Pastoral for the Violently Afraid

Isabel Hardwig

The car must have bled like a wounded beast

all the way down the hill.

Arrow in its hide. Watching all the purples and golds

leak into the asphalt,

feast for some dirty gutter-king.

It’s snowing. The city’s vision blurs with hunger.

My friend says as we walk that when she was a kid,

she thought the iridescent lines of oil on the

side of the road were the homes of reject mermaids,

hair snarled with exhaust. Fingers dug into the tarmac

hard enough to crack it into a thinner skin.

Their memories would be shallow. Even the

good ones. Their dreams would say

this is what you do, to get back to the ocean:

collect yourself through last week’s rain and the fossils

plowed into & pulled from the dirt. Trade a song

for a businessman’s bones. Lure commuters

to the edge of the bridge. Sing so softly their hands

slacken on the wheel, for the

acid-stained mouths of your French Broad sisters.

Give the squirrel safe passage across the road. If he turns back,

say I am the stretched skin on a bubble’s surface. I am the tailpipe’s

scorned offspring. I am the closest thing to a god this street will ever see.

I am not merciful.

If he doesn’t turn back, take the phone lines and warp them

for your own. A sky is only a sky when it is not a dividend.

A puddle is only a puddle before the ocean

rises up to claim it,

because after that there will be no words for the smaller waters.

You have mothers who slept in meteorites. You have cousins

who gambled in the pipes of desert cities,

took it all and were taken in turn. This is what you do, to get back to the ocean:

you bludgeon everything else. You simmer. You eat July like it’s nothing.

You hold yourself like oil and water. Like the sheen of sweat on the sidewalk’s glistening spine.

You sang your best funeral songs to the engine last Sunday,

when it rained like the hands of Penelope on the shoreline,

and the heat was catastrophic.

Your teeth ache when the neon buzzes out. Like a piranha,

they are sharpest in the dark,

hiding a hunger unrivaled even by the sewer grate.

There is still some reflection of the old days in you:

the vows you made men who dissected their ships on the rocks. The jetsam

you built into your next reimagining of lightning,

portrait of a sailor’s grasping hand.

This is what you do, to keep your promises:

you let the street drown. Let the high rises drown. Let the

graveyards drown. Take the brute that spat its opulent blood

into the freeway

and hold its head under

until it keels.