

Steve's Balloons

In our dreams,
dreams are like balloons—
light and round and always, always rising.

As I drove through Haw River,
a one-church town in the South,
I caught a glimpse of their maker
and stopped to reflect.

The store was boarded up,
its gravel parking lot weedy
and empty of cars,
and I saw where plastic letters
had been taken down from the faded roof,
leaving a less faded stencil of the words
STEVE'S BALLOONS.

He must have grown up here,
this namesake of mine,
amid these rural ruins,
the porches in disrepair,
the cracked pavement and telephone poles
and the strip mall the locals regard
as their special version of Eden.

I imagined the boyish optimism
that inflated his hopes
and buoyed his faith
that a worn and weary town would find
perpetual cause to celebrate.

I saw then that balloons are not at all round
but are shaped like tears,
that a dream is not so much
that scrap of rubber on the ground
as the breath that once filled it.

Leaves

For Shinayo Matsumoto

At ninety-one,
she still liked to arrange things
just so,
kept her possessions in tidy boxes,
some engraved with Asian motifs—
dragonflies, exotic birds,
and leaves of bamboo.

And how she loved her sumo!
To watch, on the Japanese channel,
rikishi ten times her size
colliding like forces of nature
filled her with a sense of nostalgia
and possibility.

She was the venerable priestess of tea.
In the autumn of her age,
faithful to the rituals
of a dying art,
she distilled from the parched leaves
this pure nectar,
green as youth.

Flowers found perfection
in her hands,
wrinkled hands, with fingers like twigs.
Once, perhaps, as she trimmed the leaves,
she remembered a time when she
was that perfect flower,
blooming in her kimono
of peach and green.

Her family arranged
a simple Buddhist ceremony.
In late November, the trees
were mostly bare.
But across the lawn, beyond
the small gathering
and the somber stones,
the leaves all danced in the air.

Nasal Biopsy

Nurse says there's a *mass*. I hear
a requiem, see gothic arches where
alae and columella frame a nares
and its twin. *Is it malignant?* Ushering this fear
to my cathedral, I marvel how breath is born of air
at the portals, inspiring the choirs comingling there.
The priest wafts in, hovers in his shimmering chimere,
but as he places the wafer on a tongue of gauze to share
with *Pathology*, I have to wonder: Is it fair
that a god should mete out grace or despair
in proportion to fealty, that the hereafter (if not the here)
should hinge on professions of faith? Does this square
with cycles of nature? And what of those who dare
to breathe in silence, mutes in the kingdom of prayer?

Syringe

*Syrinx was a chaste water nymph who, pursued by Pan,
was mercifully transformed into hollow reeds.*

By all accounts, she knew nothing of multiple sclerosis.

I.

These marks, my metric
of defiance and decline,
gauge a meniscus as the lumen fills
with fresh platoons of synthetic drug,
game as ever to deploy.
But what draws my eye this time
is the glint of syringe
—that crack in the slats where sun leaks through—
I pry the blinds,
peer in

II.

As if the brain were lit by a strobe, flickering
between real and not, between now
and some taproot of time,
as if the temporal lobe had seized
on this pool in the skin, this fluid lens,
and telescoped instead
to a pond near woods
with frogs and nymphs and fish,
and, by the water's edge,
a stand of reeds—horsetail, I surmise, *cauda equina*—
piercing the surface like needles

No plunger
drives the sun to its zenith,
retracts the shadows of trees,
pressures the breeze
to be wind,
nor does the mind,
which thinks it sees
the white coats of birches
but is more akin
to that orange disc climbing through branches
synaptic in all the circuitry

Nights,
when ripples are obsidian,
the moon
spills across the surface,
scatters a flotilla of lights
whose oily spangles buoy, conjoin,
yet always part

And here, in that timeless dark,
Syrinx appears,
a synthesis of moons
sheathed in halos of myelin film,
the flutings whorled
around her waist
like petals,
that place
where now she glides
an arm, the wrist turned in,
and effortlessly loosens the ties
that linens might slip from her skin

III.

This bloating sloughs
like fat off bone.

I return to burned-out husks
the columns collapsed
the cry of syllables
huddled in shelters
each vowel a child dragging its feet.

Where wires are down
a wireless crackles
and static animates the screen,
save for this glimpse of a green frog in my fist
and the teacher saying *insert the needle here,*
between the vertebrae,
then wiggle back and forth
to pith the cord

My reeds become water,
my memories
myth

Tube

Crest seemed apt at a time when I
was iconic:
cylindrical chest,
torso tapered to a terminal seam,
gleaming
and clean as an airfoil.

As my only vowel was O
I tended toward reticence,
though when pressed,
a wave would empower the sea-blue gel
till bluish expressions egressed.

I've since done a lot of shrinking.
My affect's flat
while the lack of limbs has left me bereft
of the gestures of affection—
a hermetic seal
on its shelf.

Mornings
find me cupped in a supple hand,
and I dutifully dispense the drib required
though afterward,
I'm even more depressed.

The mirror says
my rear end's collapsed
and my cap looks like a fez.

In equal measure, contents diminish
and the dim, inner dimensions close in,
hence no holes or fissures,
no pockets of air to squeeze—
no cavities.

In the end,
after all the paste is secreted
and drained as waste,
and my tube is a rumpled wreck of tin,
I still persist—
not dead or empty, just

depleted.