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LITERATURE



Ach'íí'

Tacey M. Atsitty

Reach into your pocket: fat
wrapped in intestines is so stiff
when cold. It looks like—

we shouldn't speak of such things
so young. Instead, knead salt,
flour, and water in this bowl.

These were our toys; I've tasted
them: figurines of shepherders
or soldiers. Should they harden

and be painted. And should a hole
be blown from the insides, from
the intestines. All that salt.

~

Your baby brother, his intestines

were broken. He couldn't pee.

And he died because he was so full.

Just like your grandmother,

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the day she walked out of the hogan,
dropped to her knees, holding her
stomach—so mixed up inside
when it exploded.

~

After all those explosions in Vietnam it must've messed him up pretty good. He could never eat ach'ii' again. He had to have three Enemy Ways done. We had to haul so many sheep. It's a long ride in the back of a jeep, all the way to Farmington to be baptized. The Apache Building: it was big and red. And I stood there next to that wall of bricks, wearing my squash blossom: a line of females v-ing down to the male; and there rested his tongue, almost between my breasts.

~

That brings it back to me. I remember
She who wasn't spoken of— each Red Vine
costed a nickel, that easy twine

across the street from our little red-bricked
house— They say she drove so fast

she turned into a whorl of smoke
behind Table Mesa the day she died.

Dad says he remembers the first time he died,
that long bus ride when they took him

to Utah for school. He had been memorizing
land formations: an angel the size of his hand

disappeared and after that he was so empty
from crying & so full of remembering

rocks he just fell asleep. He remembers
stealing pennies from his foster sister

to buy red licorice. He was always in trouble
for that or for sling-shotting the chickens.

Only three survived the morning massacre.
Only one sheep was taken from the flock.

They stole it, all those Navajo boys—led it
out to the base of the mountains, where
they built a fire and slit its throat:

laughing into the dry
night, fat dripping
from the sides of their mouths.

Playground Notes

Prologue

*It was nothing new; I'd always been without
water on days like these.*

*I'd climbed desert mountains
with a mouth dry as sagebrush.*

*I knew to blow into shallow pools
of rainwater, caught by mesa pores,
before drinking. And I could take you
to where a woman once brought up
water from a rock.*

*But as such a young child, I didn't know
how to ask for what was not in front of me.*

In an empty playground how many times
I thought it was a treat to be left for hours,
to seesaw the day away, to run through
tires erected in the dirt, then to sit inside
them when the wind got big. I'd imagine
sitting inside with Joey—they say he kissed
Heather in there. Once he touched the burn
on my forehead. "Ouch. That must've hurt."
Never had a boy touched me so tenderly.
Then we ran to the swings and he gave me an underdog.

~

Inside the tire, in its darkness we wait,
only Shideezhí is young enough to utter

"When's Daddy coming back?" When it's done
howling or raining we walk over to the edge

of the playground, in the sandbox we press
letters of our names—

then smooth them out.

~

Can I just say I got tired of waiting,
that it got too hard—

the solidified salt
tear from inside. Have you ever
scratched a squiggle into the back
of a door? *I love Tacy*. The teacher shut
me in a room during recess because she thought
I carved my love for myself into a cabinet.

~

My little brother and sister, it didn't matter
that with their weight combined it wasn't enough
to teeter-totter me into the air. *They* were in sky,
yee-hawing with those clouds.

~

Have you ever lain beneath bars: horizon-
tal ladder or bed spring, with the wind

knocked out, hard-packed dirt
& gravel or tile at your back?

In that position you learn
sky's weight, feel his hand; when unable

to move, to whimper lie—
plead thin clouds to drop

and fill you fill your tongue with breath—
iron out the stuttered heaving.

~

I learned not to answer Shideezhí
until the sun lit up our skin, ready
for a deep bruise to fill the night.

Soon.

hog-tied on the floor, asleep in her own urine.
I knew my dad had been a bull rider,

but hadn't known about him calf-roping.
I circled around her, into my dad's room.

That's Mary, he answered. *Go fix breakfast
while she sobers up.* I walked out, stepped over her,
and stood at the stove— pushing fat around—
waiting for that salty smell to drown the house.

Stem Water

After the Wedding of my Brother

I.

When we lay icicles across newspaper, it's an offering
to our father. We brought them in from outside:
we allow fire to follow us; we clink until altogether
we break— My brother and I kneel outside
at snowfall during sundown. It set as we lit kindling.
Out here I handle ice like the skeletal frame of a fan,
hold them between flame and me, closer until closed,
but move before melt, hum before smoke.
Icicles are not supposed to go to bone.
When fire reaches through our fingers, I realize
the half-life of an ice stick—

II.

Dad says it smells like a funeral. His bride wilted
with her bouquet in a separate way. It hangs
upside-down in the mud room, the bouquet,
kept in a still January hold. What does it mean
for a flower arrangement to pass on? To pass through
tubes of lilies and rise to rim. I think to throw them out
though they haven't fully blossomed or put them to rest
on the sill, above the kitchen sink or offer them
to loved ones so their stench no longer culls visions
of matured-blooms in a basket, no longer clouds
or salts stem-water.

III.

I should be eating protein right about now.
I read once in a poem that no one should eat
this much cake, but here I am at five a.m., losing
my tongue to tiers of butter and salt.
After four thick slices I can taste it all,

every ingredient— I've learned that cascading
is much like gorging, that sugar is not really
so sweet as it is salty. After you've burned your tongue
on granule after granule, it's nothing new,
almost familiar: such a thick, swallow frost.

