

THAT & THE KISSES

after "100 Bells" by Tarfia Faizullah

We sold pods that fell from trees.
We told Mother to write the sign.
Green beans, we said. She said, *Not
Green beans*, but wrote it anyway.
We stood on the side of the road.
Everyone laughed, including us.
His hand felt like an adult hand
Though he, too, was just a child.
His hands collided with my body
In many times. The hands punched.
The hands helped. The hands smoothed
My baby kitten hair. The hands scratched
& poked & pointed & pinched.
The hands did nothing for a while..
That & the kisses are what I
Remember the most of our six years
Neighbors & friends navigating
Childhood, the cracked streets & crooked
Sidewalks. Once we ran away together
To a Klu Klux Klan rally, drawn by
The secrecy, terrified by the robes & tone.
Years away from knowing the context.
Once we watched *Dirty Dancing* together.
Drawn to the tone, terrified by the secrecy.
Our gyrating & kissing & comforting
In the carpet-covered closet of my green
Room. A sharp hook on the inside.
I cannot remember his voice or why
He moved across town. I cannot remember
Why he called me that name in the lunch
Room. It was many years later, though not
Yet had he died in a car crash. Nor I.

NIGHTMARE SACK

A goat limps from the labyrinth hauling presents in my nightmare sack—
Dead pet monkey, blood swept up by Alice from The Brady Bunch,
Mr. Banana's limp carcass like an empty backpack, or

A polar bear tears to pieces an object never discovered without the blur.
Could be a rough collage of this family—the Late Cough syrup era?
No luck. Each night I am sucked into the valley.

I can never push the hill, but here, the hereafter, I can say the earth's tumor
It turned into a rhino, the rhino spoke english, very broken.
The coffee mug dangling from his snout represents my angst.

I have waited twenty years for the giant green teeth to return, to finally swallow
That backhoe that churns apart my house every dream cycle
Leading to another bright day. My midnight babble!

Or an airplane scoots this doofus to a new place to collapse like Wyoming.
My flight attendant is me, I am out of peanuts. I have not the guts
To hop down the inflatable slide into another sea writhing with bees.

SWALLOWING FOR THE LAST

My grandmother always had white kittens.
She named each one Snowflake.
Seven or eight at a time flopping
In & out of the shallow holes the government left.

A road cannot decide to go on or end.
It turns half-heartedly to gravel.
It is the beginning of the end of a very long journey.

That is not snow, the doctor said
Pointing collectively at the kittens dotting the beige carpet.
Loose hairs hung from their mouths like straw
Between the teeth of farmers in the museums.

This was before the doctor went to prison
But after he removed my tonsils—
A scar I have been swallowing for the last thirty-three years.

WHAT IS OCEAN

I am trying to remember the first time
I felt the ocean, but can only recall my cousin
Matt's first time seeing the ocean. It was dark, his
Family had just arrived from Indiana, we had beat them
There in our parallel mini-van, thanks to my dad
& his good driving, he is a semi-truck
Driver, & thanks to my bladder, how precise
& hollow it can remain. Matt was
Wearing a shirt with a collar & awful
Loafers, as he always remained prepared to go
To church or his Nana's house. Of my first time
All I remember is I did not like how
Light fiddled with the waves, but that glimpse
Only stays for a moment, then it is back
To Matt, how later he liked the stingray & how
The stingray squealed a single solar system of bubbles
After I rubbed its back, the only of my party
To muster the guts. Then, like now, I can
Be oblivious, or I can be courageous, my body covered
In jellyfish stings & the scars they leave, but
Not for too long. Like kelp, Matt & I were
Mid-cook, still figuring out how to be these
Creatures we found ourselves inside, not often
Of tender feelings, except in that sound of sand
Being licked by another wave, or a cousin crying
When he left his hermit crab sanctuary on the porch
All night & day, only to return to what is now
Shriveled. Doubt, the strongest gift ever given
To a soul skim-boarding in a body at the start of the tide.
Like a footprint on the beach, Matt & I do not often
Say goodbye. We do in fact live our crummy lives apart.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CREEK

My friend Jay married a woman named Kay.
I never met Kay, so I did not know what Kay looked like.

The tint of her teeth, or how she carried her shoulders in the rain.
The height her family had come together to give her.

But I know she spent a cold winter in northern Indiana in a trailer with Jay.
Come to think of it—I never met Jay.

No beds, just two musty couches they found there
Kissing end-to-end, right-angled, a triangle absent of its third side.

I know she loved to sing Bon Jovi
To the birds, but immediately shut her mouth

Like a large-mouth on a warm hook
When someone, usually Jay, joined her in the snow.

& when the freeze thawed, I know Kay
Enrolled in a book club at the library where she & two

Much older women read cookbooks & talked
About them as if they were novels.

Then Kay smelled of onions, though she had spent the afternoon chopping beets.
Then Kay woke up with Junebugs in her hair.

Then Kay rescued a stray pig, & she named it Tyler.
Then Kay asked Jay to quit emailing me.

His last one included a picture of Kay
He had taken on a crappy flip phone.

Her head was turned
Left ear facing the camera, but I knew her

Hair was much browner than I imagined.
Her forehead sunk like the ditch out front Jay often described.

It was the year the farmers were to plant soybeans,
But instead they planted eyeballs.

A TAPEWORM OF SOUND

In Alabama, I heard an unprescribed hello, a trill
In the dusk while I waited
For my sandwich, & onward

I trudge, feeling tucked between phantom greetings, & today lug
The anger monsoon around
Curled in the shadow of what

I claim as deflection—the grieving wall punch, the forgotten
Syllables uttered in gripe,
The speeding down the back road

Around the traffic jam. All of a sudden I send my phone
Flying. Like the dew baked back
Into the pavement, it rose,

Meaning the frustration arose. Whoops. Another distraction,
As is the fresh-swept porch &
The cat with her tuna treat.

A colony of bats appears like every card ever
Slipped from the magician's sleeve.
To the side a woman breaks

Up with another. They run off in opposite directions.
Memory is that fishing
Pier one sees in Midwestern

Ponds, corner collapsed into its own reflection, creaky &
Sweatered with moss, but stand just
Right, it can be possible

To fish from it, & maybe, you will reel in a keeper. I
Think that is what the voice was
Beginning to say to me.

A SONG OF JOY IN THE FOREST OF THE COYOTE

The first time I heard Diana
Sing I assumed I had drifted into the heavens

Which everyone knows is painted inside
The belly of some unknown but great mammal

I never thought I would get close enough to grace
To see. She was forty-two

Different angels & still is. I applied
Salt water to my scrapes & borrowed a shirt

With buttons from the local church
Lost-&-found. My sister always said you fight

Fire with sweet vermouth, the flame's distant
Cousin. My brother said all you need is a good

Brake job & a sturdy pair
Of sunglasses. I stuck pins in my eyes

Just to be sure. I tapped my teeth
With ancient coins to keep time.

The day I asked Diana to marry me I took off
My shirt, which I had done

Thousands of times before, but never like this, never with
The sun devouring the trees in quite this manner.