

Mountain Redemption

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For Eric Smith

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?

—Psalm 137:3–4

Drawl

I.

Sweet sorghum on a lover's tongue
Fresh briar marks on her thighs
Black beetles cased in cedar sap
 with new-hatched dragonflies

II.

A knife wound stanced with masking tape
A bin of cottonseed
One boy's fist on another's jaw
Bone shards in chicken feed

III.

What thoroughness What cleanliness
An altar glazed with wax
Deer trails through the dark pine woods
Abandoned railroad tracks

IV.

On crumpled onionskin the words
 of Christ like sunburn scars
Liquor drawn from sweet corn mash
The black between the stars

I.

Thanatophobia on Shinbone Valley Road

Dearest fawn,
 half-crushed
on the pavement, forgive me.

Having found you already
dying, panting, feebly hoofing the asphalt,
unable to crawl away
from your back end—

limp, twisted, varnishing
itself in black-red,
hide gashed and mottled, light
fur thickly matted—

what my father once called *mercy*
I can't set my hand to,

can't raise the barrel,
send you leadenly into
the after, where nothing awaits us.

Life has been hard. It will yet be worse.
For this, I am sorry.

Yesterday, my father brought me
two halves of a rattlesnake—
one gripped by the rattler, the other
the head.
The pieces swayed in the wind.

This is what happens, he said,
and said nothing else.

This is what happens, fawn.
Nothing else.
I don't want to believe that.

The weather is nice today and it will be
a long time before I die.

Persimmon

As a boy, I built a trap for deer
from rusted tin and bailing twine
and rigged it up between the farm's
last two persimmon trees.
I'd seen the deer Dad strung up in the barn,
strips of hide and organs
strewn among the straw.
When morning came,
the shard of ruined tin hung lifeless
from its net of twine—
the trap untripped.
I laughed and breathed
and hacked the knotted cord
to pieces with my pocketknife,
then made a bed of leaves
and ate my fill of ripe persimmons.
Another day, my brother took his hatchet
to the two dark-wooded trees
and felled them both.
I watched as he dismembered them,
stripped the trunks and limbs of bark.
When Dad appeared,
my brother fled into the woods.
Dad swore. He stood silent
by the fallen trees, head down,
mouth moving as in prayer.
Side by side, we rolled the last persimmons
into piles then crouched beside them,
squeezed each tiny fruit—
some green and dry, some ripe,
some far too soft to save.

Mountain Redemption

When Ottis Wilkins lost his arm,
he burned his tiny sawmill down
then sold his long-dead in-laws' farm
and moved his family into town.
He opened up a barber shop
and hired his sons to sweep and mop
the place each day and brew coffee
for the men who came to see
the one-armed barber. Inch by inch,
the fresh-barbed rose up from the seat
like sinners from the mourners' bench.

Petunia Eckert's heart was broken
down and blown out like a tire.
The skinny girl she loved had taken
all Petunia's pluck and fire
and moved to Blue Ridge. Petie took
to church and, Sundays, wailed and shook
and made the preacher smile. That summer
Pete got work as a part-time plumber.
In basements she would flail her wrench
and watch rats, terror-maddened, clamber
like sinners to the mourners' bench.

Old Jackie Raburn didn't hold
with killing. Even the mice and snakes
that shimmied nightly over the cold
stones of Jackie's floors caught breaks

no other man would care to give them.
He had a shotgun, though, one trimmed
with etched brass plates. Some days he'd haul
the thing outside and discharge all
his shells at the ground and blast a trench
in it, then wait for silence to fall
like sinners to the mourners' bench.

Whenever Sherriff Biggers drank,
and that was often, he revved his Chevy's
engine up, sped past the bank
and dingy Main Street shops with a heavy
foot and siren wailing just
to see the townsfolk gawk as the rust-
and dirt-stained cruiser barreled by.
Once, he had to shoot a guy
to death. He watched the man's jaw clench,
his dead eyes lifted to the sky
like sinners' from the mourners' bench.

Preacher Greene, a handsome man,
a widower of just a year,
made all the married women fan
themselves and smile from ear to ear
when he preached of David's lustful pride
or the spear that pierced the Savior's side.
At home, the phone set off the hook,
he'd open to his favorite book—
Song of Songs—then feel the pinch
of chaste Paul's thorn as his fingers shook
like sinners on the mourners' bench.

And mountain people—hard as limestone,
rich as black silt, deep as clay—
dreamed each night of valley towns
where valley cornstalks stood up tall
like sinners from the mourners' bench.