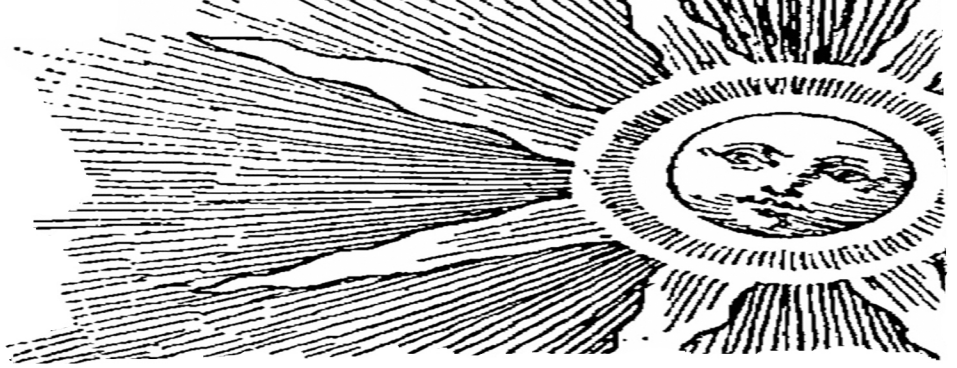


Noelle Armstrong “Skippy Blair”



Associate me with flowers! she says, Not those hideous streaks against the porcelain. Her hips are too narrow for birthing but she keeps doing it. A hip cracking activity. Opening, breaking. She finds out her doctor is in the business of sugar pills. A friend of her husband's but not her friend. Not at all.

Late one night, a knock from the inside. A sea creature suturing its gills. A salty loaf delivered from between her. She names it Bobby. She can only dread the milk suckled slackening. The passive resistance of a quiet dinner.

She is always making frightening noises because she finds his leaping funny. She holds the door open for faraway people just to watch them run. She is a sharp, bitter nettle. Her regard is purifying. You can make a tea out of it.

Her best moments are the ones spent alone, standing in the moving dark beneath the smell of trees. Mmmmmmm. Mineralizing curlicues spurting down the mountain. She has her reference points. Before all this she was a traveler.

Volcano bread? The most disgusting bread she's ever tasted. Served with oily, potent strips of fish. People only ate this because they had to! She prefers a warm rainstorm in Japan. Feet slippered in kangaroo leather. Lanterns in the hills.

The whiskey dwindles into the babysitter's stomach. Drip by drip, little rancid cave. Even the pressure of air is too much for her. She feeds the dog quickly, by scooping fleshy mush from tin. Her swiveled wrist once catching upon the can's jagged edge. Bobby breathes her blood, wristbone to elbow. The porous glass of her teeth. Her jerky moves, her lip-stained glee. Her husky, creamy smell. Bobby's mother, suspicious, fills the whiskey bottle with hair oil, crunched peppercorns, shoe polish. Rushes in with the night to find him: ripples around a stone. Her tongue a grey wad? The mortifying elixir a sign from God? She will tell her friends: I don't know what I thought would happen.

Struck by a sideways asteroid. Trying to steam the ice cream. Humiliated at the grocery store. Her zipper is down. Bobby's teeth are rotting from his face. It's the inner gurgle and the terrible reality of translation. Life is a sour assault. No one will ever know! she laments.

Peering through a deep series of scales. The goal: to be clear-eyed as dinner. To be fresh as the freshly dead. But her brain is taking a nonconsensual tour of fat cells. Dithering in the globby realm. Whirring, blended, squirrely fat with worms slipping in and out. Disgusting! Don't think of worms slipping in and out and now all she can think about is worms slipping in and out!

She helps the weevils out before using the oats. She adds kidney beans to everything. The only person in human history to combine beans and honeydew, stewing stewing until the skins are coated in a thick, greenish goo. Smashed on toast, spoonfed. Bobby eating with a jump of fear in his belly, wiggling the protein.

There is no pigment in Bobby's hair. He appears in photos as a shaping of sand, scrunched on the beach, blending with eye crinkles. His mother is a dancer. She runs her hands about her friends, eyelashes bent toward the sky. She throws her neck back in laughter, casting the blue flavor of loneliness above her head.

Bobby befriends a man named Fritz who lives under a bridge. Fritz ties his soiled blankets into togas and capes. Bobby steals loaves of bread and sugar from the larder, drinks sweet water and toasted bread, sooting it up by the fire with Fritz. One day, the sky begins to darken and lower, turning Fritz into a speckled rag upon the dirt. I fear, he says, That old Fritz cannot absorb the storm. Bobby attempts to stay awake. He is a crescent moon bent over Fritz, willing the water around them. He sends his eyes through the dark but sleep bends his body into the dirt, until sunlight wriggles down his arms like a rush of spiders and he sits up quick. Little distraught right angle under a bridge, legs streaming toward the sea.

A mountain is thicker than we are, she teaches Bobby. They have divided the house into charming things and scary things. Bobby is standing on the velvet couch wearing a floral apron. Nipples crystallizing in his shirt. He is holding a length of silk, a charming thing, and a bit of bleached wood. A palmful of vitamin D. Little sun droplets. His mother is standing next to a stuffed bird holding a jar of moldy olives and Bobby is receding. At first he becomes very small. He is looking better every minute, she thinks (humans love miniatures). Then he becomes a shadow. Then he becomes a stain.

Are we one with the fabric of the universe or contiguous with it? Our bodies might be threaded with a kind of thickness. But no more thick than a rock. There is also this question: what is attached? If we can detach it with a knife, is it any less a(part)? A pinky butterslid onto the floor. An insect lifted from a mountain by a breeze.

