

Jan LaPerle

Lumber

For weeks I have been here, eating and putting on my shoes
one at a time, as if I may go out in them,
out in the street where the neighbor's dog sleeps.
Strange squeaking birds roar past my window, and lately
I've been thinking of having a baby (even in the middle
of all this danger). I must, and I must because I am getting old,
the thought of which spreads out in front of me like a lawn,
the streets two women in town walk down
with their babies strapped to their front-sides.
The babies like little beans are happiest then.
The blonde mother is pretty, she smiles at my husband,
and the young girls spend all summer in their swimsuits.
It is no wonder at all he calls the plastic playhouse
across the way a dollhouse. Dolls, dolls:
it is my deepest tendency to feel jealous of absolutely everything.
The tomatoes in the garden blush and ripen.

~

I run toward myself in my sleep crippled and old,
squeaking like a big strange bird (even awake
I do these things). That bird settles down upon me
so heavily I cannot see straight. My husband smiles
at me, but I cannot smile back. My face is as heavy
as lumber. My body, too – lumber.
The best thing you could do is build with me
and call me home, I say, and he does,
and he pulls out his drill gun, he fiddles for a screw.
I laugh every time he says caulk; he knows, simply,
I am happiest when we play, when we pretend, when we run.

~

In Georgia I met a boy with a syndrome that made his skin
stretch, his bones as soft as beans. Everyone took a turn
twisting his ear as if he were a wind-up toy. Are we all toys?
By 50 he'll be in a wheelchair. By 50 the boy next door will have
a belly round as the hillsides, but right now
he is filling up the dollhouse. Dolls and toys
and little boys – in a setting such as this I could be anything.

Costume Girl

My life is more interested in windows this morning,
and I love deeply the fences between our houses.
This is the type of day the moon sticks around.
Hello, moon, I say, you are truly my friend today.
You listen to me and that's all I ever really wanted,
all I will ever need, my dear. Oh dear.
Oh dear, I love you, moon. Oh dear, love me.
Oh dear, the church bells are telling me the time,
telling me it is a day to go out into,
despite the sad pumpkins, despite the rotten pumpkins,
smashed pumpkins, despite, despite, a little spite, too,
but this isn't the saddest day, not even close,
but sadness is all around – lurking,
and an alley cat woke me a hundred times last night.
This morning I say, I forgive you. I forgive you,
alley cat, you are fine with me. Yowl, baby, yowl,
let it out, and I yowl with it. We yowl
and the neighbor yowls at his wife. Damn it, baby,
damn this, damn that, we aren't getting it right
no matter how hard we try, no matter how drunk we get,
how stupid we seem to ourselves, each other, and tonight
we are going to let it all out into the Halloween night.
In costume, in dress, in fishnet: these are our versions.
This may be a part of me you prefer. A part of me
you'd like to bend over, and the moon, too, is in
a version of itself. Costume. And my costume is a window
I look through, you look through, and I go out
for some candy. A candyland, the candyman can,
and I am myself on top of another self and I come home
with my selves and fuck myself, as it is too late now
for the trick-or-treaters. No little guys at my door.
No chickens, no heroes, no ghosts. But, they are still
out there. The vegetables walk the streets tonight:
this is the madness within us: this is the time to get it right.

While My Tornado Is Resting

The television in the kitchen announces:

THERE'S BEEN A TORNADO.

I set down a roll of socks and watch
houses ablaze, lighting the night, faces
of people – a few choking,
a few with no hair.

Feeling sunk-in like an old mattress,
I get this urge to talk to someone.

But I am alone on this hill
of laundry. A small goddess in slippers
wandering a domestic landscape, tiptoeing
corner to corner so as not to wake a storm.
When storms sleep they dream in a countryside
where confusions are ordinary.

I cannot sleep, though never stop dreaming
of waking, want these little televised disasters
to pull me more than these carpet ruts.
Walls grow into mountains,
cowering at the base, I am the small
stone at the bottom longing
for a window, door,
an exit from the barren foothills of couches and chairs.

I look out across the lake in my sink,
release a sponge – the sail-less ship
that I must board now, must hold to –
safeguard against the pull
of dirty dishwater, swish
through the rusty pipes – subtle warnings
of the dangers of the outside.

Bull

A year or two ago, in an Army exercise, a group of us soldiers attached injuries, made of cotton, Styrofoam, and paint, with pins to our bodies. Bloody stump. Wounds from guns and knives. A bit of spilled guts wrapped to the belly. We lay in the tall grasses and waited for the other soldiers to find us.

