

Primal Force

(an exorcism)

by Kathleen Quillian

Somewhere there's a storm learning your name.
If you are one of the dispossessed.
The immigrant who disappears into a crooked system,
The indigenous who subsist on torn paper and rage,
The poor and working class
Who eat concrete for breakfast.

Most days the sky opens like a split lip
And everything underneath it smells like iron,
Like something ancient just woke up,
And sniffs the air
In anticipation of its next meal.

It's not always noticeable
the moment the eyes shift—
And the target becomes prey.
But the air leaves the room
In an instant
In the sharp breath drawn before the first bite.

I've seen charm up close.
It has bad teeth
And stains on its shirt collar.
I've also seen indifference.
Sequestered under large-brimmed hats.
Eyes sheltered from view
And ears tuned out from
The soft, wet sound of power
And the crunching of brittle bones.

There are wolves in the break room.
Smiling, always smiling,
Like they didn't just gnaw through someone
On the way down.

The interns carry their trauma in borrowed handbags.
Their shoes clicking code
As they make their way out of the building.
Beware, beware, beware.

Power is an elevator
That only goes up
If you have the right code.
And it smells
Like expensive soap
And immunity.
Power uses the word "we"
And means "not you."

The dispossessed though,
They know the angles of every room.
They memorize the resonance of footsteps,
The duration of glances.
And learn to read silence
Like scripture.

The people in Central
Who operate the machinery,
Throw around words like “strength” and “resilience”
In their mandatory trainings.
And I wonder
If they’ve ever pulled a calf
From its mother in a snowstorm,
If they’ve ever bled into their own gloves
And kept on digging.
What do they know about strength, really?
What do they know about resilience?

Resilience
Is what you see in the eyes
Of girls who’ve been taught to smile
Instead of speak,
It’s what you see
In the textbook margins of trans kids
who draw dragons with bloody teeth
Next to pictures of Great White Men.
It’s the slow twist of root under sidewalks,
The fox slipping past your security camera
Like it owns the place—
Because it does.

Every time the sun rises
Over this unleveled earth,
It touches everyone
With the same indifference.
And maybe that should be the start of things.
We should learn from the light.
How to show up,
How to witness,
How to give without fear or favor.

Because nature has a way of fighting back without force.
And it will eat
Your five-bedroom legacy
In vines and rust
If you’re not paying attention.