Try a cartwheel, they whispered. *It's not too late.*
The grass stroked my ankles with small green hands
and tossed me in the air, where the cedars
Reached over and murmured *courage, courage*

Justice

I lay flat on my back, thinking of the muddled
Laundry in the dryer until our yogi
Instructed a cleansing breath, in through the nose,
A sharp exhale. I drew in chariots, their spiked
Wheels raking my throat, whole armies
With bristling swords and rusted bayonets,
The wounded, the dogs of war, the doomed children,
Their sandals, their boots, their shredded sneakers.
On my great exhale, those ploughs rolled out,
Motorized, the oxen and horses free to eat sweet grasses.
Children tumbled, eyeing bewildered
their clothes, patched and clean covering
healed limbs. *Triumph of the innocents*
Men and women held the elbows of those
Not so strong. Some birds had donated feathers
For straw hats, and I sneezed out a tumultuous riot
Of Bartlett pears, seed cakes, sweet wine,
Mandarin oranges, and jars of honey left over
From the Queen bee's birthday party.
Well, not just hers—we were all born that day,
the lights overhead singing our marvelous song.

Casting Off

Rose had taken to reusing paper plates.
She'd brush them off—a bit of grease didn't matter.
Another cheese sandwich, chips over the stain.
She'd get three or four uses out of it. Why not?
She saved water, soap, and time.
Time she had precious little of these days.
She was nobody's fool. She'd pared everything
down to the bare minimum. Better
she should throw out than let others
do it later. She was glad they brought her
to Hebrew Life, relieved to leave
her apartment. A kitchen, living room, bedroom,
she'd rattled around there like unlucky dice.
She wanted nothing from those dry rooms.
What was Karen thinking of, showing up
in this shared room with her tarnished tray,
the perfume bottles and framed pictures
scrabbling across the surface like mice.
Rose had meant to leave it behind.
Karen acted like it was a jeweled scepter,
so proud of herself, this daughter,
thinking she knew what her mother wanted.
Bring nuts and chocolate, things she still had time for.
She had no need for scent, and the faces of her mother and sister
were etched long ago behind her eyes.

Portrait of a Lady, 1801–1834

The words next to the paintings tell me what to look for. Dutifully, I read them. Folk art portraits, done by itinerant artists, no formal training, no garrets, ateliers, benefactors, imported cigarettes. *Look, I'm instructed, at the way the child's head is placed on her shoulders without benefit of neck.* Why so it is. *Notice how her left foot has a life of its own.* It is a bit long, not impossibly so. *The part in her hair is drawn without perspective.* So what if her head is flat; her teeth are pretty, though gray by today's standards. *Notice the articulation of the teeth, a touch not often seen in folk art.* Although they made her look rather carnivorous, as if she had just eaten mouse stew. But it's the young woman next to her I'm worried about. She's waiting in plain brown dress for the artist to leave, freeing her to race down to the Gloucester harbor, where her husband, swordfisherman, rises from the sea, like Poseidon in oilskin pants. No fussing with color on her cheeks, no simpering smile; she's told the artist she won't have it. She's got fire in her eyes, though the artist wasn't sure how to put that in. She lived thirty-three years. I search her face for signs of trouble, anemia exhaustion consumption. Nothing there. Succumbed, perhaps a year later, to childbed fever, typhus, cholera. Oh, so many ways. Maybe grief. The world's turned over a number of times since her death, tumbling everybody out like salt from a shaker, refilling, emptying them out too. I'd guess she held on for dear life, but the only record of her is the painting *whose proportions are not those found in real life.*

Yard Sale

Useless, I could tell instantly.
Baby toys in plastic orange and red, grimy fry pans,
bent hollowware burning in the sun.
I walk in past the woman and the baby sitting on the concrete stoop.
I'm on my way out before I see the books piled on the grass,
their pages soft with age, the damp dried out of them.
The Sun Also Rises, the striped Scribner edition.
Do I have this one at home?
I crouch down and turn limp pages, not reading, brushing off dust,
unwinding a tendril of cobwebs from my finger.
The odor of paper stored in boxes too long.
This one's not worth it, broken spine, even for a quarter.
I put fusty Hemingway down.
The baby cries, his voice quavering and scratchy.
The woman picks him up and says it's time for a nap,
you're ready aren't you, you'll lie down for a little while.
I stand up, the sun hot on my hair.
I want to lie down, a baby, in a darkened room with only a thin cover.
An opened window with a fan going somewhere.
I'd close my eyes even if I didn't really want to
because there's not much fight left in me right now.
The baby whimpers.
I forget what city I'm in,
whether it's Minneapolis or Boston before that or
Chicago back even further.
I'm a burnished nub, everything rubbed out of me,
clarified. Even so, I have to get back to the car,
do the things that make it go,
add on to myself the crumbled pieces
that fell off and lie there, in the grass.

Leaving the Dining Room

Sometimes your constellation comes together just right.
You've been standing in the teachers' dining room
far too long with your coat on so that the nape
of your neck is limned with sweat. Then you
walk out and the air is just chilly enough
to cool you off and snow is falling
in fat clumps and you breathe them in.
On the drive home, the radio announcer
says to look up at the brightest moon of the year—
if the sky where you live is clear enough.
The sky isn't clear enough where you live;
it's overcast and damp, just perfect,
and the heavens stream by
and none of the stars falls out of place.

Rose Has a New Walker

We buy it online. She got her old one,
standard issue gray aluminum, at the hospital
after she fell at Susie's house last summer.
It's a man's walker, and she holds her elbows out like bent wings
when she grasps the handles. It's too wide for her.
I toss out the question one day, if you had a new walker
what color would you choose.
Blue, she says, just like that. I order blue.
When it comes, we connect the hand brakes,
attach the basket and the seat,
pull the plastic off the wheels.
Can I return it, Rose says.
It'll be hard, I tell her. It's from the Internet.
She feels better knowing there's no choice.
But it's always good to try again.
Maybe I won't need it. I ride the exercise bike now.
And in Chi Gong class I stand up longer.
Before I did the exercises from the chair.
Anyway, it's not blue. I think it's black.
So for that we'll return it? It's navy.
Under the lamp we compromise on navy black.
I tell her to try the seat. But always remember
To press the hand brakes when you sit down.
It's like the brakes on a bike.
She doesn't get it. She never rode a bike, she says,
she roller skated everywhere, to the botanical conservatory,
to the library. She tightened the skates with a key she wore
around her neck. When they broke, and that was often,
her father would fix them, *a tragedy you kids never met him.*
I ask Rose to push the walker in the hall.
She can't help smiling; stately, royal she glides like the King's barge
down the Thames. The waters part before her; I hear Handel's music.
It's nice, she says. *But what should I do with the old one. A shame to waste it.*
It'll be a spare, I say. Maybe we'll take it in the car when we go out.
Remember when Daddy taught me how to ride, I say. Running beside me,
his hand on the fender and then letting go.
Of course I remember, she says, *he taught all of you.*
And then I was free to pedal around the block, up to the drug store,
turn right, turn right again, over and over, centrifugally
pulled by the gravity of home.