

Love Letters from Occupied Lands

I.

he tries to write me with moccasins, but their skin
melts on the city blacktop.

I wear nikes, white and fresh.

he tries to write me
with raven-silk hair past my waist,
but L.A. is hot in the summertime
(steam comes to my knees).

I whisk it up and wear it short.
he tries to write me on the reservation,
but I love this city, love her shape—
love her brownness, her woke, her shimmer
at night, her voice,
the hum of the 101
against the smoggy sky.

II.

beneath the milky lake,
two fossils call for me.

one, fish-like, ticks its own ribs
and asks for a dance across the martyred dunes.

the other, tattooed with grooves,
is the moonlight's echo chamber.

the stars shake free of the sky,
and scatter, warm and anxious across the graveyard
desert. they fill the bare sockets of the fossils
and become the flesh of old ghosts.

I catch the fallen radiance in thickets to illuminate
the lake. from the waters rise two young gods, once forgotten,
now alight.

I dance into the wake,
for who can refuse a lonely god? the world around me
shivers, remembered for the first time
in a century. the wind sighs, and I swear,
in the blaze, everything is alive.

III.

the girl paints her nails with sycamore blood, sticky
gore with a heartbeat in its throat. she's whacked
the tree head from the thick neck—
she watches it roll
through the lily-pads.

she loved a boy
 once
with eyes like bark and hair like brown sugar
streaming from his temples. he was small
and soft, with hands wide enough to hammock himself
from sycamore to sycamore.
she taught herself to love his half-shut lids,
juniper seeds, frybread grease,
 the inside of a raindrop.
much later,
she unlearned things she only half-admired,
 and withdrew barefoot into the lonely woods.

IV.
I love the corn-silk god.
he skims the distance between us like a reed
in water. hands, thin and yellow, cup my brow.
 I count the raindrops
in his upturned lashes.
I coil with him in the night, succulents the size of stones
 seizing our waists. the earth sighs with hot breath,
raising poppies on my lover's forearms.
I nibble on sweet magnolias he folds under my door,
and pray the night will never fall
 so that he may bury himself in eternity
 beside me.

V.
in Wyoming, when I left you,
I found an art structure in the middle of an open field,
 silver swirled into a conch.
I ducked inside, and found myself
surrounded by signs in Navajo, warning of the evening
eclipse. feeling far from home, I was suddenly awash
with the familiar superstitions of my mother's teachings.
the metal, twisted, a punctured shelter,
seemed a looming reminder of home. I wonder if the artist,
a woman, hid from the sun when she was young. did she imagine
the two gods blackening the atmosphere
with suffocating love? everything around me
dared me to look: the tourists in their tacky garb,
the restaurants selling half-off drinks with cosmic names.
I had never felt so alone.
 and yet, this gnarled structure,
nailed with signs in Navajo,
 curled around me.
when I stayed indoors that night, I did not look up—
 not for fear of seeing your silhouette pressed

into the sky above, but for reasons more ancient,
reminiscent of home.

VI.

his shadow reminds her of what poisons stop the heart.
her spinal fluid billows, buttermilk half-moons puzzle-piecing themselves into place
along her back. just above her breast, she feels the stutter
of vessels, gasping at the vesicle locked with decay.

in her youth, she had plenty heart. she pierced her ears with wishbones.
she watched the valley plug and fill itself like a bathroom sink.
a thunderstorm with clear eyes and Augustine hair scraped the land free of cicadas.
their brittle ghosts threw themselves against her bedroom window.

he is feral in post-colonial ecstasy. she is the corpse of a prairie rose
sucked high into the churning air. perhaps they will die tomorrow.
perhaps she knows by name the bones obscured by silt
at the pit of the swollen valley. they have learned to ask few questions,
to hold their breath above water.

VIII.

I am twelve when I meet him.
I flip through his pages and see his face,
warm and observant. I tell him I'm lonely,
but he sounds like my uncle. he smells of artifacts
under the sand, reminds me
of someone much older. since then,
I've met someone else. she ribbon dances
through her dialogue. she wears sneakers
and sleeps on the border between skyscapes
and backwoods. she has my face,
but different hands.
 they are broader, more capable.
beside her, he shrinks,
 until he is swept away by the swaying ribbons
of her regalia.

IX.

and these dying things that you have given me? when will you pay me back
for the nails I lifted from my skin? one-up me one more time
and I'll have to charge you for the olive branch.
in other words, I want to taste your rolling tongue;
 I burned in your elbow grease, I shot
a gun in the dark and it bounced off the moon. can I kick it? —
 right here, between your thumb
and forefinger. your body is a foreigner, carried by cold wings,
 eyes blazing in the dark.
 unzip yourself! toss messages for me

into the sea. I think of you and touch my fingers
to my nose.

I backhand the blood away.

It tastes like your broken jaw.

X.

Indian boy! brown baby, lemon grove,
you caught hummingbirds between your teeth
& their wings brushed your palate,
ribbed and pink.

my heart opens itself like a peel-back can.

Indian boy! I knew someone with your skin,
washed with grooves like the riverbank. come whistle
the tune of an ancient war. the one—that one!
make me remember.

XI.

at a concert in L.A. I remind someone smoking
next to me that they are on tribal lands.
I hurtle back home in my Subaru through the smudging lights,
buzzing with the music's aftershock, warmed
by the heat rising from the highway. I imagine hands
pressed to the asphalt's underside. have these ghosts
learned to love this city as I have? it is hard to feel lonely
when I think of them smiling at me through the night,
knowing I am where they can watch over me.