

Four Poems

With Eyes that Bear the Widowhood of Days

from a line by Beatriz Hierro Lopes

The ceiling of the ocean floor is fat,
 with its tidal drop, a mere sandy slope, the
 barrenness, now, a symbol, a lost meaning,
 to catch, a rule that the Portuguese fisherwomen
 on the shore above can attest to, easily
 nodding in agreement that they are bound
 together, like time they have wagered and lost,
 a lifetime of fresh bets and new hands,
 grown old with uncertainty, a rule,
 a catch, a slip of the tongue and the
 courtship will be over, lost to sea journeys far
 away from solid-footed Terceira, where black glue
 is the medicine of forgetting and a pause
 is the known secret inside absence,
 and where love is a shy attachment to hope, the
 thaw that every woman, waiting here, tempts
 with her own fate On shore, they long to don sadness,
 like a dark shawl around their forearms.
 It is a uniform, encompassing wool, knitted
 halfway between loss and joy.
 The friendliest girls they used to be,
 these women, now waiting on the land,
 reveal happiness but with but a slight
 mention or a holding note of the wind,
 softly reminding them
 of the men they used to love.

I've Driven all Night through a Grainy Landscape

—title from a line by Tiago Araújo

All the answers, I used to know,
 repeated again and again, as if they were
 lines in a political game, trying to talk
 someone into believing, as they say
 in apples and a banana and then go forth
 into a world where there are walls
 built across artificial boundaries,
 and families torn apart inside the parallel
 lines of truth. It is what it is and that
 means even if it kills me, I will be true
 to my own patience. It's agonizing, I know,
 every single time, the visits are painful,
 the release is impossible to recreate.
 It's a total body experience, granted
 and guaranteed to take me somewhere I can
 smile and normalize things as they should
 be, as I recalled them--just not yesterday.
 But, last year, it didn't it take weeks
 for the clock to click one minute to
 three like when you were a kid, agonizing
 to go home. And then there are the waiters,
 not food service but those who are patient,
 for diagnosis, for tests, for death.
 The mid-line boundary between
 someone saying everything is gonna be
 OK and everything is over. It is the middle
 passage, that long journey, that I have
 to work myself up to face, to make it
 through hard borders and boundaries, week after
 week for the past year, a life lived,
 sawed in half like a magic trick. I am
 perched on the edge of the bed, ready to
 nod or to run. Waiting makes you swear

someone was loved and kind once, and
that to make it all OK again, there is
wishing, a hope for it to be as it was,
when it was perceived to be all right
but perhaps it never was. And, so,
to normalize interactions, the daily hellos
we take for granted, the guarantees we
make with each other must be labeled,
seared into agreements that we promise
each other, to be civil or polite, the nods
at the bus stop, basic remnants of life
in front of a modicum of human happiness.
But, my heart also breaks. In truth, it hurts a lot
because the heart knows what my
job is. The hurt is the pain above
it all, the others keep moving away, to form
new shapes, now, and when I want them
to stay close, they stick to me like glue.
Longing is the middle ground, when you have
distant connections. It's such a hard place to be in.
The waiting and the hoping for a time
when you won't any longer then feeling guilty
for that. Then, it all runs together
in rhythm, like dirty rivers, seeking a new mouth.

The Graphics of Home

Were broken by the Great
Depression, the textile mills,
and the golf ball factories.
We came from The Azores
and the mainland and Canada,
settling in Hawaii and New Bedford
and San Pedro, the original
Navigators. No one was documented.
Here was what I learned at home
thru the lifecycle of a shirt.
It arrived from Sears, in the mail,
sent as a hand-me-down
from Fall River, carefully washed
and ironed and pressed,
on a tomato box that had been
repurposed and wrapped in brown
paper and smelling of stale
cigarettes. That shirt was worn
and washed and used many times,
as if it had been new. When they
frayed, the elbows were mended,
and torn pockets were reconnected
with thick carpet-makers thread.
When the sleeves were too worn
to restore, they were scissored
off to make short sleeves and then
the new ends were folded and hemmed
until no more and then there was the time
when the sleeves were cut off
entirely, to create a summer top
or costume for play time, sleeveless,
perhaps a vest for a pirate.
When outgrown and too worn
for even that, the buttons were removed,

in one straight hard cut along the shirt
front, through and through.

The buttons were removed by hand,
for storage in an old cookie tin,
the cloth cut into small usable pieces
for mending, for doll clothes, for
whatever was left over. The rest, torn
into jagged rags for cleaning and, if the fabric was soft,
used for Saturday's dusting of the good furniture
in the den. Whatever was left, was sold
by the pound, wrapped and rolled into
giant cloth balls, sold to the rag man
who made his rounds in the neighborhood
all oily and urgent and smiling as if
his soul were a miracle of naturalized
birth.

And, at last, God Returns

from a line by José Tolentino Mendonça

Sordid and sallow, a harsh
 disappointment
 to the prepared flock awaiting
 for salvation or the next thing
 coming, the judgement call
 or all judgement calls.
 The reckoning or the vanishing.
 The end of the narrative.
 What is it they call it? The
 Rapture, and not in a sexual
 way, when the faithful are
 suddenly taken above, under
 the dove wing of god, leaving
 behind only the sinners, the
 men and women who walk
 the blind earth, able-bodied
 and kind, perhaps they do not
 know or are yet have lived their
 delicious lives yet un-indoctrinated
 into the secret work of Christ or
 deliverance or hatred. The
 salvation, a sweetness, alone,
 like a small boy
 who cannot find the last puzzle
 piece to the lake with the swans
 on the family table and is punished for it
 forever and ever.

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