

# VESSELS AND OTHER POEMS

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## Vessels

The first boat was a frame of sticks lashed  
together thousands of years ago, something  
like the bamboo raft I used when I was younger.  
Then came canoes and kayaks, hollowed out

from a tree trunk, seal skin stretched over whale  
bone. Landlocked, I wanted to cross an ocean.  
What is the meaning of distance if not space  
aching to be covered? Magellan's ships

were carracks, billowing masts emblazoned  
with sigils. Out of a crew of 237, only 18  
men returned to complete the first  
voyage that circled the earth, three years

after setting sail. All those days adrift,  
dreaming of wine, women, Seville's harbor.  
I've set foot in deserted islands and desired  
to claim them by giving names. Think of a reef's

secret, a wrecked galleon lost for centuries  
with its cargo of chipped porcelain, ivory,  
gold ingots. Think of plumes of steam driving  
the propeller, stokers shoveling coal

to feed the furnace. The miracle is how  
the mind conceives of such vessels, turns  
a homespun idea buoyant, seaworthy.  
Rudder and hull, yoke and paddle:

I have gone from one port to another  
yet the horizon plays its trick of always  
shifting further. Unearthed from a cave,  
a burial jar's lid is a boat that bears

two figures, a rower at the stern  
and a passenger, the soul at the bow.  
I long to be the one whose arms are folded  
across the chest, seeking the edge and never

returning, never looking back. What sinks  
to oblivion? What swirls the water? Oarsman,  
coxswain, singer of dirges, be with me along  
and against the current. Ferry me across the river.

## Killing a Goat

And I saw the animal's eyes:  
dark pupils, horizontal slits  
on a pool of amber. The goat

held my gaze as its throat  
was being slashed, Father's hand  
pinning its head steady so not

a drop of blood spilled from the bowl.  
I was seven. For weeks, the goat  
had been tethered to a tree, something

to prod with sticks, feed with broad  
leaves of banana trees. The day  
came when the knot around its neck

was loosened, which was when I knew  
it would be butchered. I saw its eyes  
and heard its bleating, the sound

almost human. Looking back,  
what did the goat see as it died?  
The day bleeding of sunlight.

A boy, standing, whose silence  
could have been a mercy. Years  
would pass, decades, and I would see

again those eyes, Father confined  
in a hospital, wasted by lung  
cancer. I would sit beside him,

the quiet punctuated by the whirl  
of machines hooked to his body.  
It would become carcass. What I saw

burned in my mind: the blade's sharp  
flicker, eyes staring at the world  
one last time. I have borne witness.

I would count and collect my losses,  
and grief would keep me in its eye.  
I would never look away.

## Cross-stitching

Gradient of colors, laid according  
to pattern, mosaic rendered in thread  
and the drip of minutes into hours.  
Pictures framed in burnished wood or faux  
gold: an angel blowing a trumpet,  
*The Last Supper*, a cottage dense with flowers.  
Do you remember why you started,  
Mother, what made you reach for aida cloth,  
squinting to thread the eye of a needle?  
What did you think of when you embroidered,  
repeating the same movement while your husband  
and children were gone, returning day  
after day, until no one arrived  
at the door? Did you need to keep your fingers  
busy and were those little crosses  
the burden you carried, necessary  
weight you held, which made you feel grounded?  
Did you become frayed by the years stitched  
into a life, each strand of questions  
a puzzle, a pain to untangle?  
And if you unraveled in silence,  
knowing there would be nothing but the cross-  
stitched pieces to leave behind, it begs  
the question I cannot ask: Mother, will this  
be the sum of my inheritance, your heart's  
trove of suffering, gathering dust on the walls?

## Lost and Found

*After Carolyn Forché*

A woman sits behind the counter, scribbling line  
after line of what accumulates in the shelves,  
waiting for the bereft to claim antique pens, books  
with dog-eared pages, bills and coins, credit cards,  
coats with missing buttons, dirty laundry, earrings  
orphaned from their pairs, forms for newborns, forms  
for the dying and the dead, gifts unwrapped  
then wrapped again, harmonicas, IDs, jigsaw  
puzzle pieces, keys and locks (all mismatched),  
lipsticks, memory sticks, music sheets, name tags  
in brass and enamel, onyx pendants, passports,  
photographs, quartz watches that have stopped  
ticking, reports, rusty bracelets, spectacles, scarves  
frayed around the edges, tickets for concerts,  
traveller's cheques, umbrellas that no longer touch  
the rain, velvet clutch bags and ribbons, wedding  
bands, X-ray scans, yoga mats, and a Ziplock bag  
that contains a lock of hair, which she takes  
a glimpse of every now and then, wondering  
if it belonged to a daughter or a long-gone lover.

## Notes Towards Another Elegy

1.

Try to shape the mouth in the form of loss. Let the tongue unknot itself. The throat constricts in the effort to remember.

2.

There is a hollow left by that which is gone. Some days, it is the size of a keyhole. Other days, it yawns deep as a trench. A figure has become an absence but observe how its shadow still remains.

3.

Memory can be an abstraction or obstruction. One letter makes all the difference. A eulogy is delivered; an elegy is sung. Mourning extends beyond this morning.

4.

Who is speaking and who is spoken to? The dead can only reply with silence, even with the grave assumption that they can listen. In the end, the self's lament is addressed not to a vacuum but to the self.

5.

Ruins, in fact, are an elegy's architecture. Before being gazetted as a national monument, the Colosseum had been abandoned, looted, vandalized, turned into a tenement, a cow paddock, a fortress, a quarry for marble and travertine stone.

6.

What is time but a movement towards diminishment and negation? She is no longer here. Say not in grief: he is no more, et cetera. A bird flits in a cage, trilling *never, never*.

7.

New names will be added each day. A flipbook of faces, blurred into facelessness. There will be no consolation. The elegy will never be finished.