

Fable 23

When I was small, the books I loved were large
and growing smaller as I grew. I took to bed
a fable about a ball that bounces twice the height
of the bounce before, then twice that, and so on,
saved only by the familiar touch to calm the little
manic wonder. I have known a season like this.
A fear of nothing turns to panic and breathing in
a bag. Then my father led me to the basement
and said, do not worry, our family will be fine,
here with our old fridge, our cots, new storm glass
to break the fall of nuclear winter. What did we
know of the boy reporter who screwed a sunlight
filter to his camera. What would we reclaim.
I looked for the book about the ball, years later,
but never found it, never knew just how it ends.
I told myself the story is out there, somewhere,
passed from child to child, like faith in a father
who comes home, mixes a drink, closes his door
to watch the news. Perhaps I made it up, the book.

Either way, I wake up still in a desert motel.

A radio crackles, glasses shiver; in the distance,
a magic ball raises a column of dust through
the contrail of the dust before. It tears a shaft
into the cloud, and people wander from their rooms
like a shy question from the back of the hall.

Strangers, gawkers, spill into the parking lot
in undershorts and robes, seeing in each other
their own bewildered stature, their place below
a monolith that never falls completely, as it falls.

Fable 24

Where the missiles hum and smolder on their launchpads
underground, who here in the village knows enough to care.
Somewhere a radar screen taps the eyes of a young cadet,
bored to tears. Hello in there, it says, and no one answers.
So difficult to tell these days where the new war starts.
Does it rise and fall or simply go into hiding like a sun.
I have known many suns, some of whom burned behind
the iron of a fog, so thick they never powered through.
But they were out there. Like Russian children in an age
of missiles moved by stealth of angles like bishops in chess.
When I think of Russian children, I see the face of one.
She is of course no child. Only a cartoon. But it helps
to see her. To name her. To mourn the one who is
no one. The none in all. Like a god made personal,
vulnerable, capable of love and shelter. Underground.

Fable 25

Whatever the tune, it is neither memorial
nor moment. Never the ghost anticipation
of the whole. It has no history to unravel,
no mirror to eat the body of its measures,
no sanctum, vault, or shelter at the dark end
of the hall. Ask the instruments at hand,
the piano, the clarinet, the blue half moons
of fingers winter put to sleep. Ask the birds
that barb the prison wire. Does the end
go unconscious the instant that we meet it.
To think that someone swept those ashes
from the ovens. A boy, a private I imagine,
though long forgotten now. I see him still
as he empties his bucket into a pit outdoors
and stops to listen. I too hear the cello pose
a question the violin answered, saying nothing,
though not without the tone of understanding.
You know, of course, music cares for no one.

It cannot judge you. Cannot kill. It slips through

the sleeves that rustle from a nearby chimney.

But the end of the music is no less music now.

It is the blood of a savior crowned in razor wire.

Everywhere the same blood, same abyss of birds

floating though the heads of soldiers, prisoners,

the bitter and confused. Same illegible smoke, mouth

after mouth. Same song that is, to some, a god.

Fable 26

When I think of you, you are of course nowhere,
just a cloud in the mind floating through, but here
we are. The cloud of a listener everywhere
silhouetting the sky. Damage raises the architecture
of repair. Look at any face close up. The blackbirds
are there. In every single bird, the flock that flexes
and raises the horizon. A little of the all in you.

The world keeps poking through the holes that are
clouds, and when it rains, the meadow grows quietly
full of joy. When the bell tolls, a black car pulls up,
and I think of you. What I would not give to hear you.

Fable 27

When the news arrives, it looks tattered
and abused. So weary from the journey
you can make out the ghost of the story
beneath each story: their crime scenes
and environmental summits, stocks,
sports, obituary portraits. Whatever
the layers, they blur to the intertextual
grey of mercury and ominous weather.
Too much information as none at all.
If you feel stranded, you are not alone,
if a rope falls with crackers and antibiotics,
your hair in the wind of the rising copter.
You knew it would come one day to this.
The prodigal of lost sleep would knock,
fall into your arms and turn to water.
You felt a shift was underway. You said,
lately the gulf has been so temperamental.
Inarticulate as lambs, clouds come and go.

When the news arrives, the pages flutter open
and closed like the curtain of a voting booth
or house across the street. You were a child,
and the woman who cracked her drapes filled
the crevice. Over and over. You never knew
her name. But for years, you thought of her,
how she spied on you. Because you looked her way.

Fable 28

When time came, we heard a ticking in the box. Bomb,
we said, though we never opened it. Should we send it back,
I wondered. Why not blow it up in a parking lot on the edge
of town, you said. Then it happened. We could not budge.
The clock in the package moved an inch ahead of us. So we
would always be in the moment just before. All that wreckage
in our garage—it wept a lens of grease. Black, as if the sun were
down there. When I leave this house, I live there still. But this
morning, I stepped out. Was that you or the bomb that whispered,
give the future back to the future. It does not live here anymore.