

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Natalie J. Graham: Three Poems

Natalie J. Graham · Saturday, December 4th, 2021

Touching the Bird

A panicked boy calls me over to kneel with him. Grabbing the air in his fist, twirling his fist in the air. Punch, punch, punch. Then, his mouth open, silent.

The question he asks me is a bloody tooth in a brown napkin.

This is the day's first brightening, clouds swept off toward the river, the boy prickled with grit, our shadows thrown over the dead magic of a half-crushed hummingbird, wilted, silent.

A tuft of a straw wrapper stuck under its bird-head. Tuft fluttering. Feathers fluttering.

Its dead bird-eye wedged out by some skittering insect. Its dark insides open to the air.
Legs, crumbles of brown straw. The iridescent shimmer of its waving body scuffed murky blue.

I roll the cracked bird into the stiff curl of a magnolia leaf.
It flops into the miniature canoe like a stuffed toy.

You can't pray for a dead bird to fly. You can't even touch it with your fingers.

The boy knows how death oils itself into the skin, knows we are covered with holes, minutes away from drowning or being smashed under a wheel.

He knows a boy can't touch a dead thing without its soft little death touching him back.

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Make Me

His hands make a spire.

I teach the word steeple.

We dream at God.

I say, *God, be close to us.*

He says, *if God can't*
make me *a bird,*
who can?

His heart, a ripe peach, his wild boy-song, jubilant fire.

When I say,
 I can't breathe,
 I mean,
 I am afraid.

No window in this corner of night

no hopeful crows calling for the dawn,
 no nesting with their babies under pine,
 no nudging them into air.

See the dark yawn spread,
 the gloom-blotched murk,
 night, a giant lily's bloom
 unfurling a fan of shadows.

When I say matter, when I say
 lives, I mean,
marvel at the
 pinnacle
 his brown hands make,
 his brown face
 rising,
 draped in ginger lamplight.

Poem refers to "The Corner of Night and Morning" by Amy Lowell

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Song for Cruella

It starts with the way they sticky and twist your name,

stuck taffy, toffee in their teeth, they grind out a warped call for you—

you a crude, pale thing. Before you were born, they practiced.
You were already too much for their clattering, toothy mouths,

yipping and gabbing ready to call *you a cruel thing*,
ready to carve a new path through what they think you are.

Look how they clamor to save a dog. Villains, all.

Look how their tawny faces yawn,
holding open the *uh* of the middle of *muuuuuust*—
words haunted with gravel, *inhuuuman beast*—
they coo to their bald, shivering babies.

They trumpet in their attics and blam down on pianos.
Hands, skittering spiders, they find jazz for you, make hating you a song.

They are a flock of owls, and you are too white to be trusted,
the slip of your skin, a bloodless drape, too malleable.

Before you were born, they crushed words for *savage*
out of flower petals and toads and their miserable, silent children,
already slaughterings, already bones ground to paste and made sweet.

Who would want their wretched world of tufted couches, of vacation photos,
of withering armchairs and green cotton socks, of custard button-downs
with sleeves rolled up to a wrinkled elbow?

You wanted after just one more something, soft as foam, to silk over your body,
Cruella, Cruella, soft as forgetting, silk as slaughter, smooth as blood.

(Poems selected by *Olga Garcia Echeverria*)

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