

Waterslide

The girl is checked, and wretched:
she's tall enough to ride.
Her father walks her up the stairs,
chlorinated slowly
as a lethal poisoning over years.
Her steps back down are shy—
after the lifeguard's eyerolls, after
the brave impatient children
heard her father reassure
before he began to mock.
At the bottom, she paces. Her mother
talks with other women
showing off their legs, their suits
they never get very wet.
She climbs and comes back, oh,
five or six times—her giraffe
eyelashes thicker with tears
each trip. I watch her at the top,
the line growing behind her
stillness as if she will cement
into a statue: The Girl
Who Could Not. Today is the last day
the pool is open, today
lifts summer's whitest flag,
and she flaunts it from her rampart,
avowing this blue-bottomed pit
scheduled to be drained tomorrow
is empty even now.
Will her grandchildren ever believe it,
this indulgence of water, so
much water? Do you think
they'll believe there used to be days,
as the old regime of seasons changed,
when all we were supposed to do
was have a good time?

Love

The dust of Tennessee
powder-sugared lines of cars
waiting for the festival
to let them in. "It's my birthday!"

she yelled again and again
from the bed of a red pick-up, packed
with almost identical girls
in bikinis and Uggs, and kegs.

After some hours of that,
I was dismayed to see her tent
well-pitched right next to ours,
among thousands. "It's my birthday!"

she introduced herself.
"The only thing I wanted for my birthday
was for my mama to make me
some birthday pancakes and do you think

she did? No she did not."
She paused. "What a bitch." And left.
That night she couldn't find
the way back, and compared her errancy

to the arcade game Frogger.
"And I lost!" she shouted, as if
praising loss. "Hey! It's not my birthday
no more, want to celebrate?" but she

had a habit of walking away.
She said she filled her boots with ice
to keep cool. She loved to love
things: "looooooooooooo burritos." "Loooooooooooo Wayne Coyne."

To my shirtless friend: "Those shorts
make you look like you're naked. Loooooooooooo
naked men." When she found us
playing spades at 3 am:

(new stanza)

"Only card game I know
how to play is Dick the Dealer.
Loooooooooooooove being the dealer."
By then I was infatuated,

but when I asked her name—
"Andie. Handy Andie," she winked—
I knew I'd never know.
She was like one of those floating islands

explorers once imagined
they could track with changing maps to spend
one night that floats forever,
then wake back on their boats,

a disappearance glittering
where the sea meets a sky of endings,
where late becomes early,
the regattas and garlands gone

without a trace, like her,
as the sun rose the final day.
I thought she'd appear, bottle
in hand like saints hold scrolls, or skulls

and crossbones, cats or apples
in their icons, and say something
amazing. And do you
think she did? No she did not.

Bedtime Stories, Late 5th Century BCE

We shall persuade mothers and nurses to tell our chosen stories to their children . . .
– Socrates, Plato's *Republic*

Bad things worried Socrates.
Especially from the mouths
of good men, maybe even
good women, too. But mothers
and nurses know that's how
such words must be delivered.
Socrates talked all day in the agora,
then into the night's rich spread
of dining couches, surrounded
by interlocutors who kept
their cups full of him. Meanwhile
the children of Athens destined
to become her best citizens
gathered around their favorite
nursemaid, the one who knew
the wickedest tales – who loved
to talk, who was easily coaxed –
to ask for one more, one more.
Guardian of the realm and its virtues,
she leaned her face close to the fire,
timing things so any shocks
would glow, a little urgently.

How Many Lost Roman Emperors

Purged from history by experts, the face on the coin wears a wreath of shark-fin waves across his locks, allied with his aquiline afternoon of a nose and a mouth set as if in

decision. Discovered in a small hoard in 1713 in Transylvania, the face was a commander forced to crown himself, to rule a province so far-flung it was severed from Rome

by civil war, the Carpathians, pandemic, and the empire was fragmenting . . . the face of a temporary emperor, a functioning economy emperor, a vampire emperor. A Gary Oldman or

*a Bela Lugosi or a Leslie Nielson emperor? Decision, from *decidere*, to cut off. Derided as a modern fake by a famous French numismatist, *ridiculously imagined and poorly made*, the face*

*was catalogued away, until his cheeks were magnified, tendered to, with scholarly heat. *There really were scratches, consistent with being jingled* — our face had circulated, accrued the marks of touch*

*all money once amassed. *The Baron was studying the coin at the time of his death and the story goes that the last thing he did was to write a note saying "genuine."* Oh face on a coin, I hide many small hoards*

in my house, and I wouldn't mind a final act like that: to exact a life and decide, He was real. Note the irregular wear and tear. Examine these gashes. They came from somewhere.

Dandelions

Calming down, he opened and closed
his fingers like a mouth,
like dandelion petals shut
at dusk, as pictured in

the bedtime book so recently
thrown across the room.
Lying beside his crib, I raised
my hands to mimic his.

“Our Herb, Lyon’s tooth,” not because
a lion’s yawn is lined
with softest petals – it’s their leaves.
Go see! How sharp the likeness.

Walk into grass or sidewalk cracks
and find these weeds that once
made wine – *Mrs. Beeton’s Book
of Household Management*

said it’s “better n’ a doctor.”
Today I saw a man
park his tank of liquid blue
and take aim with his hose.

In 1963 *The New
Good Housekeeping Cookbook* instructed –
“Heap chopped, cooked dandelion greens
and scallions on tomato

slices” – Heap them. It was the year
of the Birmingham Children’s Crusade,
and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombed,
the year Myrlie Evers

watched Medgar gunned down in the driveway,
their daughters in her arms.
I’ve been holding my sons and thinking
of George Floyd calling “Mama”

(new stanza)

– “Clock, the downy head of
the dandelion in seed
[So called from the child's play of blowing
away the feathered seeds

to find ‘what o'clock it is’].” He called
out “please,” too, the word
most mothers ask children to say
until it's instinct.

*We pray – to Heaven – / We prate – of Heaven –
Relate – when Neighbors die –
At what o'clock to Heaven – they fled
Who saw them – Wherefore fly? –*

What o'clock was 1963?
“What can I do?” A white
girl once followed Malcolm X
to ask, and he said, “Nothing.”

Later he'd say he regretted it.
He was one who went back to terms.
“Now, aardvark actually means ‘earth hog.’
That's a good example of

root words, as I was telling you.”
It astonished his biographer:
on a day he gave three speeches, he'd gone
to the Museum of Natural History

to see about a word. Tonight
I might do nothing but read
dandelion dictionaries.
Their history begins

in 1513: “Seyr downis smaill
on dent de lion sprang” –
it's the morning of a battle everyone
knows cannot be stopped,

but the poet wants to talk flowers,
and velvet seeds adrift
as if there were no will to weed,
as if teeth could not kill.