

The natural world

By Anne K. Ream

It was terrifying, of course
but there was no shock to it.
When the knife touches the skin
it feels inevitable as rain.
To say a thing is unimaginable is
an act of imagining.
Words and images fail
but the body knows.
The world had finally caught up with her,
that was all. The worst had ended
the worst had yet to begin.
Violence is ever and always a prelude.

The Buddhists say
stillness
The Christians preach
forgive
Oprah admonishes
Just let go
Even Bob Dylan sings
Don't Look Back.
Do they not see?
We do not cling to the past
it is the past that cleaves to us.

The real lessons to be learned
are in the natural world.
There is no mercy.
The cruelty, the culling
is the point.
You do not overcome
you persevere.
Rain is not cleansing,
it releases the detritus.
Even in the Redwood Forest
everything is ugly when falling.
Dead leaves
bird carcasses
a spider's web
once a glittering mosaic
suspended between
breath and air
now an insect graveyard
made of tired, tangled silk.

Off the coast of Durban
a wall that is a wave races towards her
and sometimes she rides it
but mostly she dives
into a silent muffled place
avoiding the glittering, too-bright chaos above.
It is hallucinogenic
and dreamlike where she is
but she
is not breathing
and she
is not ready to give up on air.

In Glacier she wears
bear bells to scare away the grizzlies.
In a mauling she knows to curl into herself
and play dead
until the bear, bored with her inertia
and satiated from a prior kill,
skulks away.
No one calls this capitulating to the perpetrator.
This is the discipline of survival.

She reaches the Mayan ruins atop Volcán San Pedro
and makes an offering to
a god she does not believe in
before realizing that
coming down from the mountaintop
is its own form of treachery.
Is it that she is tired from the journey upward?
Or is it the fault of the well-worn
ground beneath her feet?

There is a certain quality of sleep
under skies that blanket lonely places.
But at Lake Atitlan
the roosters crow all night.
There is mercy in their music.
Somewhere it is always
the break of dawn.
So she sings a prayer
that is a mantra
that is a wish:
*I can be kinder to the world
Than the world has been to me.*

Anne K. Ream is the founder of The Voices and Faces Project, an award-winning storytelling project, and the author of Lived Through This, her memoir of a multi-country journey spent listening to survivors of gender-based violence. Her writing has been featured in The Washington Post, The New Republic, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan and numerous other publications.

A biweekly series curated by the Chicago Reader and sponsored by the Poetry Foundation. Poem by Nikki Patin, who holds an MFA in creative non-fiction from the University of Southern Maine, is a recipient of a 3Arts Make A Wave award in music, and was recently named one of "30 Writers to Watch" by the Guild Literary Complex. Patin is the community engagement director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and the founder and executive producer of Surviving the Mic, a monthly live podcast and writing workshop series based on the south side of Chicago, where she lives with her six-year-old son, Tobias.

