

Alice Friman

Lesson from Iceland

When icebergs calve from a glacier
they're born blue. Blue as the curse
of Odin's eye. For this is ice
country and silver-blue its mark.

What can I take away from this place
where every frost-stiffened forest
has been cut down, and all that's left
belongs to the wind?

I pocket a stone
from a black-sand beach where a raging
Atlantic spits and hammers at the land
as if it didn't want it — or me — anymore.

Let this stone be a rune stone
rich with telling. A black witness
worn smooth by its argument with the sea.
Let it speak in silence: stone speech
straight from the volcano's mouth
of a place where defiance means virtue,
and persistence beauty.

Where icepacks
overflow their stingy summer
to let down, like an old Rapunzel,
waterfalls of silver hair. Where gangs
of wild swan commandeer the coves,
and masses of wind-slapped buttercups
born to this thin soil, grip down, lift
their chins to the sun and hang on.

Stuck

Yesterday in traffic I watched
a woman's hand gesturing
out her car window to the lilt
of her conversation, the hand
turning this way and that,
inviting attention by the wink
of a gold ring, each finger
speaking not words but
the music beneath words,
the hand becoming a stand-in
for its owner, adorable and
expressive, the fingers short,
earnest as a child's, sometimes
punctuating the air or stopped
to cup the wind then starting again,
playing arpeggios on an invisible
keyboard, pinkie for a grace note,

and though there was no sound
I swore I heard, like the deaf,
a music to dance to, here
in the middle of this town,
the middle of the state, in the
middle of America, and I wanted
to poke my arm out the window
to finger the air, plunk out
my own tune if only to imagine
a connection — a duet, maybe
a fugue or a great oratorio
like the end of Beethoven's 9th
when all the voices come together
to rise in an blaze of glory
as if there were no such thing
as rush-hour traffic or talking
to myself in a blue, blue car.

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Postmarked Georgia

When you woke this morning
you were not beside me
for I've taken our embrace away,
we who have held on so tight
for twenty years. I have gone
to this strange house to be alone.

Outside my window, a magnolia —
not the Japanese kind that looks
like a fairy tree, but that leathery
green witness that takes root
here in the red soil of the south.
So big with history and thick
with thinking about itself,
it bristles around an interior,
hiding a past that worships
its own dark shadow. Sometimes
in the hours before twilight,
I think it mocks me — here,
there, a wink of white blossom,
shameless and blowsy in the heat.
But come morning, the message
is only twitter.

 The experts
say bird song is territorial.
I don't believe it. I don't believe
in many things: that the old gods
have fled, walking away leaving
not a footprint to follow; that glory
isn't glory, here, under our every step;
that you don't love me anymore.