

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.