

Animal Experiments

At some point it became imperative to understand
just how much could cure before it kills,
so we took the healthiest mice, plump with white fur,
made sure they were of the right weight
and injected them with the virus.
It took only a day for it to take hold:
first, the lack of appetite, staring at food
like it were a puzzle they had to fix, then scuttling
to the corners of the cage. Then the seizures--
which was just the right sign. *Our tiny thunderbolts*,
or so we wrote down. We gave the antidote
in varying doses then waited for the survivors.
Sometimes there were bets, and sometimes,
they all died--standing upright then falling dead,
stiff like rocks. And sometimes it happened
in the middle of a conversation, that we had to stop
to press a finger to the fallen's heart.
And sometimes even when one or two lived,
when we wrote down *success!* and drank beer,
in honor of science, sometimes we pretended
we didn't see how they started acting strangely--
scratched themselves until they bled, or bit each other.
Still what matters is to live, and they were saved,
and we gave them names of superheroes or ex-lovers,
those driven from the present, and watched them
bump into glass, while we cooed them to go on,
keep running, run the maze, eat the pellet,
and left the lamp on just in case
they needed another day of light.

Shock Session

This won't hurt. Not much, the woman repeats the words
wishing she were asleep, surely there's something
one can take for the brain, as for a broken leg. But she trusts him –
the man with the kind words, even trusts the machine
with its two dials like a watch, like it could measure time
but more, all the extra skin she's grown

the ones that the others could touch and rub and scrape,
she could slough it off, a snake growing a new hide.
She had been young, everything new. This won't hurt.
He promised. Fingers like a rake scraping dry earth,
lifting the dust to their eyes, revealing inner pockets--
leaves, worms, grass torn, nibbled by insects.

In a room with the windows drawn, chairs stacked so high,
the boy looks like a king. He passes her a joint
wet with spit. She gulps the smoke, little waves inside her now
like ancient calligraphy dissolving with her blood.
The boy now grown up, used to wearing suits, watches his son
place his hand against a giant aquarium, eyes following

the glint of a scale, or fin, something the light catches.
What comes not too often, and asks to be kept, held,
as now the child presses his face against glass, an offering
for what he's seen. So he pulls him away,
wrist like a girl's, like something he could break.
The man in the white coat plays a fugue from Bach,

and the nurse, smoothens the blanket as though it were cold
then turns away before anyone can see. *This procedure requires
utmost concentration*, says the handbook. Somewhere it is 1750.

The old musician walks the streets of Leipzig, growing blind.
He grits his teeth, imagines rhythm as that narrow staircase
closing by the minute, his coat starched, dry

but for the soaked armpits, the warmth that spills over,
and from the distance, the blur of all-too-white, like a flag
carrying its hidden message of a truce, beckoning one
to come forward, come, rest.

Ukraine, 1932

And then the hunger began. – The Soviet Story

The nth day of summer: two boys in overalls
run across the decimated field, hands up in the air.
They're pilots on a secret mission, Roger that,
says the older one, fist pressed to his lips like a mouthpiece.
Around them, the outgrowth of crops form a furry carpet,
stretching to where the sun, this summer has begun to set.

Their mother calls them in to make paper airplanes.
The younger one's stomach has begun to bulge,
the eyes pale yellow like summer's afterthought.
They fold paper, a deck of airplanes, throw them out
into the evening sky. Watch as the planes plunge below
to rest, fallen, a treat for the field mice.

Somewhere, a man takes a glass of water to his wife,
watches her lick her lip, like the first time they lay together
and said what the reckless say often, and more importantly,
how the young love, transgress. He picks a lifeless man,
drags the body to the waiting officer, takes his reward:
a half sack of grain. He promised her she would never die.

Perhaps he only imagined the shallow breath, the chest
still heaving as they threw the body on a truck. Roger,
roger that. The boys afraid to sleep now, to leave the woman
with her hands. Does she imagine the others coming for them,
the boys growing tinier until they fit in her palm,
and they can run, keep running, their brittle legs taking flight.

