

Hand-Me-Down

Erin M. Bertram

Everything that once shook does, in memory, still. I nod along on my green balcony with the *Dracaena* once owned by a dead man I never met as it jerks & sways in the crosswind. He'd tended to the plant the way a good mother tends to her young; it's apparent in the firmness of the leaves, which I handle regularly. Gently.

I love him for this, the stranger, though the palm, for its poison, could take my Norwegian Forest Cat in less than an hour. He's dropped anchor in my heart, sways from chamber to chamber with the tide. Later, his dinghy will heave out into the wide sea, & I have decided he will live. He & his frail craft will return in a single piece.

On my green balcony painted fierce & shoddy & therefore somehow more human, my light it dwindles, each windfall fanning wildly its lemon-scented flame. They're sandbagging upriver, banks swollen with bilge. Fluid dynamics where dry rot should be. Wet a state of mind. I feel guilty praying for rain but do it anyway, eager for its balming slip. Storms, since I was wee, have stunned me still.

The stranger was Catholic, my mother says. He had a wife &, when she left the earth, he withered, grew into a recluse. When the sun shows no sign of ruin, squirrels climb three flights to gnaw the palm's circuitous roots, & dirt scatters out all angles in a halo of sweet decay. What does it mean to say there is no center. When it rains, each palm frond licks skyward like an avid tongue.

You Will Never Get Used to It

Erin M. Bertram

Five days into Equinox, already a full moon, a room full of books. Tangerine walls. In the center, a tall glass votive bearing the name & Westernized likeness of St. Anthony, patron saint of lost things.

And I have been lost lately.

One summer, outside the heavy wooden doors of Chartres cathedral, I reached my hand into a crowd of bushes for an abandoned calfskin wallet carrying a pair of dried Band-Aids & a tiny silver charm of St. Anthony. On impulse, I gave the wallet to a friend, kept the miniature saint for myself.

The irony isn't lost on me.

At evensong, the bells of the neighborhood church loll their clapper tongues back & forth for God or whatever it is they find particularly beautiful & true that day. The music closes its wide open mouth, ceases its choral swell.

Find me in that orange room.

My god is a torn almanac.

A passenger train skirting wide arcs of fallow plain.

An apple core.

A hotel bed.

Pigeons praying together on telephone lines gone slack along country roads.

The body performs its many functions, distills to the essence of itself.

I've stacked my phone books in descending year order near the door. Kept a tally of every time my thoughts enter the sullied night. Here, there's no confessional, because every moment presents that wide-mouthed opportunity.

I've wandered the long hallways of loss, offered up my tattered days to compensate for all the times I stood before a yawning window & went missing.

Sometimes it gets so quiet, I can't make out the shape of my own face.