

Evolution

I.

From wet swellings we are spawned in night-time:
jellied globes that could be anything.
The feral cells fuse.
We emerge, burning,
a creature leaning into light.

What light coaxes our wet bodies out?
At the end of the tunnel,
is it stars or their silver shadows,
the undulations where
fish have left their footprints,
gelled and slimy,
trailing history?
What dark current moves
the finned limbs?

Hunger,
and the blind fears,
spastic copulations.
The thought of God.

Whose mad voice do we follow
at midnight?
Cleaving the birth waters
our heads emerge
in an alien place.

Who can say
if the first strange, accidental encounter
will be an offering or a taking?

And the first vision:
soft lips lowering,
or the shadow of a long blade
cutting the air like a fish in water?

II

I was born into a square world.
Glossy and rubbed again and again
with bottled products
that live in my lungs
like white spiders festering.

The towers rise up, phallic teeth
against the sky's hard jaw.

I ride taxis: yellow hornets
clustered, trailing hazy dreams.
The world flies by in blurred colors.

My mother still remembers the names of trees—
Oak. Sycamore. Willow.
I once curled on her lap hearing their stories,
wanting them to sprout up in my room.

“Remember bicycles?” My father
makes the motions in the air.
Our mouths drop open clicking
the sheened buttons
while images dance on screens
the size of our kitchen.

III

In Africa the trucks leave wide ruts
in the fields, trailing gasoline.

They are heavy with rice,
white capsules pressed together
like seeds to be offered
in Paris, with basil and sliced oranges.

City dumpsters are foam, overflowing.
Children peel greased fries apart
and suck them in their little mouths.

IV

In the classroom we stood under stars and stripes
laying our hands on our hearts.
Now I'm looking through the old books.
My eyes go past the words to what lies beneath them:
Littered bodies in the grass.
Boarding schools with barred windows.
Swinging crucifixes on the hard necks of nuns.

Silhouettes,
like bruised fruit, hang
from the limbs of trees,
and white hoods, and fire.

Like roots seeking the ripe soil,
we spread our curious fingers.

What will they find?
These half-true story-books,
the moon's blank page,
a sky full of toxins.

"Homo-Anglo-macho-sapiens:
the species at the top."

Beyond, beneath, between
the blood still bubbles.

Behind the bookshelf
are the invisible stories,
swimming mouths stuck on "mute."

The heads of politicians
bounce up and down
like painted doilies.

Outside the classroom is the yellow-green sun,
smothered in carbon from the towers.
No matter.
The first-graders keep their eyes on the flag,
which is
unchanging.

V.

In Burma the foreign men come tapping
on the doors, asking for children.
They want girls who are “green like mangos,
not fully sweet.”

“It makes the customers believe they are still young,”
explains Big Uncle.
When the cops come they forget their jobs for fifteen minutes—
the fruit is too tempting,
hanging helpless, brainless, painted.
How erotic the squirming virgin,
How thrilling her plea.

Three months, her belly will swell and be held down
with stones, to spill the lucky guts of the child
who would have cowered
under dirty mattress springs, hearing his mother break.

VI.

In church God hangs over us,
the way the bodies of the negroes hung.

He floats, pale and ghostly, to remind us
we are in his image.
The red wax beads gather at his
feet, eternal.

The dragonflies outside the window
couple, their stamens fused,
sunshine resting on the lips of flowers,
green green green green.

Sister Martha's wrinkled hand
taps my shoulder
to draw my gaze back.

The stale air gathers by closed windows.

I wonder where the trapdoor is
between these two worlds.

I want to see what happens when
the dreams collide.

I want to take Jesus off the pole
nailed to the ceiling,
and cover him in dandelions.

I long for 10:00, when the doors open
and the pollen floats in.
The dragonflies know how to touch my fingers.

Could they perhaps be angels?

When I dream of Jesus, he has brown skin,
and smiles.

VII.

If I peeled back the layers,
what would I discover?
Could I cinch apart the world's
hard lips
that grind and grind,
and would I find
a pearl?

VIII

I wonder
where the human in me has gone.

My arms are rather like automatons
whose lives are laid out
on the walls and doorknobs,
a gridwork they follow
unthinkingly.

I wonder what happened to
the child who was certain
she could live in rivers,
chewing on leaves.

The city towers over me, glaring.
In my dreams it rolls over the animals,
crushing them.

And I realize I must make a choice:
join the man behind the curtain,
pushing buttons, pulling strings,
or, like the tree that still
clings to soil,
die without honor under the rough blades.

IX

Am I a puppet?
Or an accomplice, one of the millions
holding the strings?

Perhaps both.

Heavy milk sacks lowered
and I suckled.
The phantom imprint
of that first teat:
the want that drives
my next step forward.

The bruised world opened
and I stepped inside,
trying to live,
trying to move.

What is this creature
moving
over the long cracks,
pulling the curtains open?

A product of fused synapses:
Who beckons me to pull the cords—
god, animal,
what am I?

My dreams—are they mine,
or poured here,
in my bedroom,
from the hands of stars?

In them are furred angels,
winged crocodiles,
creatures with teeth who know
how to give the best advice.
Everything moves,
morphs,
expands
like flayed ribs.
The skulls.
The fins.

The thoughts of birds.

Out of their entrails
come the gnashed heads
of children
and women
and Jews.

Out of their entrails
comes God.

X

Here is another dream:

A cave, warm, orange,
filled with the first sparks I have truly seen.
There are several of us huddled,
re-teaching ourselves how
to make fire with sticks.

Outside the telephone poles
lie like snapped twigs, wrapped
in thick wires. The absence
of their buzz reverberates.

It is all dark, an electrical swamp.
The ghosts of children huddle
under the shells of cars.

We have to dig hard until
the soil gives, dropping seeds
like stars
to which our lives are given over.

by Elizabeth Stauder