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This Year of Not Writing

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MEGAN CARPENTER

Reunion

Then, we polished our fingernails shades of Future Success Red, Parents Don't Get It Pink, Love Ya Like A Sis Lavender, using them to claw at life, striving for handholds of retrospect as we now strive for respect, hoisting ourselves up and over. We tried to write history without time, choosing favorites to create brea(d)th from width: this is less, that is more, have you ever?—no, I never. Overestimating the size of our hips, making paths larger than our own selves, up and over.

What we really wanted was a country in which to love ourselves, with loyal and disloyal subjects all our own, and we thought we would get there via an overpass of irony and cynicism, raising flags of protest and littering our selves along the way. We had nerve, guts, balls, and walked in a swagger, flinging our bodies against the path as if the one singular truth were that to be out of control is to have control, as if to say, “This Is Me” with every left step, and “Isn't it?” with every right. This is me, isn't it. This is me, isn't it.

And now we are women, our bodies fishermen's vests filled with lovers and babies and compromise, our hands in pockets fingering dreams both frayed and unfurled, pennies and lint. We are queens of our own countries now, our crown jewels memories gained and lost, the bowl of a spoon, the sound of a voice. Our faces are just beginning to create the map of where we have been, and our laughs forge shortcuts, blaze trails all their own. In our pockets, minor chords and moths. In our pockets, sage and serifs.

At this meeting place, we catalogue sicknesses and marriages, assimilate every piece of information. File under: Did You Know, Have You Heard, I Never Imagined. We say, tell me how it is for you. We lie in bed sideways, facing each other, and surprise ourselves with wisdom, bones and teeth, art and artifact, tucked under the covers. Where did you get all those strong bones? we ask. It takes 1,500 pounds of pressure to break a femur, we answer. 1,500 pounds is a lot, we answer.

As queens we have our own customs and rituals and languages. We ask, was your revolution long or short, please tell me what you do when there is an uprising, do you pray before meals. Please tell me, we say, which somehow we never got around to saying before. And now, there are things that we know. We know the price of milk, and we know the cry of a baby, and the 14 million meanings of silence. We know that sometimes after a period you have to start a sentence with an And or a But. We know how easy it is to lose ourselves, and we laugh at how ironic that is, since there is so much more of us than there ever was, after all, a country all our own, with industry and progress and clans named after every sign in the zodiac. And who can lose an entire country, anyway?

We know our mothers' pain, and their love, daughters of the knowledge that we will never be able to thank them enough, to crawl back up into their skin and say, I am you, and everything that comes of me is of you, and for this I give thanks. We know that there is no reason not to put your whole self in, not to mention turn yourself about. (Isn't that what happens anyway? we ask.) And mostly, we know now that once upon a time is the same as happily ever after, for upon every time is a once, for ever and again.

This Year of Not Writing

This year has been filled
with a lot of not writing.
This year I like
the purity of plants,
the truth of a clean countertop.
Verbs of all kinds,
helping and otherwise.
This year I do not have
an audience and have forgone
speaking and listening
for doing and being.
It sounds all well and good,
and it is mostly well and good.
Except for the staving off.
(Don't faucets hurt,
to hold back all that water?)
Some verbs are tricky.
Waiting, waiting
for (lovely) release.
No wonder faucets drip,
And middle-aged women rush
to gather and reassure,
I don't know how you do
all you do, it really is something.
You have to give yourself that.
There's only so much you can expect.

[Untitled]

I

In the late afternoon light
when everything is illuminated
from within, the lizard on its rock
is proud that sitting standing lying
are all the same to him.

II

We take three items
to the top of this mountain:
rocks in our pockets (history),
clay in our shoes (birth),
the glisten of sweat on our necks (love).

III

We climb the ridge
recreating history in photograph
precreating history with hope.
The dirt is red with the knowledge
from which all things came,
(knowledge beyond knowledge),
the excess after all the babies
were formed, shaken off,
caked with love.

Fog Misunderstood

I remember the way the sun
burns the fog off the valley
in the morning. And I remember
more, wondering why people
said that it burned, because
it is unthinkable to go about
burning things in this valley
so early in the morning,
even if you are the sun.

And shame on them, because
they too are born of this valley,
and they should know
that fog is the river's blanket
that it is gathered up in the arms
of light and air during the day,
and laid to rest at night,
on the lap lap of our lives.

Certainty

When I was a girl, my dad taught me that tunnels grant wishes if only you hold your breath from start to finish. His city, an infrastructure of wishes, waiting for him and for me, and we held our breath in every tunnel, even the underpasses. I used to wish that I would meet Lionel Richie, or be President, or that it wasn't possible to get pregnant by listening to the radio. (I loved music but I didn't want a baby at the age of seven, or eight, or even nine.) Through the sudden dark, and then the burst of light more lit than light, just when your lungs warn that you might explode, the light (more lit than light) causes one big implosion. And that is my wish, trading places with the stale air in my lungs, out with the old, in with the new, taking up residence in a fiery welcome home. My insides, assimilating wishes like truth.

And then, thousands of broadly construed tunnels later, I began wishing for certainty. For ten years I wished for certainty, in all the tunnels up the eastern seaboard of the United States, ten countries in Europe, and one in Africa. I wished for certainty through tunnels of babies and love, work done and undone. Tunnels of pain and loss and grief. Tunnels of Thursday afternoons, of Sunday nights. And today, I stand here with every wish inside me, a woman's body filled with wishes. And I look at you, your head down, bent over the desk. And you pause, turn to look at me, and I catch your eye, and exhale question marks and pop stars, politicians and radios, tumbling outward. And there is silence, not a thing rushes in.

Sugar

We fed the horse clover and thistle
in the evenings, my mother and I.
The horse's name was Sugar,
and sometimes we also fed her sugar,
and I never tired of thinking,
"We are feeding sugar to Sugar."

We walked down the road
in the fading light, my mother and I
the green around us lit from within,
and she looked beautiful then,
her hands at her sides, by my side.

