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A Through G

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A through G

1.

God when you disappeared the playground's sound
was polyphonic and layered and full of terror
because I could not place your own silence in it.
Suddenly, again, as in the short trimester before
your birth, none could unsay the worst.
No one else to demand of in angry fear.
Then a mother, two boys and an adolescent girl
brought you to the ticket kiosk where I stood
working to breathe and keep my darting eyes from closing.
I got lost, and you got lost, papa is what you said to me.
I held a handful of pellets you offered to the raucous goats.
I poised you on a fencepost to see the Bolivian monkeys feed.

2.

Today you announced you have a favorite song:
Cyndi Lauper's version of "True Colors."
Your mother and I listened to it one night while you bathed
and since then you've often heard it in the car.
And today while I prepared you to swim you watched me sing,
filling in, shyly, the muted, repeated word—colors.
Your bathing suit is pink and turquoise and blue.
The towel you were wrapped in is faded emerald, with a black tag.
The last painting we saw at the Mary Heilmann exhibit this afternoon
before your eyes went rose with fatigue is called
"Surfing on Acid." It is beautiful, should you ever care to look:
layered bands of discordant color like strokes from an overgrown brush.

3.

At some point you might hear my name was in a famous book.
Over two rainy April afternoons in a Krakow flat
I met with a great poet of my lifetime and his wife,
Czeslaw and Carol Milosz. I arrived with flowers
and strawberries, my drenched shoe leather fretting loose of its stitches.
On the second afternoon Carol served us
slices of a strawberry tart. Tak—yes, okay—was the one
word of Polish I ever heard her speak. They have both died,
so mine will be the only record of those afternoons.
Carol spoke of dogwoods and John Dewey and a mutual friend.
Milosz spoke of magic, the book of psalms, and the same friend.
He had impressed us all in different ways, a lover of the written word.

4.

The salt dredge is rusted out in the inlet where we bike.
You ride behind me and sometimes tug at my shirt.
Racing teams carve past us, or bulge around us.
Across the water, kayaks for rent tally the sloping shore.
Blue herons gaze from the sedge on both sides.
Salvia and sage. Trickle and outcrop. Ripple and sky.
At the end of the path we loop to take the same way back.
Hérons are flying over the dredge. Kayak paddles mill
in the still air. The wheel's shadow spins through the grass.

5.

For three weeks in the Duesseldorf maternity ward
where you were born the nurses called me Rí'os—your mother's name.
Twice a day we listened to your heart for half
an hour. I lectured on Melville and Hawthorne
and Sigmund Freud to a precious handful of students
in an enormous semi-circular hall, assembling furniture
in our flat late into the night. Sunsets were a blessing.
Pedaling home uphill, I sometimes thought I heard your own
being in my ears. A tall block of the Berlin Wall stands
in the center of a quad where I now teach, where you
have gone springing over a green hill to the library
and scattered Odas Elementales across the second floor.

6.

And this California college was founded in 1861 by pacifists.
My best student writes poems in which bombs explode.
For twenty years, every third household in our quiet neighborhood
depended on an aerospace firm.
The year before you arrived an African won the Nobel Prize
for a tale about a patrician judge who cannot
protect his townspeople from the bellicose
errors of their empire. He pursues a futile love affair.
(You once blotted spilled wine with a paper about this book.)
Which harm is right to refuse to do? What enterprises
are so shortsighted they should be ended? And, then, by whom?
Is there a best commandment? A second name for peace?

7.

At your parents' wedding a dozen bodyguards
stood in the July heat outside the whitewashed church.
A liberation theologian was the officiant;
many attendees were followers of the Opus Dei.
In a yellow chasuble, the father walked the whole nave twice
to celebrate the kiss of peace.
This was in your other country. Where you have had no home.

A country with twenty-two indigenous languages.
Of temples buried under easy earth.
Ten hours of driving along a two-lane road
have transported you from one coast to the other:
bird-haunted sesame plots off the Pacific; yacht harbors of the north.

8.

This is how I eat fish you told my mother and sister and me
one evening at our table. (Which your mother says
looks like it was stolen from an alpine lodge.)
I think you learned to talk that way from a video you watch
at breakfast while we get ready for work.
But I am not sure. There are many sources of your English now.
Maybe it was a conversation between your grandma
and her gardener. Perhaps you overheard me read aloud.
I can carry you easily in one arm—which you often ask me to do—
but our conversations now are more like when
your mother and I each held you by the hand and swung you,
gently, without a thought of letting go.