Old Friends

That time when we called it a fancy thing --
experiments, a system with its hierarchy of needs:
the need to suppress cold by rolling inside a carpet,
waking up to a closet with clothes spilling to the floor
like gutted fish, the rule that each body held within it
miniature earthquakes and if you stood close to the other
you could sense the tremors, the rise and fall of it, almost
like music, the stories of fighting in an old revolution,
children who wore berets and coughed blood,
shoes left on the streets. And after the hours that landed
in all the soft places, when we had to mark territory
by planting tombstones, writing names, the first to not grieve,
to not keep what we've taken, like we were children
with oversized coats on an afternoon hunt,
picking up everything that could be of use -- a kitten
that wouldn't eat, stones that grew cold in one's fist,
a photo, undated, back when all we knew of how to live
was the force that drove us forward, to carry on
towards that earthy weed-stalk taste of ruin,
each other's weight spilling from all the hidden pockets,
the smell of irrevocable, dead things.

Fishermen at Sundown

By this hour their hopes have dwindled—
a bucket of today's catch, enough
to make their arms ache a little.

Sand dripping on the doorstep,
women who scrub their backs to a pale, raw pink,
and the armpit, groin, where the smell

of dried fish spread prostrate on nets
like sacrificial virgins, clings, festers.
The waves they carry

in their blood rock them back forth,
towards dreams of the day's run,
hauling the fish offshore,

standing in line with the other men
each pulling his part of the net, sweat
on their arms, trickling on the silver bodies

still struggling for life. The sun on a retreat
in the horizon, blazing their skin bright orange
like they were made of wax,

the men holding their place, afraid
to miss a step, fall out of line, as if a little touch
could set off a hidden switch under the skin

where the women's hands don't reach,
and they would all at once
burst into flames.

Anthropology

The old lives in the textbooks: men who carry arrows
and go to war, the women with their breasts swollen
a blessing eternally slanted towards the earth.
The pictures the boy takes to the bathroom. He is thirteen,
he would like to sling arrows from across a jungle,
hit a wild boar, roast it in a spit. He would like his mouth
under this woman's breast, would like to wait
for the milk to come in little drops, gravity his friend.
These evenings riding those buses, bodies pressed
together, the heat simmering to the ceiling,
he thinks of someone lost, the old name like the stutter
he more or less outgrew then came back like a thirst
while half asleep in another town. To conquer, again.
The little boy lifting his kill, imagining the stories
he'd tell -- how it kept running until it couldn't,
how he watched the feet taking its last kick,
and for a moment was tempted to press his ear
against the animal's heart. The feast they would have,
chanting throughout the night. Somewhere a girl
with no taste for meat, walks to a clearing,
raises her arms, lifts her chin, and prays for rain.

The Memorial

They are writing the names down, the martyred fallen
even those that shot themselves, trigger to the mouth.

Because it had become too dark. And there was a gun.
We've been lucky we're not down in the list.

We can go on now, bear our children, write our books.
They will give us a place to stay, perhaps some money

out of the old dictator's chest. We just have to speak out,
about how dirty we were, the mud up to our neck,

how we fished fleas from our mouths, the little rooms
the put us in, how they asked, what we were made of,

which names were worth shedding,
how they meant something until they didn't.

Yours too, but see, everyone had to say something.
We too, must have spoken placed a hand, softly

on another's cheek. We had been crying.
But there is no more crying now,

just a step in front of the other, confetti still tucked
in our hair, though our shoulders are hunched

and we sit too far apart. The mother who shows a photo
of her son--but we only saw the back of his head

hair matted by blood, the huge boulder we threw in,
a relief for the eyes, so no Ma'am we do not know

such grief. We have won the war.
We must lift our dead to ourselves.

