POETRY

Still Life

by Martina Natale



"Sprouting from inside" by Daniela Pichler

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i.

Every morning, when the sun is still more spirit than light, I’m roused from my rest in the wake of hymns and birdsong. I have been waiting for an omen, for the shape of the birds in flight to speak to me, to tell me: Rise, if you would. Jay, dove, magpie, crow, they stare at this still thing in disbelief and sing a song of mourning, mocking me for daring to call this entombment living.

ii.

My mother likes to tell that when I was born, I didn't cry but yawn. I opened my mouth to welcome the strangeness of air, lungs eager to feast on it. I cannot know if that was the last time I met the world unafraid. I can’t remember learning fear. I know I went through life trembling; bird hollow bones at the mercy of the currents, cursed with motion sickness.

iii.

I can’t pinpoint when the stillness came on. Maybe too much of home lives within me. All the seeds I recklessly swallowed as a child — bowls full of pomegranate, apples eaten to the core, every sweet orange slice I didn't share — must have taken root as soon as I stood too long in one place. I couldn’t have known homecoming would mean settling down for a perpetual winter; that the house would cradle me in the deceiving comfort of mute, mundane nothingness.

iv.

My grandmother tried to wrench the thing she calls the evil eye out of me. The recipe has been whispered down for generations. I watched her mix the ingredients together, I let her call a friend of a friend to mutter a prayer. She could not fathom the root of the problem. That night she would fall asleep counting rosary beads and the evil eye and I would lie in bed, its bees swarm buzzing violence keeping me awake.

v.

Every elder in my family dreams of the dead and they’re careful to appease them through rites of requital: paying a priest for a prayer, keeping grave lamps always alight and bringing fresh flowers to replace rotten ones. I have tried to escape these portents of death in vain.

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Here I am, alive without escape, willingly shaped into a psychopomp, carrying phantom limbs of long-lost feelings.

vi.

Legend tells that the entrance to the Underworld hides in a park in a provincial town, under the ruins of a temple surrounded by poplar trees. There, Spring came and went from half of a life to the other, bringing the world back from Death with her. It's not unfamiliar to me, this switch between states of being. Has it been too long? If I were to open my door and let you look at me, would I disappear? Turn away, just in case.

vii.

All I've ever hoped for was to make myself into an alchemist. To transmute suffering into something beautiful, something useful, something else. Instead, twin scars have bloomed on the insides of my cheeks, the iron taste on my tongue is burial rite golden as I try to chew pain into pieces that are small enough to swallow.

viii.

The swaying of barren branches and perennial green tree crowns, soothes me to near-not-quite sleep every afternoon. I have been waiting for an omen, for the arc of the leaves to speak to me, to beckon me back into the world. I still languish here, aching for an echo of a good tomorrow.

ix.

Outside the window, the sun turns the wet leaves incandescent.

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