

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Jennifer Givhan: Three Poems

Jennifer Givhan · Wednesday, January 3rd, 2018

The Rhinoceros Calf

that failed to make a strong bond with its mother
& was shipped from a Florida zoo to New Mexico's

(they'd struck a deal with the dairy farm for that baby
would drink thousands of gallons of cow's milk)

that calf in the corner who doesn't know I'm watching her
or thinking anything at all & will remember her for years

will think of her often with her sugared substitute her dry
high desert air & wonder why on the coast

in humidity & hurricane weather in an enclosure
like ours

& my children sitting beside

me on the bench where I watch tears down my face my
children asking why are you crying mama & the truth

is I don't know did that mother with her body
say nothing say no did that mother really just let go

The Girl (Whose Mother Filled Her Belly with Meth & Let Terrible People Mutilate Her Body Before Killing Her) Runs Away

for Victoria

1

She does not immediately want you to read her story on the front page of the newspaper at the Walgreens on Universe & Paradise where you're refilling your living girl's prescription & buying your girl safe a bottle of crystal blue electrolytes She wants you to keep your

eyes on your girl playing hopscotch across the automatic doors opening & closing &
opening She wants you to pick up a yellow umbrella to notice the inky splotches of
sky forming behind the hills in the distance She wants you to remember those hills are
volcanoes that they are sleeping & sleeping things wake up

2

When you step into the shower that night you admit you did look down at the counter & saw
two women with their arms upraised You thought it harmless to keep reading You'll
never know who those women are who needed comforting Because the caption said what it
said about the mother & what she let her boyfriend do Because you're hyperventilating
against the tile the girl shampoos your hair & sings Her song sounds like the one you
taught her for gathering yourself from the drain like hairs like colorful strips of paper
for the collage you've never stopped working on She tells you her plan It is so
smart she is so smart You smile as she dips your head back into the warm water and
rinses the soap from your eyes It doesn't even sting the way she does it She promises
she will check on you while you sleep & shows you the light She promises she will run
toward it past the ditches rusting in the empty desert stretch behind your
house & because you didn't write the story & because she didn't want you to—

3

you believe her

Quinceañera

1

My body he burned lue-gunning
the papier-mâché of my breasts

to the smell of arts & crafts in the recreation room
(every room after the recovery room)

like the cumbias of my girlhood dancefloors
flailing like Pentecostal Sunday Nothing tasted so good

as the mango con chile from the fruit stand
at the razor-edge of town not even the lime-

squeezed beer its smell of night-
oak shimmering in the yard I'd climb

out my window & Danny with his brother's truck
wasn't the one I loved wasn't the one

who squashed the June bugs spiraling
from my navel my collarbones the peach-

fuzzed skin of my newly-shaped breasts
 (girls in alleyways if you survived dumpster-
 diving you survived anything)

2

A mother lost her children
 to her ex-husband her children with bruises
 on their thighs in the apricot-soft
 within their elbows photographs the judge ruled
 circumstantial or unprovable the wife could not prove
 I'm wrecked for a system failing to protect what we love

When I say wrecked I mean the razorblade
 I stole when I was fifteen from the hardware store

pressed to my wrists like cat claws
 I told my mom were the neighbor's cat's

Mom she's wild she's untamable that fat tabby
 (I don't mean wrecked for the women but

unmothered things)

3

My ex's nana had a stroke
 & my ex-nuera Sally told me she asks for me time to time

my ex-railyard familia barbacoa & soaking beans
 like I'm never drunk in the grass anymore wailing

like that alley tabby I've never stopped
 needing—she lies in bed

between my husband & me stomach pressed
 to sheets & waiting hollowed calavera

en día de los muertos marigolds
 laid on the altar of her belly button

though now she could be my ex's daughter
 at her Quinceañera in white like a mother in the news

who measured her daughter's growth through
 years pressed in a wedding dress from the time

she was a baby God she was too young

4

& fifteen was a good year for me—
In the desert time of Valley ache in that wide bowl

of my hips bone dry asparagus fields crackling
heatwave where I'm still burying placenta fat as hearts

& beating back border roots with my fists
(I told the girl who said this poem is her one

chance the doors will shut love in your face love—
knock them down climb the fucking fire

escape) year I first learned to light myself
on fire call the firetruck of my own

body that holiest of waters

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