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Drought

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Sherwin Bitsui

DROUGHT

1.

More drought says the old woman digging roots in the arroyo as the sun becomes a spiral trail marked on a sandstone cliff that is now
a memory to the Maya.

A gathering of birds decides paths and rearranges footsteps
forming the scribble of branches and electric wires emerging from a cloud of red dust.

Where am I when I follow the satellite east?
Does the sun know that a rock soaks in a bowl of rice somewhere on the other side of my palm?
Does the sky recognize its feet when it is covered with light bulbs instead of the eggs of red ants?

A child climbs the blue ladder that has just appeared in his dream;
his mother then wraps a clock with a white sheet and listens to its slow pulse.

Two moths shake their fist at a young boy who unplugged his father's reading lamp,
a newspaper then makes the sound of autumn,
a silver horse snorts—
the dark windows remind him of his master's eyes.
The shadows of crushed grapes.

2.

I place a jar of teeth in the sun
so we can watch leaves grow;
after all, isn't calcium the color of our books
when we think of a cat purring over a bowl of milk?

A pale lipped thespian slows his breath, crosses his eyes and finds a melted coin in a bowl
of rice.

Will the person in the car approaching at high speed
slow down long enough to see that the coin was made in 1979?

A dog in the approaching pick-up truck licks his paws,
fleas bite into our umbrellas,
and we find lightning bolts held between lovers who share the same clan
in two paint strokes on unstretched canvas.

Cinder blocks throb under our feet when we swallow fish-hooks.
A church empties and eels are discovered swimming underneath the floorboards.

Train engines stutter to a stop.

A priest sleeps on a coat hanger
and dreams of feathered feet wrapped in stirrups floating through the eye of a
needle.

3.

The noose in my dream becomes a deer and shakes dust from its eyelids, it wants to cry for
rain,
but we are keeping the rain in styrofoam boxes at the bus station.

My grandmother was out there shaking a stick at the coal miners.

That night she cried black tears and wove her hair onto a visiting night owl.

Juniper roots surface in the dishwater.

When one dreams of a mouth covered in white chalk
speaking only in English

it is a voice that wants to be cut free from a country whose veins swim with axes and
scissors.

4.

Tonight

the beginning of the end.

I singe the nerves of a camera lens smooth

because it captures rain which does not enter from the east.

I dream of lizards and bulls and watch a silver moth penetrate the window screen.

How do we remove our thumbprints from fences,

when axes are left to grow under the sun in a bucket of water?

When the corn roaster goes to town grinding his teeth,
and his wife discovers a miniature railroad curling in and around her pelvis?
Will he then run his fingers down the length of his gun,
imagining a cosmonaut brushing his teeth in zero gravity?

5.

Each day
the city grows an inch taller,
and children in her streets draw stares from planes dipping into low altitude.
Do the pilots see the buttons their teachers have sewn onto their ears?

Listen, the gravediggers unfold the earth's bandages
and remove vacuum cleaners filled with killed pottery and broken arrowheads.

A cyclone curls around my fist when I approach city limits.
A boat is released from land
covered with snails licking rust and salt.

We anchor our cars to a bundle of prayer feathers.
A train slides underneath the parasol of a woman beading her skin cells to the curved
asphalt,
sensing that we have finally listened to her
and are now strolling our televisions out the front door,
past the recently divorced mailman
and into the supermarket
saying we want our teeth back
our fingers smell of wet ash.

6.

I turn away.
I must not look at the sweat beads of the snorting horse
or I will dream of being a wingless bird
lapping at the reflection of clouds in a rain puddle
left in the summer sun,
shaking my beak at the mercury rising in the thermometer.

A child swallows water and does not wake.
Mother then rubs a book over his moist back
“Read this
understand their language,
or sleep in a bottle of broken nails for the rest of your life!”

The night sinks from my eyes;
mud men wash the earth from their knees;
a gate key is lifted from the gate keeper
who bleaches his skin with soda and pulls the doormat
from the fishbowl’s gravitational pull.

We descend into our basements
searching the dark for the wet noses of our mothers
but we find pencils and postage stamps instead—
no paper, no address book.
So we begin sifting through the ash of burnt hooves in a field of rust,
but find only broken glass, coat hangers, and the shoes of a dying priest.