A little unstrung eyeball had been taped over my left eye, so I watched with my right the first buds of spring, bright and green, as they seemed to push and grow right then from the limbs above me.

The sweet birds bounced from branch to branch, and I was the last to be found. All the soldiers came, dragging through the grass, silly from an exercise gone too long.

They decided I was fully broken. Every bone it seemed need mending, and my mouth, that big red cut, was covered with a slash of white tape. The soldiers pulled limbs from the trees to splint my arms and legs.

They worked quickly, the clouds behind them moved slowly.

The group of them ran off, then, quickly as the scared birds had from the trees, as a new exercise had begun in a far field.

I felt like a fallen limb, and I looked down my body at the spring buds, sadly, as I knew now they would never grow.

I struggled to stand, this way and that, like a wild animal in the grass, and ran across the fields and hillsides to find the others.

What I found, instead, was a bull, his body shining big and black, all alone and looking at me. I knew I was more scared than him, and, too, that my body was covered with wounds and strung with limbs, and that maybe he would mistake me for a tree, as that seemed the only hope I had. So I stood still and pretended, and after a long while the bull looked away and went back to eating grass, but I had to stay that way, still as a tree, swaying only a little with the breeze.

In the distance I heard the soldiers, the gunshots, the trucks roaring across the gravel roads, and I knew it was better there where I was with that bull in the grass, even if I had to stand still as a tree, even as my buds lay dying.

Frost

On a morning after Easter, the cardinals, like red eggs
in dry branches, lift off. Leafless branches, and this is no place
to hide, I once said, alone, to tea, to saucer and cup.
Even the birds know it is better to be seen, but all along
I had it wrong. They're together; they fly. High, high,
and yesterday I felt high on Easter eggs and Easter ham.
Meat, potatoes, vegetables and rolls, rolls, roll
me into the grass that this morning looks sugared with frost.

Sugar in the grass, sugar in my tea, sugar,
thank you for what you have done for me (for seeing me).
So I worry about the garden, spinach, squash, peppers,
and I worry about my eggs, the mother I may someday be,
as I watch the house shadow creep toward the house.
Little taps of the dog's paws on the hardwood.
Little pats of little feet of little children that are not,
but someday may be. The sun moves over the field
and the field surrenders. I surrender: take me.

A man who wrote a book about the moon surrendered.
Gun to the head. His book had tractors, all sizes and shapes
of men, spinach that lived. Those men live as I remember them,
some so cold they could have killed me. Killing men,
killing frost, and, please don't take the vegetables. Don't
take me. Don't make me go back. Teapot, cup, saucer,
and a different man with a different gun, a man who had
nothing to do with books about moons, shot himself, too,
but lived. At this point I would rip the earth out trying
to hold on. Rip and hold, rip and hold, and the man who shot
himself and lived can no longer swallow, and it is the biggest
scar to bare, I think, the scar of wanting to die.

Winter Wedding Waiting

My man says he'll marry me
when he believes I trust him,
when I believe he wants no other.
I believe one morning I will wake
and the tulip bulbs I planted last fall
will have pushed up through my skin.
Look, I am a spring garden this morning!
Look, aren't I marriable? Well,
isn't this how it works: a bulb in the dirt,
a hope in the dark. He gave me a picture
taken in the 30s of thirteen men dressed
in gowns. A womanless wedding. I looked
at the picture while he folded laundry.
I looked at the picture while he cooked soup.
I looked at the picture while he set the dinner-
plates, and our cups runneth over. The dog
laps, laps, laps. Each of the men, man
& woman at once. Thirteen screams
from the picture: I am one! I am one!
I am one, yeah, well, Let *us* be one,
I scream across the dinnertable. I scream
myself awake from the banquet hall
of my sleep: I was there, it wasn't beautiful,
the room was full of ghosts in gowns.
A waltz, a bad country song, our great,
great grandmothers at the chicken dance,
flapping their wings viciously: fly away,
children, fly away while you can. The sky
is like this to me: a winter wedding waiting,
and I watch it behind you as we sup on our dinners.
Always a window behind you, always a door.
We are boyfriend and girlfriend, though boy and girl
no more. Your chest hair grows gray beneath
your shirt, fast as monkey grass, and, well, honey,
put your ear to my skin and tell me what is growing
there because in that dream the ghosts started
fucking the winter gardens, each of them horny
from their womanless wedding. Bulb in the dark,
hope in the dirt, and it wasn't just confetti
that flew, flew, flew from beneath their gowns.