The Couple

That night, you bring her in, smelling of vodka
and some fruit. Relax, you say and she puts her arms
around your neck while your hands work on her belt,
blouse, pantyhose. You guide her to the bed, *don't move*,
you say gently, and the two of us, we get naked for the nth time,
a night like any other, or so you say, fog on the windows,
crickets, the echo of a song on the radio
Relax, you say again. You flip her over on the bed,
push her face down with one hand and with the other,
you stroke the hair off my face.
You enter her from behind and push and push
and keep pushing, sweat on your forehead
trickling on her bare back, her voice muffled
on the pillow. *You never let me love you like this*,
you say, eyes fixed on me now, just never
never enough. You pull her hair to lift her head
and she lets off the screech of a cat caught under
a moving car, this stranger filling our room
with the howling of animals.
You push her face to mine, her teeth sink to my lips,
a rabid kiss, the taste of salt, rust

linger on until after she's gone. Lying there,
waiting for dawn, your hand finds mine
under the blanket. What was that you said, I ask,
that about love. But you don't speak, we won't speak
of things again, the sheets seeming always damp,
the mold on the pillow quite fixed -
a face, an open mouth.

Lab Notes

They scraped off frontal lobe after frontal lobe
before they knew even the mind has its limits.
It's just that some things are learned that way.

Once I carried a brain with me everywhere.
It lay on the bottom of a plastic container
drowned in formalin. Now and then

I would dip my hands into that reeking fluid,
run my fingers across the lines of the sulci
to where the curves converged like fat

cryptic text. I wanted to trace human longing—
that thing we often mistake for art,
even in its post-mortem form. I wanted a piece

of it under the microscope, feel its pale
smooth surface, touch it in its center, to see
if it would wriggle, or warm my fingers

Take care of it, you said once, as if
it were something one had to watch constantly
to keep from dying. And the men in white coats,

perhaps they too were looking for something
they could save, digging deeper, and deeper,
perhaps one asked—did it hurt?

and no one said a word anymore. I imagine
this fear, how they must have stepped back
and waited for it to settle, into something

the self recognizes—a kind of peace almost,
blank, posed as weights, waiting to be lifted,
given a name.

Third World

From the evening news: update on the sunken ferry,
the view of the hull pointing towards the sky.
The officers rattle numbers: so far, five hundred left inside,
the remaining five hundred. Children push pictures
to the camera, an old man here, a young girl
with pigtails next. Cut to a man sprawled on the floor.
Voice over: he hasn't eaten for days. Cut to a scene
of bodies hauled out from a truck: body bags,
garbage bags. Men in overcoats spread liquid lime
with giant hoses, camera zooms while fluid trickles
over a child's darkened foot. Change channels, to a feature
on the anniversary of the American occupation.
Photos in black and white, makeshift hill of carcasses,
faces and genitals blurred, a smiling soldier carrying
a rifle, a girl offering flowers to a mound of earth.
And an interview: a woman recounts watching
the slaughter of her brothers. How they screamed
like little girls, then stopped screaming.
An officer asks her gently if she's ever been touched.
She cannot speak. He leads her upstairs, sits with her
on a bed with fluffy blankets. His fingers graze her hair.
They stay quiet, then he takes from his pockets
biscuits, places them carefully in her hands,
an offering. Fifty years later, she remembers
the grainy crumbs, butter and milk, sweetness
like a small volcano in her mouth.

Anthropology II

The tools he takes to the field: a shovel,
a brush, a cap from his youth to shield his face.
He starts to dig before sunrise, waiting
for a bone, a piece of clay, anything
that might belong to that other world.
He imagines unearthing a massacre,
men and women with blunt force trauma
to their skulls, imagines piecing together
a story of tribal war, but hours and hours pass,
and he's got nothing but rocks, stones.
He remembers a friend who nursed a dog
through some deadly disease,
held it while it vomited, stroked its stomach,
pushed water down its throat.
On the third day, the dog lifted its head
as if to say it wanted to live,
then gulped down water.
Two hours later, it was dead.
Strange how hope passes, leaving only
an aftertaste of having been deceived.
He thinks of it now, the sun going down
knowing he'll come back tomorrow,
digging elsewhere, through dust
and earth—all he knows of what it is
to be human, and the sullen walk home,
that too, towards a fire, a book, the cold
already familiar, etched in bones.