



Candice Kelsey

Reflexology

Two cardinals
perched outside the window are taunting me

like the masseuse
who worked my body and afterward

answered
my question — *how*
often should I see you?

by responding
with brazen celerity —
every day

as if I too could
plume carmine
beneath the sun's fingers

Two of My Students Fight over Chimamanda Adichie

And I smile
Because they aren't
Arguing about a boy
They are selecting a scholar
To study for honors credit in the world
Literature class I offer
A list of non-American, non-European
Authors with a post-colonialist lens incomplete But something
at least
Beyond the brief toe-dip
Into Achebe I bring them
To Soyinka, Kincaid, Narayan, and Jin
As well as Wan-Suh
Through a neatly formatted Google Doc —

Two columns of names
Like two pillars of powerful stone
Reflections from Homi Bhabha's hybrid
Identity standing face to face
Like my two sophomores
Battling it out for Adichie:
One the victor
The other feeling defeated
Thinking she has settled
For Sindiwe Magona
And for the brilliance she is yet to discover I smile

Back to Joy

I read my pocket Whitman in the bleachers
as the catcher warms up my son.
Behind him, a tier of white skyscrapers
like science lab skeletons

flanked by mad palm trees & the outfield
fence that separates him
from six skateboarders landing tricks.
I watch him, now fourteen,

gaiter-masked & broad-shouldered
inhale & exhale. I like to think
he enjoys this, though I know he hears
the halting scrapes of pivots,

know he sees the barrel jump & rails
of the long & lean skaters – confident as hell
with the glow of doing what they love.
Outstretched arms like the soul of a bird

with sudden explosions of flight
then dip as my son pitches his fast ball
to receive it back into his glove. The love
of forward & reverse, of air & speed

into leather womb & out again,
this reentry after a year of no baseball,
a year of stay-at-home orders,
& County protocols. He will stand

on the mound a different kid
who's been through a hell of his own:
Quit ball & skate? Quit school & disappear?
Today he stands on the other side

of adolescence, that chain link fence
through which we both can see
who he used to be, maybe still is, or always

will be. The backpacks & Arizona teas,
focused & fast with kick flip freedom,
swivel & wingspan over the wavering
deck & curve of the spine, long & dark
as the hours spent on the five-stair.

Now this park is catching the sunset.
Bone-cold buildings fade like a year,
or a child who has found the way
back to joy. He's come home finally

from the anger that rolled & roiled
his mind into nights on the back porch
while I slept & he smoked,
inhaling the spirit of disenchantment.

I imagine him trying to exhale
my failure as he skated farther away
from the leathery warmth
of a maternal toss & catch rhythm

that today seems somehow
harmonious at the top of the fifth
with two outs. He balks & turns to the ump,
unphased by his error or by the skaters

slouching by the plate, satisfied
with their footage. I think about that
New York Times article from a few years back
claiming America's boys are broken

"and it's killing us." I close my Whitman
as the ump calls *Ballgame!*
My son joins his teammates to tip his hat
& shout *Thank you, parents!*

In Response to My Students Who Still Don't Understand Irony

*and for Germanwings Flight 9525; crew: 6,
passengers: 144, survivors: 0*

Take the German schoolgirl
who almost missed her flight home from Spain.
Because of a forgotten passport,
she could have been stuck at El-Prat
to consume an iced mocha alone –

But she made the flight, soon
ascending toward Haltern all buckled
and ear-budded with her *freundinnen*
and the Spanish ether. Buoyed with relief
she made it forty minutes in

when the sudden descent
sent orange juice, hips, and hands
gripping over Le Vernet.
There was silence from the co-captain
on one side of the cockpit door;

frantic pounding by the captain on the other side
with a fire axe. This fate blazoned
her name misspelled across the news,
over the rocks of Le Vernet,
and into stone plaques like tombstones

or smeared blood over a poet's doorframe
heart. Lives spilled like orphaned shirts
from torn luggage across the mountainside
that took the German schoolgirl –
who almost missed her flight home from Spain.

Ode to Sadness

*a not admitting of the Wound
Until it grew so wide
that all my Life had Entered it
~Emily Dickinson*

Unzip this girl from the inside,
and let the rats pour out
tail first and tumbling
to the jagged beat of her heart —
that dust bowl ceiling vent
ruining every room
from L.A. to Augusta —

while she struggles to breathe warmth
hoping for a reprieve
from heavy work
crowded inside herself
a dying dog, angry cat
life she prays through
a sandpaper childhood
burning the eaves of memory
in her hospice soul
like the anthracite coal
her father worshipped
an amulet womb
from Southeastern Pennsylvania
zipped into his shriveling mind,
his quadruple-bypass Frankenstein
heart that cannot stumble
away from the loneliness of being

that four-year-old boy
with no father:

a zipping up of the future,
cold grip like teeth on the wheel
to steer their '78 station wagon
forty years later fathering
four times as long as his own
father an immigrant
with so little

time to find the touch
we need the intention
of our people in the only space
we know hunger's maze
we call our *need*
to be in the touch

— gifts of the tongue
wet with life and healing —
sights that say we exist
with a birthright
again, *it is time*
to gather the Depression

into marked cages of this girl's body this shiny black
bag
of generations
you'll zip up
until the next time
we perform experiments
paddle-deep in the mine
where she's a Prometheus canary
dying by noon and waking
at midnight to die again

—a futile warning
wound as old as woe
she ignores as she marches into the earth

just another mine
rat living on scraps with a pickaxe
and a headlamp whistling
the song of her grandfather with the lips
of her father
the carbon tongue of hope

almost a century breath.