2017

An Open Letter to the Father Who Was There

Amber Slack
Western Michigan University, amber.r.slack@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate
Part of the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Laureate by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
Something about your skin will be so smooth I will mistake it for glass
When you went upstairs I forgot where the icebox was and spent fifteen minutes holding
the stem of an empty glass
waiting for it to be full
I saw you in the reflection, isolating an emotion
Building a home around it
Giving it a proper resting place,
and putting it over a pillow
You ask me, how about you let go?
To set the glass down or wait
I twist my fingertips around the ridge and imagine all the people I could have been
I tilt my head and suck down what doesn’t exist
I could see us both through the empty glass,
Transfixed on what was outside of it
We prescribed meaning to the absence of space
My hand grasping so loose it could have fallen
“We’re never really touching anything”
I mumbled I should pack up my things,
My sweaty palm fogging the glass
Maybe we should sightsee states over
Maybe we should grow fins and explore the ocean
Maybe we should tattoo our bodies with topographic maps
Maybe we should
The glass still empty and I froze.
The mid-air head rush of watching something hit the floor.
My mind broke into numerous pieces and I went for the shards
You said let’s call it a night
while I swallowed my tongue so many times it became an extension of my pride.

Did I ever tell you what
happened to all those
words that I needed you
to say in defense of
me? I swallowed them to
fuel angst rained on memories
like confetti at a parade
but they calcified, became
the weight in my chest, heavier
each time she burned me down
and you stayed silent. We have both
gone to bed with her poison wrapped
around our necks.

I learned quiet much
faster from your apparent
apathy than from her
pinching the soft skin
under my doll-like arms
until my body watered with
whispers of, “I’ll give you something
to cry about” through teeth pressed
together to flatten my emotions
until she could crush them in
her hands.

Don’t explain to me
about dosages and chemical
imbalances because I know what hatred
looks like in blue eyes just like you do.
If you’d ever paid attention you’d
know what betrayal looks like in
hazel. You have always been my
teacher by opposition, giving
me a voice that can separate
her atoms by never even trying
to use yours. We have both been
colored by her. Nothing rips
apart a child’s cheek like a diamond
ring applied with force but words
are what put me in therapy.

But we don’t talk about
the reasons because what
exactly can we say? That the
reasons behind my mental
history are the reasons behind
your complacency? I survived
her. I haven’t quite finished
surviving you. No one can smooth
out the bruises and explain away
the tears like you. You’d think I’d
get at least the art of lying from her
but while you covered up her
indiscretions I was covering up
blood and wishing the words rattling
around my brain were true: “You
are not my daughter!”

She can serve herself the idea
that I am not her fault but the
concept will never taste right and
you know just as surely as you’d
like to believe that my accomplishments
are yours, baggage is the only
thing you’ve ever given me. So
don’t ask me to forgive you for
the weight, you might know well the
sound of anger bouncing off your
walls but you’ll never know the
sound of redemption.

I.

Sometimes I am more deer than person:
I walk through the woods, I see movement in camouflage,
I freeze, they laugh,
I stare, my red heart bursts, you could be shot
My heart bursts again
I’m bleeding, I burst, I run away. Don’t come back.

Does anybody care what I look like in a field? Does a person in a black cloak ruin a
landscape?
The throbbing space between the stars, a bruise.
A cold lake in November, black coffee, black squirrels, my eyes.
In the right light anyone can look like a darkness.

II.

I sit on the edge of a collapsing concrete foundation staring at the lake,
a stubborn slab: all angles, all unforgiving.
The lake laps at it, don’t touch me.
The foundation slips forward, the lake whispers what it knows,
The foundation sinks lower, the foundation kisses the lake and knows it is wrong,
and the lake swallows it.
The foundation loves on the lake’s terms very slowly, and then forever.

III.

Two snowy-eyed deer collide in a field, their hearts burst.
Two jittering specks blown across a sunlit cloud of goldenrod, the first neon subtleties of fireflies.
Two hundred flickers of the moon and a speckled child is born, weak legged and drowsy, it shivers in its mother’s slime.