Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Rebecca Schumejda: Four Poems

Rebecca Schumejda · Sunday, July 9th, 2023

Visiting

There are losses more heartbreaking than death
like waiting for morning count to end,
so you can walk through metal detectors
to embrace your youngest child
under the scrutiny of armed guards.
When you get there you can't remember
the conversation you rehearsed during
your four-hour drive to see him because
you are lost in how his skin sank further
below his cheekbones. How? Just, how?

What can you say when he tells you
he passes time playing cards for push-ups
with a cellmate who is serving time for rape?
His antipsychotic meds give him the shakes,
but he has read four books from cover to cover.
When you call him by his name, he looks
around as if you are talking to someone else.
Before becoming a number, he was your baby.

You will never hug him outside of designated
visiting areas, like this one, where you watch him
devour vending food machine until he vomits
because his stomach has become accustomed
to emptiness. I tell you not to go so often;
what good can come from secondhand suffering,
of shackling yourself to someone else's sentence?

On your way home, you pull over a dozen times
because of intervals of torrential tears,
but you will go back next week and the week after.
You can't accept he could have done something
so disconcerting, even though he did.
The only time I see you smile now is when you

tell the story about when you forgot his lunchbox
on his first day of kindergarten and he told you,
Don’t worry mommy, I’ll go home and get it,
you wait right here for me and I’ll be back.

*

Peel

As I remove the skin from a clementine, you tell me
you may drop the Civics class you’re enrolled in
through the prison degree program because
it gets so loud on your block that you can’t think,

the indescribable sound of pent-up guilt is cacophonic.

I don’t tell you my husband brings our daughters
outside whenever you call. There are only a few
dirty mounds of snow left. I watch my girls run
straight to them with their good sneakers on;

I don’t tell you this either, instead, I suggest earplugs,

meditation, humming to drown out the background
noises. You laugh and ask me to send you pictures
of everyone and I say I will, but you know I won’t.
I am pulling apart what you say section by section,

your words seep into invisible cuts on my heart

and sting. I imagine the inmates in your class
discussing citizenship, the rights, and duties they
forfeited. Outside, my daughters bury themselves
in dirty snow as if it’s beach sand. You tell me how

no one else comes to see you besides a preacher

who reads to you from the bible and then quizzes you
on the material covered. You tell him your meds
make you forget, even though the truth is you
aren’t listening. Really you are trying to tell me

there has to be someone listening to your prayers,

that you need me. I place the clementine down
on the counter. I look outside again and watch my
daughters sculpting tiny snowmen with their bare
hands. Hey, you say, *look out the window at the sun,*

tell me you don’t believe there’s a God behind that.

*

Tornadoes

I don’t want him to get out, my daughter says
out of nowhere and everywhere, but I am
focusing on how the wind is suddenly
picking up, how the sky has darkened,
how the rain pushes in through the screen
like all those fears I try to distance myself from,
which reminds me of how tornado warnings,
in this valley, are increasing, because,
she continues, if he could do that he could

do anything. There is enough light spilling in
from the other room to expose the space
she occupies; I should wrap my arms around
that space, but instead watch for funnels in the sky.
There’s nowhere to hide, she says.
She could be talking about the storm or
her uncle. She could be talking about both.
This is not about how the cold air drops
as the warm rises then twists into a spiral.
This is about what I should have done
to help him before it was too late.

I should probably make up some statistic
about the improbability of experiencing
a disaster firsthand, but then she’ll remind
me that we live in a house without a basement.
I should tell her that I am terrified that he will
get out someday too, but instead, in my mind,
I go over what I should do if sirens go off:
get everyone away from the windows,
hold on to something sturdy, use our
arms to protect our heads and necks.

*

The Bird Feeder

The sparrows keep coming back to the feeder,
even though our cat is killing them at a rate
of six per week. Bundles of feathers left
outside my door are letters from my brother
asking for forgiveness I’m not ready to give.

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Sentenced by Rebecca Schumejda

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