

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Katy Day: Three Poems

Katy Day · Wednesday, July 31st, 2019

Blueback Herring, a Triptych

for E, wherever you go

I.

Before she became addicted to heroin
and her son became a ward of the state,
E and I took a road trip to Taunton State Hospital,
an abandoned asylum in Massachusetts
where her great great grandmother was once a patient.
Our flashlights swept over rats burrowing
in the smashed sheetrock. Crooked bedframes,
opened cabinets, hallways lined with doors
to different dimensions.

II.

In the 1850s, women across America
were banished by their husbands
and sons to the women's ward.
Gruel broth, spoiled beef, rotten water.
Shock therapy turned the uterus
into a bad melon.
Ice baths dumped over heads
by the bucketful. Chattering teeth,
goose-fleshed, and tied to a bench
to reset- reset- reset-

When we were there, the clawfoot tub
at Taunton was filled with flecks
of paint, glass fragments,
an uprooted fingernail.
A vine crept up a brick wall

beside the window facing East
 where the sun rises. E's mother
 was already addicted to heroin
 when they call it an epidemic
 in Baltimore. It wasn't hard for us
 to map the route from the Taunton
 women's ward to Baltimore, to E's mother.

III.

Somewhere off the scenic byway,
 E dumped her blue Gatorade
 into the Connecticut River
 and refilled it with watershed.
 She pulled a blueback herring
 from the current with her bare hands
 and held it like a newborn child.
A gift for my mother, she said.
Herring sounds like harrowing or heroin.

The whole ride home, we sang
Bridge Over Troubled Water.
I'm on your side when times
get rough, we sang, while the fish
 scribbled in the plastic bottle,
 trying to break itself free.

*

The Work of Grieving Second Graders

When our classmate was shot by his father
 they removed his desk from our classroom

and made us play musical chairs
 to forget where he was supposed to be.

We squished our bodies together
 on shortened risers to take our class picture,

hefted a sign that proclaimed 20 students
 instead of 21 and worked 43 muscles,

which is how many it takes
 to smile for a photographer

whether you're happy or not.

When our friend was killed by his father,

we pushed all our desks against the wall
and rolled out a mural on the floor.

We cut rainbows and angels and peace signs
out of construction paper, and labored

for days to make it perfect for his mother.

We wrote her cards with hearts on Mother's Day,

and learned to write in cursive her son's name
after learning our own. We grew, on average,

2.5 inches that year, read a newspaper
for the first time in Saturday morning light

to read about our friend's death,
learned C makes the Sssssound

in homicide and suicide.

We spent the rest of that school year

preparing for a Disney musical to put on
for the rest of the school in which our friend

wasn't cast. Learned all the words
to *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*

and *Circle of Life*. Tell me if there isn't anything
to be done except teach our children

the work of grieving their shot friend,
their shot neighbor, their shot classmate,

their shot bus buddy, which is the person
you ride the bus to school with every day,

which is what this person was to me
and when he was murdered by his father,

the adults rearranged our lives,
made us all sit in different seats,

take in different views
of the classroom, of the lunchroom

of the neighborhood from the bus,
but all we wanted was to sit in our seats,

to hold a space next to the window
for our friend.

*

Plastic God

It's a 30-minute drive to my brother
who said in a text he was trying to get a toe-hold
on life, but life didn't want him, the body
too difficult to inhabit. Now silence.
Now he won't answer my calls as I drive.
I've never had a God to believe in except once
when my babysitter performed a baptism
on me in her pink bathtub because I asked
what it felt like to be in water with clothes on.
I thought I could see God in a watermark
on her ceiling, because I told her
I didn't believe what I couldn't see
and she said you had to look hard for him
in unexpected places. Now I am alone,
but there is a bobblehead of Abe Lincoln
on my passenger seat that one of my children
brought home from a fieldtrip. I sit him
on the dash so he can watch me groan
in traffic, imagining the ways a brother
could die from his own hand. I look into Abe's
plastic eyes and whisper, *God*. And now that I know
he is here and watching, I have someone
to blame. *How could you watch this
and do nothing*, I can say. *What kind of God
would do that*, and he nods. He nods emphatically.

(Author photo by Patricia Smith)

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