Leda’s Daughter

Kara Penn

I was a bird. I hatched from an egg.

My wings were grand. My wings were paper stars glued end to end.

My stars were out of reach and susceptible to water. My paper was pulp and supple.

From a new mold, a version of me with shoulder blades. I wore a gown of wing-like material, down-soft at the neck, a swan white, hip-fitted and approachable. Men desired me, men who shot arrows through the breasts of birds,

breathless with the chase, bleeding birds plunged into water, wet birds retrieved

In the soft, malleable mouths of dogs. I went to the water with purpose.

I came out naked, cold. I emerged wingless. I emerged and made

a dress with what was left.
Becoming Tree

Kara Penn

A stadium of leaves applaud while I walked that path, all gold and the back of gold, branches baring their shimmering guts, slender foliage filtering down.

I was fragile then, counting empty, mapping places where bodies began, failed, released. Cored, the insides out, I held vacant after release of bone, red river, clump. I clutched the soft bodies of my dogs, lifting newborn-like weight and size.

I reassured heart beats through black pads of paws. They burrowed, barked through autumn—becoming path. How did I become tree, throwing wide and out my gold?
Starfish

Kara Penn

Blood-red and lumpy.
Wet, it lay
on your small palm,
not flat
but almost.

The five arms, your
five trembling fingers,
your mouth
a universal O.
The handler

provided facts:
if a starfish
loses an arm,
another will grow
in its place.

Has evolution
failed us?
When we lose
with what
do we replace?
Into the Hands of a God

Kara Penn

From the fifth floor window
of the hospital across the street,
innuendos of light and grief flicker.

Among the conversations
of early diners lining street cafes
a discernible inquiry lifts up
into the hands of a god:

“Does it matter so much
a woman’s guts can be removed
and cradled in waiting arms—
so as to be split, cut, sewn,
stuffed back into the cave of her body
in no particular order,
and she will live?”

Dusk falls shining and wondrous.
Dizzy leaves are stuck among rusted grates
only a sudden flash of rain will sweep loose.

On a hospital’s fifth floor, a person
finds himself regretting humanness, loss.
A secure heart is the only gift of order he’s ever known.

As darkness blankets and hospital lights gleam
frenzied moths, wooed by the iridescent street lamps,
press their bodies against searing bulbs.

Crisp husks float down like languid stars.
Shoveling the Drive

Kara Penn

Unsteady hands twist the milk cap.
Raw with loss. Over-ripe bananas
bruised black, terrorist news

in Mumbai, four days of silence,
our newest attempt at ourselves,
15,000 cells, action-packed and drowned.

The best prediction of who we will be
tomorrow is who we are today. Today
I am me from yesterday minus thousands.

Tomorrow I will morph into something
less. The doorbell rings with laid-off men
carrying shovels. I refuse their help, do it

myself. I lift that snow and toss it. Pile
and push it towards alley and gutter.
Exhaust myself in a half-mile of sidewalk,

a cricket pitch of drive. I keep ten bucks
in my pocket. I hold onto something
for one day longer. Later, we’ll buy

unripe bananas at the store. Two days
from now they’ll be sun-yellow.
I missed the highway exit, turning early.
No semi-trucks blaring by or complicated urban merging. Instead quiet, burnt out backs of commerce—
Nothing clean or manicured. Trash, ripped canvas, leaves—reds, mainly golds.
Water-smoothed stones in their pushed piles, debris swept down in flood. There, in broad open—
belongings: flannel shirts, jeans, blanket, backpack, work boots, bludgeoned cans, cutlery, water jug, teddy bear with bright red bow. Then, the owner, stepping out from shadow, collecting each small comfort.
Kara Penn

Kara Penn lives in Denver, Colorado with her husband, three young daughters, and two dogs. She is the founder and principal consultant of Mission Spark, working with nonprofits, government, and philanthropic foundations to further the missions and social impact of their programs. Kara is the recipient of several competitive U.S.-based fellowships and holds graduate degrees from the University of Chicago and MIT. She co-authored the book Fail Better, which was published by Harvard Business Review Press in 2014, and was selected as one of the best business books of the year by Business Digest. She’s participated as a 30|30 Poet for Tupelo Press, completing 30 poems in 30 days. Her poetry has been published in a variety of journals including Ekphrasis, Rockhurst Review, and the Meadowlands Review.

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