

The Names We Called You Meant Nothing to Me

We shouted *witch*

but inside I said meadow-sweet, hollyhock, clover.
We said we'd peel off your skin
but I dreamt of you taking me:
the sky let you go and you landed
between the laurel trees at the graveyard gate.
You covered my mouth. Your hand light and dry as a moth.

In bed I imagined
the smell of your cloak: lanolin and cobwebs;
or the smell of the skin at your throat,
sweet resin, sweat and wood smoke. I was so tender.

At harvest, the village set a fire and we chanted
crone, hag, Satan's whore. I imagined dancing with you:
our shadows, the flames and soft ash,
the heat catching our faces, our throats.
We were red and gold and impervious.

We didn't burn the oak tree
though its roots circled our bonfire.
It smelt green; it grew lichen. In the morning I found you there
hung from a noose. The branch sighed.
Your feet without their shoes. Your toes blue and small.

I was afraid, and then I remembered our names for you.
Witch, I shouted.

Autism Spectrum Disorder, at Age 20

1.

The taste of the sewing-machine:
a honey hum at the back of my throat.
The vacuum cleaner
shatters like glass in my mouth.

Blood doesn't flow easily,
blood sets into an iron pattern,
stains the drain and the square under the sink.

2.

On the light-switch by the door,
the harvest-man is dead,
his jumble of legs and wings
translates into a shadow like French lace.
My friend the harvest-man, a barrier
between world and door, between
my egg-shell and the tarmac
glittering with cars.

3.

I am a gorilla,
and they cage me with the flamingos, macaws.
Such colour!
I sit by myself, I put leaves
over my eyes.

4.

Ferns coloured rust by this January wind.
I make myself small in the mulch
between tree trunk and concrete walls.
Woodlice walk over my ankles.

In the supermarket, tomatoes pulse with light:
I'm so hungry.

5.

I am getting better
at not making a fuss.
I put my hands in my mouth,
the screams press against them
like a Jack-in-the-Box drumming his head
against the wooden lid.

The Light Comes in the Name of the Voice

(– Jeanne d'Arc, as quoted by Anne Carson in *Variations on the Right to Remain Silent*)

And in the end, only this moment.
First the ash-pile, white, fine wood-ash,
grimy ice, a grey noon. The pigs.
Frost lacing the leaves. The girl
with itchy thighs, cold nose. Then
this moment. The voice.
The light.

The light.
It did not flow like a muted shaft of sunlight
in water; it wasn't like snow,
snow at dawn, the white flecks
on a fox's tail as it bounds in snow-ferns.
Nor like the flash of a stoat at dusk
overcoming a rabbit bigger than itself
(though, like the stoat, it held everything
in its jaws). It was not even like moonlight,
like being thirteen, warm in a moonlit room, moon
so full and bright it lies in long white beams, white
shadows on the skin, skin melting into shadows
as though there is no longer any space
between self and moon. The light

was only like itself
just as she was only Jeanne. Her breath
a shape in the frost. Then this moment,
only now, only ever the light
and the voice. Wordless and complete.

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She was questioned. At her trial they said where
does your voice come from do you
hear it like you hear my voice when do you hear it
do you hear it now. Does it echo. She
could not answer, there were no answers, as there had
been no songs, no angels, no shadows. Only light,

the girl transformed by light. After the trial
it seemed to her the light had always been full
of the smell of herself burning: her bursting lungs,
her fried skin. The questions already licked
her arms; behind the voice, her white ashes –

and somewhere she still knelt by the pigsty, hands tense
as if searching for a sword.

Passage Grave

I'm in the dry centre of the passage grave looking
at interlocking circles carved by stone-age hands when
the guide tells us life expectancy was twenty-five.

I'm dead, then. The guide adjusts the electric light, creates
a gold glow and asks us to imagine sunshine, December
sunshine striking silent stone.

I imagine I'm Neolithic and pregnant, standing here, knowing
I may die soon from wounds or childbirth. I'm taller
than the other women. When we celebrate I

chew berries and paint my face purple with their juice. The women say
I'm a wicked goddess. We laugh together in the dark; a woman
kisses my stretched abdomen where the baby's head

distorts the skin. She kisses my foot, too, all its firm callouses.
We laugh together in the dark among dry stones and I'm

standing in Newgrange and I imagine I'm
already dead like all those who
didn't—who stepped into the sea and went under, who never
disgorged the pills. I have a year left, I have fifty, I watch

the electric light glow gold, imagine
stone-age sunshine striking stone,
and a December goddess laughing in the dark.

Twelve Dancing Princesses

Come back, come back right now, obey – they hear
but begin to dance. Sleek as a knot of otters

they tumble in dew-sweet air
until their slippers wear right through. Smooth soles

on smooth marble, they come apart from themselves
like whales breaching and crashing back

against the sea. Light, dancing light. A comet on a long orbit
around our star. Come back – they hear

as they dance, imagining a husband's weight, cool hands on
warm waists. Stomachs starred with stretch marks, a baby

under the skin. But they forget. No way
back, only further out, more stars, more space.

Detour (Leaving Edinburgh)

It took some time to admit we were lost.
That a train could be lost. I always held
my breath high in my chest until we crossed
the Forth Bridge, when the firth swelled
grey under us – the stretch, the too-wide
stretch of waves and rock, the wet clouds
bisected by red struts – and then I sighed,
a rough gasp, every time, even in crowds,
even on a 6am commute. But that day we never
crossed, never edged cold beaches in Fife
and, much later, the voice small and slivered,
the announcement came: we were in Stirling. Life
unsettled, we simmered on polyester seats.

Then I saw the river. River and willow tree, grey
shape of an old rowing boat, the beat
of oars. The water was slow-moving that Sunday
in September, the light thin. I was nineteen;
I was in love. And I let go: I'd been
holding that breath until I saw the river,
the willow leaves falling onto the river.

When I Was Twelve

I did not conceive
but still the child appears. Sometimes
she's a turnip child, made from ruddy roots

and onions. Her face, white as the inside
of a chestnut-shell, is only an impression
of ears and nose, but perfect.

Sometimes a coal-cellar child, she comes
sparkling with dust, her eyebrows gold,
her tongue made of fossil ferns,

her cries the sounds of embers
spitting on a hearth. A mushroom child,
when I squeeze her, she spills spores

like a puff-ball, and she smells
like a late-autumn orchard. She's the baby
cursed by the witch in a fairytale

but she reminds me I never quickened,
never grew heavy and limp with nausea,
never split open like a nut. A toy child,

made from satin and cotton grown soft
with time: now when she screams
I don't curse her, I hold her to my breast.

Suddenly The Unicorns

The unicorns give us space
to be ourselves. We were cut
in pieces and put in metal boxes
and we forgot our thumbs,

our eyes, our lungs, we forgot
what it was like to breathe. Then
the unicorns, a sudden darting black,
sharp points in miles of sand

or a black eye at the centre
of a dust storm. And the first time
I touched you. Your skin pulsed
like the sinuous heat of a unicorn

as she plunges through glaring streets.
You were afraid and you opened
to me, bruised limbs spilling from boxes,
wet lungs gasping for safety,

and I remembered Sappho, I first held
the black book in nine-year-old hands, read
standing on one leg, her short lines lost
in the bleak white landscape

of the page, but when I found her words
they were wide open – the smell of sage,
the smell of seaweed, the smell
of a woman's dusty foot. The unicorn,

vivid, another universe crossing
the page to give me space, this space
to find you and watch your limbs knit
themselves back together. Together

we're wild again, exposed as in a desert
or on a bright street, sharp points in monotony
and I kneel at your feet to lick
the breath out of you, and back in.