

Something Else

Suppose, one spring, the birds decided
not to fly north, and the animals
sleeping in the woods decided this year
they'd rather not wake, and turned over instead
for another dream.

Imagine one summer the butterflies decided
to stay in their cocoons, or the caterpillars forgot
to wrap themselves up inside themselves
and simply gorged themselves instead
until their season passed. One day the tide forgot to rise.
This is only one way of speaking for the world.

Suppose the spiders stopped weaving, mosquitoes
forgot how to suck our blood, bees
decided not to pollinate flowers.
Suppose the sea turtles never returned
to the beaches that bore them, to lay their moon-drawn eggs.
Or suppose for a moment the rivers held still
and the leaping salmon held still in mid-air.

Imagine fire stopped burning things to ash
although it still burned. It was no longer hot.
Of course that couldn't happen. So think of something else.

The Jam

So one day he woke up, opened his closet
to get dressed and found all his clothes hanging
in tatters, falling to the floor as dust.
All the towels in the bathroom looked like spider webs.
His wife was sleeping peacefully at last, after days
of fret and obligation. He didn't want to wake her
and he didn't want to stay home from the office, but
he was naked. What else could he do? And so
he picked up the guitar he hadn't touched in months,
sat down on the wood floor and strummed like he used to
in the old days. He woke her after all,
who lay there a few moments remembering when he'd
sung like a young man. Then she got up, opened
her closet to find all her clothes tattered too.
Her husband was howling now. What could she do
but slide her old cello out from under the bed?
And so they jammed for hours. Then they lay back down
exhausted—it was afternoon already—
and slept, and dreamed vividly. And when they woke up
refreshed for the first time in months, laughing
at their predicament, they found their closets
replenished with stylish new garments, sharp suits
and elegant skirts, freshly pressed and perfumed.
Astonished at their luck, they tried on these new clothes
but found that none fit, not even close. This could go on
for a long time they realized as they undressed again
with a kind of glee and giggling, until
they realized their bodies had grown unfamiliar,
thicker than they used to be, calloused where they used to be
pink with small veins scribbled everywhere, and nerves
that had danced at the slightest provocation
and had now moved far off to some hideout in the distance
that would take at least a day to hike to, climbing
rocky terrain over poorly-marked trails,
naked and numbed from this hunger.

Extinction

The creature my mother had been once was hiding
in a supermarket magazine photograph, as though
she were a stylish shoe; the animal my father
had fancied as *himself*, was howling at the moon
like the wolf in that famous ad campaign
that taught us how to act wild and stylish at once,
like a new kind of gesture. We had lost all the creatures
that weren't of our ilk, like we'd lost certain aunts
and uncles to their snapshots. And then we started losing
those animals inside us, as our sleep started dreaming
in languages of follicle and cuticle, fingernail
and ear wax, sand and snot. Until something
moved around inside again, wilder than we'd ever been
and almost as vivid as the world, and it hurt
like language must have done once, or maybe even love.

The Milky Way

If we could imagine that every word we speak were an animal or insect, the last of a species ever to be born, that the very act of speaking brought extinction even before our words had been heard and replied to, we might get a feeling for the vanishings we witness but don't see. And if every conversation were understood as a kind of holocaust denuding whole landscapes, some people would simply fall silent—as far as they could—while most others would keep chattering on. Just imagine the vast forests of lives, the near-infinity of forms brought to a halt with a simple conversation. And I would be one of the talkers, despite the fact that I knew what my talking destroyed. And so I would mourn every word I said, even while I argued passionately for silence and for learning to honor the sacred diversity of life. Just imagine watching the stars go out on a dark night in the far north, a clear night, one after the other until the sky was black.

Once, when I was taking out the garbage, just walking dully across my back yard, a huge bird—as big as a vulture but glittering and sleek—rose from the grass and flew into my body, knocked the breath out of me, then flew up and away with a powerful pull of its wings. I could hardly see it in the darkness. Then it was just gone.

The Ghost Trees

And now a certain kind of scientist says
the weather in various parts of the world
is growing exhausted and just wants to lie down
for a nap, or maybe for a longer dose
of oblivion, so its dreams can be
re-spawned, its creatures large and small
replenished to wildness, the air re-folded
into its invisible origami, even
human language shot-through again
with sap. In the clear-cut woods--
raw ground and stumps--invisible trees
are learning to move from one place to another,
blurring paths and meadows; the people
who live there call them *fathers who turned
away without waving goodbye, and learned
to dance slowly*; they contrast them with the boulders
and rocks, who truly know how to dance
in slow time, even as the humans and the creatures
in fur and the creatures in feathers leave
their bodies and all the bodies they passed through
to arrive at now through eternities--but still
we pretend they cast shadows across the ground,
and still we pretend they bear fruit.