Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Rebecca Schumejda: Four Poems

Rebecca Schumeida · 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.

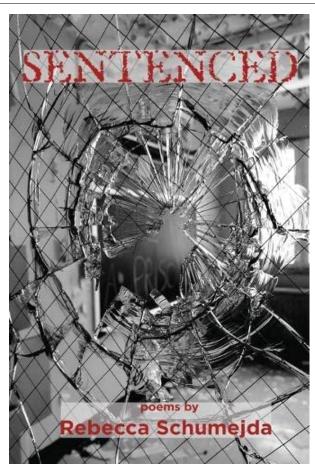
This is about what I should have done to help him before it was too late.

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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