

When Grief Isn't a Gift

A Silver Lining is a "phrase used to tell someone that there is a brighter side to the problem they are facing."

—Urban Dictionary

It was not like a letter
you could set on a table and ignore.
It flew in my door like a turkey vulture

swooping down on her prey. Sidestepping
was not an option any more than brushing
off a hurricane when it slams a brick

through your window and sucks out
everything you own. The grief of losing
your mother, your marriage, your home

during five weeks in May was not *a gift*
as I've read. It was not *for the best*. Grief
shows you how the hardwood floor feels

against your naked body in June,
but it didn't teach me that we're all
connected. The dirt here taught me that—

about what can grow, that I am no match
for brutal conditions, that I am unlike
the towering Cardon cactus who survives

110 degree summers without a sip. One waves
to me from the mountain as I sit near a farm
outside Todos Santos. One raises her hand

desperate and twisted as if begging. Another
offers the peace sign. One gives me the finger,
wild, and covered with eyes. One is bent

reminding me how my father held his arm
around my shoulders. And a giant one sleeps
just yards outside my window, noble

like an ancestor, her feet rooted. Her injured
limbs ending in dusk. She is 300 years old,
40 feet high. She says, *You have seen nothing*.

These cacti reach their crooked fingers
and broken hands toward something. Thousands
of them, stumped, silent and stuck, steadfast

and smooth. With their wet, fleshy insides,
they ignore tourists driving fast from Cabo
hoping to buy their land on the cheap.

East Cape, Baja CA

“What am I that I should love
So wisely and so well?”

—Edna St. Vincent Millay, from “The Philosopher”

What are you to own a room inside me,
you who said, *The more bruised you are
the better*. And when I reeled

in that swordfish, you told me, *Catch it
like a man*. I wrote you a letter, the one
you write and never send,

and I sent it. And I didn't see you again.
This weekend I collected leggy limbs
of driftwood, pitted and ribbed

with spines, silver from waves and baptism
by sun. I've placed those sticks in a broken
pot I couldn't use for much else,

in a corner of the room I always see.
What are you to still live, your edges round
and sharp and even now though I only see

you in grainy photos. What are you
to occupy my mind, you who everyone
worshiped like Independence Day,

going a million miles a minute until
you came to a standstill. And what am I,
frayed and rigid like those limbs,

and thinking I've loved wisely and well,
as the late afternoon high tide takes
the sticks it wants and leaves the rest.

Doctor Good

I've seen him take a fishing hook
out of a man's cheek, diagnose
a bikini-clad woman on the beach

where she sat with her son—his form
of flirting. My father rarely came home
before bedtime to sink into scotch

and Hemingway, shut off from me
in his Salem cigarette smoke, leaving
early in his scent of Dial soap. After

my parent's split, he detailed how a date
wrapped herself in cellophane and ribbon
to answer his knock. I wondered if that

was the trick to being loved. He was
a charmer, all sunlight, bravado, rod
and reel, binoculars affixed to his face

in his suntan, making margaritas
and fresh caught dorado dressed in salt,
and mayo. A poor boy from Long Beach,

builder of boats, scrubber of decks, spent
from the line of patients who'd fly in
to see him, the one I blamed when I ran

away and sat under a purple orchid
tree hoping they'd find me, or at least
come looking. And yet, I would find

my way back to the ocean, his presence
all around in the afternoon sky, filled
with turkey vultures and sea mist.

My Elephant Tree

With less than a dozen days of rain
each year, the trees and shrubs are silver

as bone. The desert here in the Tropic
of Cancer looks like a woman

I saw at the doctor's office, like her mist
blue hair and bent fingers. The golden

Torote's papery skin rips away
in my hands. Sprigs of it don't collapse

as I thought. It is agile as a new leaf.
When I bend it, it doesn't snap. It arches

all the way back before it breaks, and now
I see the life inside it as I inhale its eucalyptus,

the source of frankincense and myrrh. All
these plants are perfume and quietly alive

and waiting for the rain that comes
in the fall, waiting for someone to notice.

Cuerpo

I wanted to tell you about the shifting light,
How marigold spread across both ends of the sky
After the sun set here between the Sierra de la Laguna

Mountains and the ocean 7,000 miles from Brisbane,
But instead, I am writing about a dead child
In the back of a small white car that pulled over

To help, the driver on his way to a funeral home
In Cabo. I want to explain how I fell to my knees
Struggling in the deep sand after our car stalled

An inch from a cliff. I want to write about how
Not an hour earlier your body blanketed mine
Against a rock jetting over the water, how

The ground trembled later when I stood
On the starless freeway waving for help
From disinterested truckers flying past

My flailing arms—just some crazy gringa
With a dog at the crook of an unlit dirt road between
Two small towns in Mexico, while you stayed back

With the car. I could go on about the satellite we saw
Skim the Milky Way and how you looked at me
Under the half lit moon and asked *is this too much*

And I said yes, but all I can think of is what was under
That sheet, not how I had packed a picnic and we
Only ate three grapes or how my skin became braille

Under your hands, and I wanted to escape the earth
Even before I knew what was in that backseat, but I
Won't go on about how impossibly we scaled the rocks

And startled at the screaming surf, how we traipsed
Down in near darkness, the sharp granite grazing
My bare feet. I can't write about the cold wind

And your warm mouth, the stars bright as headlights
So far from the city, how I had to pee in the sand,
How embarrassed I was though the waves drowned

Out the sound, flummoxed, when the driver told me
What he was carrying, and that he and his co-worker
Stopped anyway to push our car to safety, how I gunned

The gas flinging rocks and dirt into their faces
As they pushed us in their white suits, and funeral
home nametags, until all of us were covered in dust.