American Eclipse

A month before the eclipse, I brought you
a pint of blueberries I’d picked wild, leaning out
over the edges of ponds, then giving up
and wading to my thighs along the mucky shoreline.
We stood in your driveway eating berries, then moved to the porch.
Then up the creaky steps, where I hadn’t been in months,
and you held me for a long time.

I said I wanted to see it—the eclipse, the big one,
the first in almost forty years to darken
American soil. Wanted to take a train out
to somewhere like Nebraska, where I could see far.
Maybe, you said.

I bought the special glasses to stare at the sun.
Bought a smartphone, my first.
(Tiny dirt roads without a map. Emojis of suns
and moons, birds and hearts for any reason at all.)
I picked more blueberries, threatened to read you poems.
I wore that dusty purple skirt, with the artfully tattered
hem. A pow-wow came to town and I bought you a blue stone,
the same kind you’d just lost, though I didn’t know this.

You came to visit me in my parents’ house while they lolled on the beach
for the first time in years. Curry with handfuls of basil from the garden,
the tortoiseshell cat on your feet when we woke, till my mother
broke her foot in that tourist town
and they came home early.

I didn’t go see the eclipse. Train tickets were long gone. Everyone,
apparently, was packing their bags for the *path of totality*—
staring at the sky, a thing to be planned.
The drive would take days, and no one wanted to come.

Besides, you’d already changed your mind again, nothing
I didn’t see coming, but still—my sky shifted and darkened
all on its own.
Harvest

Three days after Election Day, I crack an egg into a bowl. It breaks red. I gasp—the golden yolk in a pool of bright red whites, a bloody sunrise. I show it to everyone; we wonder what went wrong.

My bartender tells me that people who usually get one drink are getting two. I order a third, reach for the *New York Times*. The moon leans closer to Earth than it has in sixty-eight years.

It is then I learn to throw myself into icy autumn streams. To meld with snowmelt, pitch downhill, cut through shadows that have slid into place. I don’t know if it’s possible to inoculate oneself against winter. If I’m trying to feel more or less. Only, it seems important to go past what is reasonable, to learn how each time I strip down, wade in, it gets easier; how after, the skin tingles and burns—a stubborn kind of warmth rising.
Wreck of the Michigan: An Inquiry

—with thanks to Ginger Strand

In 1827, to attract tourists, hotel owners in Niagara Falls loaded up the schooner Michigan with wild animals and sent it over the Falls; as many as 20,000 people came to see the grand spectacle.

You set off on your horse in search of the cargo you won’t quite find: the most ferocious beasts of nature—panthers, wildcats, wolves. Easy enough to shoot some, but you need them alive. You peer after shadows and snapped twigs, feeling watched. The New World is still new, the wilderness a dense green belt around Niagara, inscrutable. Did you curse the folly of your mission? Question this need to touch, to prove?

~

Was it like heaving a branch into rapids—its bumpy progress downriver oddly fascinating? Like dropping a bright leaf off a bridge then running to the other side to see if it appears?

~

I keep dreaming I can touch the feral cat who lives in our house. We have caught her, coaxed her, made her love cushions, windowsills, treats from our hands, but her eyes gleam wild when you get too close. In my dreams her fur, the color of bark and leaves, is soft, and she never runs. Was it like that?

~

Was it the hypnotic churn of whitewater, its glassy sinews wrapping and wending over rock? To see how your own bones might crush? Maddening, how you could saunter to the brink of wildness but no farther. That white, cold power—the only place you couldn’t go.

~
Nine years old, at a Plymouth Plantation schoolhouse:
on the ledge below the chalkboard, I find a small blue egg.
No one looking, I pick it up, test it between thumb
and forefinger—part of the display,
like everything else, I think.

You thought you couldn’t scratch
the wildness of this continent, thought surely
the creatures would swim to shore, shake themselves off,
slip back into shadow, invigorated by the plunge.
Of course I squeezed until my blue egg shattered,
real after all. Ashamed, surprised and not surprised,
I put it down, wiped my hands off, hoped no one
would see. Was it like that?—the new world more real,
more fragile than you ever imagined, its yolk
all sticky on your fingers?
a black bear finds my bird feeder, 
bends the metal trellis it hangs on 
down to the ground until the feeder bursts free 
and spills its dark, rich prize.

This has happened many times.

Sometimes, I hear it from not yet sleep 
through summer's open window, 
the telltale thud and clamor of metal, 
because I've forgotten to take it in 
or grown complacent, pushing my luck. 
Usually the bear runs off at clapping or Hey! 
or the sound of the heavy door sliding open. 
I dash out and bring the pieces in, dented but sturdy, to salvage what I had forgotten 
to tend to.

But now, it is January.

A bear is supposed to be 
an afterthought 
curled in the warm, dark earth, 
un-fed and un-craving, hunger 
a distant sensation.

But this morning, the old wreckage. 
Tracks in the snow and the birds confused, 
picking at the ground. It always feels personal, 
this ransacking. A violation, an invasion, 
though I know the bear is just smart, and hungry, 
and means nothing.

I said they usually scare away. 
There was one that didn’t. It lingered 
at the edge of the porchlight and leered. 
I clapped and barked get out! like I meant it, 
while trying not to wake the neighbors. 
It was big and shaggy and unafraid. 
It kept coming back and wasn’t leaving
till satisfied. I remember how it glared at me, how we both felt my power slip away like a joke.
eclipse (moon)

Going, it was a reddish haze, 
the moon full, its brief death 
splendid. Slipping back 
the white core is clean and sharp. 
We are all of us eaten away 
by shadows. Outside, light parses 
and splinters and I wait and wait 
for you to call, quench this moon- 
hard worry. Because last night 
I dreamt of whales beaching themselves, 
looking for a way in, some river 
that didn’t exist, and you, stepping off 
some indefinable edge, and I shuddered 
awake. Because the earth is so 
staggering and wide that even 
its shadow could stun you, 
slide over you by degrees, 
steal you from yourself.