



POETRY | SUMMER 2021

Fragments from a prayer, a dream, or something else

By **Cambray Smith**

I. Intro, during which I try to set the scene:

Dear God,
I am so small.
That's all I can think to say right now,
besides mentioning my dream,
the one where I slept on cookie cutters.
My abdomen couldn't relax without star-shapes being punched through me.

I will try again.
God,
May I cultivate an adequate amount of concern
—*teach us to care and not to care*—
for this world, for the people around me, for my fluttering little self, for the beyond.
I know I am limited, so I aim at adequate,
but if you think I can handle more, I'll try to accept.
There's no use in lying, I suppose.

While we're at it,
please have mercy on my grand ambitions,
the ones that will turn to dust someday,
and (please) don't laugh at my plans too much,
because every once in a while, I think I have a good idea.

(Sometimes I think everything in the universe might be ridiculous,
Excluding only the golden trees at dawn.)

II. Another dream:

Why did I see those scenes the other night?
The cutting in the lab,
and in this haunted version,
a take-home project: carving a human head.
They said it was for science, but I heard the whispers,
felt the blood on my hands.
I tried to escape, but I have the memory.
Will this one day help me heal?

(Knowing I participated in this—what am I supposed to do with that weight?)

All the same, I don't regret it;
I am always the first student ready to cut.
Forgive me this, if forgiveness is needed,
and, God, please consider continuing to lease me my curiosity.
I have not fully repented yet.

III. A transition of sorts:

We sometimes ask for broken hearts,
to feel what you feel.
I am not sure I want all that.
The injustice of it all is too much for me,
and I am doubtful about my capacity for action on these topics.
(How loud fear feels.)
Brothers and sisters remain entangled,
and I look on.
What is my greatest crime?
Who I am, what I do, or what I fail to do?
Is this perceived guilt real?
Sometimes I don't think so, but then I look inside myself.
I see the shadows,
I know the depths.
Do we all come to the same conclusion?
Of what do our souls consist?

Even those of us with organs full of doubt
still try to pray.

Bless my sister and my brother,
my sibling and their lovers.
May we all be free, someday,
threaded together by the words under the words.

IV. On living in a pandemic at the edge of the Anthropocene:

They say the world is turning against us,
that the fire and floods are here.
I think the earth might be right to expel us.
Can these bones still dance?
Doubtful, although some make an attempt.
Should I try?
I'm ambivalent in this moment.

We are ill, so ill,
and the machines are not coordinated to fix it.
Death-nets are being stitched while the people argue on.
Is use of the term "despair" always melodrama?

I am tired of all words losing their meanings,
of concepts becoming anemic and brittle.
These hollow names do not touch what is real.
Hearing these not-quite-right words hurts me—
a stab-ache in my chest—
I grow old, then numb, and eventually dumb.

Bless the artist, Mother, who makes beautiful things from ashes,
who conjures life from letters and color and light,
and yes, even from shadows.

May I make one true thing in my life.

V. Moving forward:

I'm reminded that this is (still) supposed to be a prayer.
I ask: does courage still exist?
If so, I would like some of that, please,
and also eyes that see and arms that reach.
I am sorry if I demand too much,
I know not what to do with myself, nor how to constrain, shape or hold hope.

Since the beginning of mind,
wise ones have recommended banishing the pesky voice within.
I would also like to do that, I think,
to disappear.
Goodbye, ego—down the drain you go.
Goodbye words, and books, and feelings for friends,
goodbye ideas, good and bad,
goodbye conversations in my head, goodbye jokes and horror,
goodbye dialogue, goodbye impressions and interiority,
goodbye faith and pathology, brain, body, and mind.
Goodbye, goodbye, and good riddance to it all.
Please subsume me into something larger now.

Being a self is hard.

VI. Departure:

I turn off the lights in the warm water;
I find solace in places where there are no words
(any word I know—
any term that's familiar—
dulls this).
I feel it all, and also nothing.
It lasts a moment, or maybe longer, or maybe never happens.
What does it mean to capture, to rapture? Are these related?

Where do we go when we're not at home?

VII. Re-arrival:

Oh, to see visions of a flourishing earth.
Oh, to hope, even amidst fear.

My skepticism erodes for the moment,
and I think we can still maybe do it,
figure it out, even if for just a little bit, even if it will require some disappearing.

I cannot rid myself of stubborn striving toward the sun.
I put a stake in the ground. The sign reads:

Accepting all help: The practical and the mysterious, the created and that which generates, the temporal and the enduring, the silly and the small. We do not deserve to discriminate, to discern, to decide; to reject newness or oldness; to say what is lost or what is found. We do not know anything.

Those who say they know much are fools indeed.

Will we hear something?
Will we listen?

I am confident that I've never heard anything.
I am confident that I thrice heard an utterance—soft, still, serene.

Author's note:

This poem uses a line—"teach us to care and not to care"—from T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" in Part I. The concept of "the words under the words" in Part III is borrowed from Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem of the same name.

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