

# Shock Session and Other Poems

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## Shock Session

This won't hurt. Not much, the woman repeats the words  
wishing she were asleep, surely there's something  
one can take for the brain, as for a broken leg. But she trusts him—  
the man with the kind words, even trusts the machine  
with its two dials like a watch, like it could measure time  
but more, all the extra skin she's grown

the ones that the others could touch and rub and scrape,  
she could slough it off, a snake growing a new hide.

She had been young, everything new. This won't hurt.

He promised. Fingers like a rake scraping dry earth,  
lifting the dust to their eyes, revealing inner pockets—  
leaves, worms, grass torn, nibbled by insects.

In a room with the windows drawn, chairs stacked so high,  
the boy looks like a king. He passes her a joint  
wet with spit. She gulps the smoke, little waves inside her now  
like ancient calligraphy dissolving with her blood.

The boy now grown up, used to wearing suits, watches his son  
place his hand against a giant aquarium, eyes following

the glint of a scale, or fin, something the light catches.

What comes not too often, and asks to be kept, held,  
as now the child presses his face against glass, an offering  
for what he's seen. So he pulls him away,  
wrist like a girl's, like something he could break.

The man in the white coat plays a fugue from Bach,

and the nurse, smoothens the blanket as though it were cold  
then turns away before anyone can see. *This procedure requires  
utmost concentration*, says the handbook. Somewhere it is 1750.

The old musician walks the streets of Leipzig, growing blind.  
He grits his teeth, imagines rhythm as that narrow staircase  
closing by the minute, his coat starched, dry

but for the soaked armpits, the warmth that spills over,  
and from the distance, the blur of all-too-white, like a flag  
carrying its hidden message of a truce, beckoning one  
to come forward, come, rest.

## Ukraine, 1932

And then the hunger began.  
—*The Soviet Story*

The nth day of summer: two boys in overalls  
run across the decimated field, hands up in the air.  
They're pilots on a secret mission. Roger that,  
says the older one, fist pressed to his lips like a mouthpiece.  
Around them, the outgrowth of crops form a furry carpet,  
stretching to where the sun, this summer has begun to set.

Their mother calls them in to make paper airplanes.  
The younger one's stomach has begun to bulge,  
the eyes pale yellow like summer's afterthought.  
They fold paper, a deck of airplanes, throw them out  
into the evening sky. Watch as the planes plunge below  
to rest, fallen, a treat for the field mice.

Somewhere, a man takes a glass of water to his wife,  
watches her lick her lips, like the first time they lay together  
and said what the reckless say often, and more importantly,  
how the young love, transgress. He picks a lifeless man,  
drags the body to the waiting officer, takes his reward:  
a half-sack of grain. He promised her she would never die.

Perhaps he only imagined the shallow breath, the chest  
still heaving as they threw the body on a truck. Roger,  
roger that. The boys afraid to sleep now, to leave the woman  
with her hands. Does she imagine the others coming for them,  
the boys growing tinier until they fit in her palm,  
and they can run, keep running, their brittle legs taking flight.

## Old Friends

That time when we called it a fancy thing—  
experiments, a system with its hierarchy of needs:  
the need to suppress cold by rolling inside a carpet,  
waking up to a closet with clothes spilling to the floor  
like gutted fish, the rule that each body held within it  
miniature earthquakes and if you stood close to the other  
you could sense the tremors, the rise and fall of it, almost  
like music, the stories of fighting in an old revolution,  
children who wore berets and coughed up blood,  
shoes left on the streets. And after the hours that landed  
in all the soft places, when we had to mark territory  
by planting tombstones, writing names, the first to not grieve,  
to not keep what we've taken, like we were children  
with oversized coats on an afternoon hunt,  
picking up everything that could be of use—a kitten  
that wouldn't eat, stones that grew cold in one's fist,  
a photo, undated, back when all we knew of how to live  
was the force that drove us forward, to carry on  
towards that earthy weed-stalk taste of ruin,  
each other's weight spilling from all the hidden pockets,  
the smell of irrevocable, dead things.

## Fishermen at Sundown

By this hour their hopes have dwindled—  
a bucket of today's catch, enough  
to make their arms ache a little.

Sand dripping on the doorstep,  
women who scrub their backs to a pale, raw pink,  
and the armpit, groin, where the smell

of dried fish spread prostrate on nets  
like sacrificial virgins, clings, festers.  
The waves they carry

in their blood rock them back and forth,  
towards dreams of the day's run,  
hauling the fish offshore,

standing in line with the other men  
each pulling his part of the net, sweat  
on their arms, trickling on the silver bodies

still struggling for life. The sun on a retreat  
in the horizon, blazing their skin bright orange  
like they were made of wax,

the men holding their place, afraid  
to miss a step, fall out of line, as if a little touch  
could set off a hidden switch under the skin

where the women's hands don't reach,  
and they would all at once  
burst into flames.

## Anthropology

The old lives in the textbooks: men who carry arrows  
and go to war, the women with their breasts swollen,  
a blessing eternally slanted towards the earth.

The pictures the boy takes to the bathroom. He is thirteen,  
he would like to sling arrows from across a jungle,  
hit a wild boar, roast it in a spit. He would like his mouth  
under this woman's breast, would like to wait  
for the milk to come in little drops, gravity his friend.

These evenings riding those buses, bodies pressed  
together, the heat simmering to the ceiling,  
he thinks of someone lost, the old name like the stutter  
he more or less outgrew then came back like a thirst  
while half-asleep in another town. To conquer, again.

The little boy lifting his kill, imagining the stories  
he'd tell—how it kept running until it couldn't,  
how he watched the feet taking its last kick,  
and for a moment was tempted to press his ear  
against the animal's heart. The feast they would have,  
chanting throughout the night. Somewhere a girl  
with no taste for meat, walks to a clearing,  
raises her arms, lifts her chin, and prays for rain.