

Ed Casey

Ghost Bird

My father and I found a dead owl
on the side of the highway.
It was a young Snowy,
unpoachable.

He ran to it as he might have run
if I were dead on the asphalt.
He stretched it out by the wings
to see its span.
Take a picture—
an owl crucified to my father's body.

We have to keep something.
He chose a talon, holding the leg
outstretched from the downy body.

I closed my mouth and tried to hide my hands.
He handed me his knife and showed me where to cut.

Flesh and sinew was sparse,
cut easily. I sawed at the bone
for the rest of my childhood. Old, thick blood
and bits of feather coated the blade.

He stuffed the talon in a sandwich bag
and kept it in a drawer in his desk, occasionally
showing it off to an interested visitor.

On some quiet nights
I would dream of owls that couldn't land,
scraping at my hair and eyes. Those mornings
I would sneak early into his office
and open the drawer, to make sure the talon was still.

Progress Report

In response to your request,
we cannot allow you to purchase
an abandoned newborn;
though we may see them from time to time,
we cannot, as you suggest, *auction them off*.

We have yet to be able to determine
if we have delivered a child
with abnormally strong lungs.
The lab report follows:

Your entitlement is undermining
the purity of your sperm samples.
We will eventually have to retest
but due to the possibility of contagion,

we cannot allow you to imagine stability, or harvest
your hang nails for a period
of at least nine months.

Potential young daughters you have, but the absence
present on your patio was enough to drive back
even the stoutest of our analysts.

Your blood sugar level is high but not totally
abnormal. Please resend
the stool sample;

your first was mixed with feathers, and it has become impossible
to separate your tissue from the many
species of bird present.

Your choice of burial plots interests us.
Most men your age prefer shade, for themselves
and their loved ones, though no one has yet to record a lack

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of sweat at this destination.

The bloody saliva will normalize with prescribed contemplation:

spread a light blanket over yourself
and, in a dark room,
with only your toes,
negotiate the revenants
of your self-abuse.

Moving Day

With its remains draped across my fingers,
I follow up the length of the vine.
The garden has become a collection
of paper-thin limbs and crumbling stalks;
a hard stare might shatter it all.

My foot slips off the edge of a flagstone.
First the heel, then calf
and thigh unmake the gray blades of grass.
I tumble and cut through
what was once a rosebush.

My eyes open into the haze
and catch a hint of green,
mostly hidden from the sun.
A shoot, no larger than a finger,
starts from the soil.

I cup my hands to protect it;
breathing onto it,
my heat and moisture beg:
grow.

I distract myself with a memory:
the vines of your embrace in a cloud of dust;
your hands bloom
with barely a sound,
bony petals against my ribs and spine;
the burden of your trunk.

On Being Taught to Love

First, don't use that word.
Don't write it, speak it,
carve it into a tree, paint it on a stall
in the men's room, chisel
it into a stone, thrust it into her,
sweat it, include it in a wish list,
bare your teeth at it, fall
for it, reach your hand out for it
in a lonely distance,
carry it on your shoulder,
wear it on a sleeve, advertise it,
call it at 3 a.m., climb its ropes,
unbutton its blouse, caress its leg,
sink knee-deep into it, whisper it
like a god's name, lick it off the theatre floor,
or listen.

It has gifts, brightly,
beautifully wrapped packages,
trimmed, bowed, dusted, and polished:
you need none of them:
they pay no rent, sleep on your couch,
drink your last beer, fill and never empty
your ashtray, run up your phone bill,
and smoke the box of cigars
you saved to share with your father.

Treat it as though it's not there:
ash in its navel,
sit on its knees.
Hide the potato chips
and your anguished face when it speaks.