

BABELDOM

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babeldom: a state of noisy confusion resembling that at Babel

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I

Glasswork

maybe it's 1982. a woman
has just set down the phone
receiver. she looks out at
Portland, the patch light and
cold apartments. through her
window she peers into the
frame of a living room. a man
on a plastic chair, the only
furniture in the room.

what is it you would say, she mutters to
herself.

the man hears only the static
of the space heater. dimly looks
at his suitcase and back at the
plaster wall. he thinks of his
mother, her quiet dorm in a
nursing home. he debates
whether he should call.

by now, he decides, *she will
have fallen asleep*.

the mother has meanwhile
sat quietly in her bed for
an hour. the lights are no
longer on. it is regulation.
she thinks of a house near a
cul-de-sac, its rooms warm with
sleeping bodies. the kitchen light
still glowing. rubbing spices into a
chicken breast, a middle-aged
version of herself stands over
the counter.

she laughs to herself, puncturing the
daydream,

*you kept saying you wanted to
rest.*

the nurses start to enter the room to
calm the woman. other residents
begin to wake.

*how could you have known, she keeps laughing,
how could you have ever known?*

Prayer

this winter premiers with pickaxe and pneumonia. he climbs out of sleep like a window, curls his arms across a naked mattress, keeps his eyes shut and pleads: *return what is mine*. this is how he barterers. this is how each day greets him: with theft.

the weather recast in front of him. It is December and he had no idea. although beneath the overpass he can explain what came before this: roar, arc light, tremor. all the milestones lining the curbside, spoiled and sheer. *be delicate*, he whispers, *they are clues*.

it is two decades prior. there was a surgery removing his tonsils. the boy lie recovering on a sofa watching Aladdin. in his periphery he sees his sister outside, playing flash tag in the dark with the neighborhood children. he turns his head, watches their figures rushing across the backyard.

the man, now seated on a bench, closes his eyes—*return to me, return to me*—the whiteness of his sister's sneakers, even a faded purple shirt she once owned, reappears with such clarity. he hears their thrilled voices, the sharp ring of her prepubescent laughter against the warmth of the television color.

show me a man who knows better than to search for what is lost, to forgo the toil of this prayer: the arch of his back, a galaxy of scrambling fingers.

Men and Their Masters

this our harvest of African rice. ingrown sprout
with wild dirt.

this the jaundice-eyed labor of men in
castoff rags.

this the monsoon that
will arrive in half a week.

the men daring not stare
into that fog walk vigilant in the field row carved for them.

this the wail
of kettle pot its belly blended with fine molasses.

the landlord looking with
boredom at the sky,
remarking to himself

that the storm
will help his crop.

some men insist
that they are chosen
some men swear
they are just being tested.

each goes to bed every night
with this contract

each with pity
for the other.

The Men That Left Town

an airliner descends on a tarmac in Kansas City. the asphalt still gleaming from a rainstorm that ended an hour before it landed. a man in his late thirties looks out from the middle seat towards the window. he thinks of the four men that are waiting inside the arrival terminal. it has been a decade since he left to a bigger city to find there was nothing to find. the plane continues to taxi. he pictures the walk towards the baggage claim, that black carrousel dropping his luggage from a vent, the red string he tied to its handle. or the handle between his fingers as he pulls its weight behind him, the arrival sign glowing over the arch of the exit. maybe he will say—quietly—when the faces of his friends appear, that home is where the heart is. and in his heart, he will mean: the surest way to corrupt a dream is to stalk it

Libretto

the sunlight emerges abruptly from the Manhattan skyline.
it slips into the room, illuminates
the desk that you sit on.

you get up mechanically, leave the apartment then
the building. begin to walk towards the water.

the railing is discolored,
covered in rust and grime. you climb over it. your palms
hold the metal. you look out at the East River.

a crowd gathers around you. some take out their phones and
record the scene, others approach and ask what you are
doing. more people arrive, and by now they are pleading with
you, begging you not to jump.

a man with a thick Brooklyn accent shouts out
that you should want to live.

the water tosses itself.

it looks like the first body you've ever seen.

Spoils

all that was untaken at the Spanish port: drums of vinegar and baitfish. the last fisherman returns to harbor with no catch. it has been two weeks like this. he moors his small boat and gathers the equipment into a gray haversack, rehearses in his mind what he will say to his wife.

the two barrels sit on the boardwalk. the fisherman notices and quietly looks around, kicks gently at the casks. the man is not a thief, has only stolen once before, a few coins from his mother's purse when he was a child; he sobbed his confession four days later. he tells himself these are gifts. or orphans; that they will go to waste. he repeats this chorus to himself as he loads them into his truck, begins the drive home.

his wife asks no questions. she peers into the casks with excitement as he opens them with a crowbar. the odor—sharp and sour—fills the room, the man staring at the spoils of his theft, too ashamed to look at his wife. but she dances around the room, declares the fish can be pickled in vinegar and eaten as a delicacy, muses aloud about recipes, begins boiling water in the kitchen. the man is grateful for his wife's mercy, the display of excitement.

they eat the same meal for dinner and breakfast: pickled fish in its own broth and stale bread. each time, the wife moans in pleasure with every bite, repeating to her husband that this is a delicacy in many villages. he plays along, licks his fingers clean every time. the recital continues until, one day, the man goes out to sea and does not return.

for a month, family and friends and strangers arrive at her door, offering condolences, bringing with them plates of food. the whole house is crammed with their offerings; the woman is forced to stack plates in her bedroom.

in the mornings, she washes her face. before anyone has the chance to knock on her door, she sneaks into the refrigerator, pulls out from behind that ocean of food a single bowl, dips old bread into that sour, rotting broth, moans through her closed mouth.