

THE LAST SHOW ON EARTH

Poems

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*for my son, my husband, and my dad
for their resilience and their vulnerability*

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags ...
... Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

—William Butler Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”

Things to chew on

after Sue Elmslie

“Each child gets cannibalised by its years.”
—Denise Riley

Oh child, I would eat you up,
nibble even when I don't mean to,
as if you are a bowl of almonds
left out. I scoop, finger-stir, chew on you
with my mamma teeth.

*

Unable to latch on,
your teeth cut gums,
broke out sharp as a scream
and bit my nipple. You would not open
your mouth. Pain
a nail through my conviction. Bottle-fed-baby,
those teeth split us.

*

Never colicky. No long late walks
to get you to sleep. We were on:
stimulation schedule. Help
you get milk from the pesky bottle
(rhythmic breast-pump a sound
we all quickened to). Wake,
dance, sing, dangle toys, chewy toys,
nursing pillow merely a prop
for tummy time.

*

Diagnosis: Prader-Willi Syndrome. Key feature: Insatiable appetite. Oh hungry child, you've chewed the buttons off your shirt, off your snowman, pulled threads from couch cushions, licked the table clean. Felt pens bitten; fingers bitten. Food hidden and still the whole of the day.

*

Were you three and a half or four? To the autism clinic for testing. All the forms I filled in felt like a list of parent-failures chewing through me. A second label to stick on you. We hesitated at the door, toys on the floor way in the distance, past all the white coats with glasses, pens, clipboards. All of them eyeing us. "Look how he's watching those fish on the mobile," the doc said, as if to explain this new label. "He loves things that dangle from string," I said, picking at its edges. "How do you know it's not the Prader-Willi Syndrome?" "We don't," he said, showing his teeth.

*

Which came first, the mother in me or the baby?
The worry, a stone I can't chew through,
or the joy, pollen on my skin.

*

We plan the day: 1. cuddles. 2. read books.
3. make breakfast. all the way to 15. go to bed.
Numbers are to the day as liner notes to a CD.

*

Am I writing this to you?
What will you do with it?
Feel teen-embarrassed or shrug,
raise your emphatic eyebrows,
mischievously grin, or chew
through another puzzle piece.
Tell me what number we're on,
how our days are numbered.

*

Silent soft-voiced, signing one, I begin
to dream again your speaking voice—
smooth and low—a warm hesitant hum
in the deep knowing.

*

Every part of you feels elastic,
feels glass. Wolf howl, wolf tooth,
fish scales, fish flesh. You sign *fish*
taco to the man at café MexiGo, touch
the sugared chips in a basket. *Sold!*
the man says.

I watch you fend
for yourself,
little sparrow. Menu-plan,
eat. Learn full, or fall
or fly. Say
No No No! deny
this hunger.

*

I am lying on your trampoline in the sun,
a kind of hammock. Birds dip
and sip from the garden. What will follow
when I am gone, gone?

*

Floppy. Failure to Thrive. Perseverance.
Hyperphagia. Low IQ.
High Functioning. I tell the docs,
I do not like
the language we must live in.
Shut up for a second,
quit feeding us from this
bitter jargon.

*

Fourteen now. I see new families
and wonder how we got here.
Once, your newborn foot fit in my hand.
Now, I slip your crocs on
turn the compost as a cloud
swallows the over-fed moon.

The man, watching

The woman who inserts the needle through the skin
between layers of fat, is, perhaps, the mother.

How astonishing the skin's flinch.

She presses the hormone in and waits, counts,
pulls the tip of needle out of the baby's perfect skin.

Small hand flings to the bite,
rubs to draw back the sting.
Nose nuzzles in sheets to sleep.

Closing the child's door, the woman waits, her back to the man.
He imagines her heart, a thunder in the tomb of her chest.
Its beat a shaky tenor.

Numerology

Clouds roll in across an Alberta sky. You stand in the school field. Spring. PE. Soccer. Friday the 13th. Nothing comes of daydreams. Longing. Grass stains on knees. Short shorts uncomfortable and the PE teacher a leech. You live under the sky of mystery. Anything can happen. Everything can change. Hum in your fingertips and in your brain. You walk the field, open to whatever mystery. Goal left unguarded as light seeps in streams across the sky. What you see is aura, the in-between, things sliding from there to here. One girl's feet seem to lift off the ground. She throws her hands out, steadies herself, then kicks the ball back into the field, laughing. You catch your breath and stare, then slip home, watch for cracks in the sidewalk and in the green screen. A dog howls. Arches his back in pain. Your mother leaves a note you cannot read. Father searches your sister's room for clues to where she could be. Where could she be? That shaft of light she left in. The dog's howl, a sign. A ball arches across a field. Hits you in the face. "Get a move on," the PE teachers snarls. Grass stains on your cheek. An owl in a distant tree. A willow branch dipping to the earth. Your imagination hurtles back to earth. You are an only child. The stars drain out of the night sky. Things slip in, they slip out. Hum on skin, hairs on end. The names for things only imagined are the names of children never seen.