

Boys on stilts

It's not what you'd expect to see
in a sad Havana barrio. Not like
the man with his crate of limes,
laundry drying in the noonday heat

from a second story porch or the red-
lipped woman leaning against crumbled
brick, flicking her cigarette as you pass
by, camera in hand. Even the dog lying

dead in the road does not surprise you,
the fifth you've seen since arriving. No
cars speeding by, just the echo of a belly
that's been empty too long and the buzz

of flies and their figure eights close by.
You are tired of tragic beauty. Then
the boys on stilts rise up from nowhere,
gaunt bodies that teeter across rubbled

streets, the clack of wood against stone
when they fall and let loose the beams
that make them tall. Clacking and
laughter, it is hope housed in metaphor,

these three young boys balanced on
skinny timbers with nails driven into
wedges to hold them high against
Cuba's open sky. Their skin ripples,

the sweat is dewy on their angular
faces. Everything seems possible.
Sometimes they tumble into me,
my crouched photo-taking position

toppling over along with them, all of us
giggling at the game of it all. But soon
it becomes impossible to ignore the one
who is trying so hard, his face

strained against the sway that will send
his body downward. *La Lucha*, I think,
slang my Cuban friend taught me the morning
before, meaning "the fight." The fun

now gone, he struggles to prove himself,
be still on stilts that need movement
in order to maintain their balance. He
keeps falling out of my frame, the furrows

on his brow deepening, his small-
boy body slumping each time he bends
to pick up the beams of wood. Soon
they are all falling out of my frame,

none of them laughing, none of them
knowing, that before I came, they were
glorious metaphor for everything
we ourselves would like to be.

Our fathers

After Sherman Alexie's Smoke Signals

This is a poem for my father, who hears voices. A poem
for my second father, smelling of gasoline. And one for the third,
or more precisely, for the hole in his foot where he shot himself
in a mock robbery. For the fourth father, a prayer for me to find

something, anything, to say about him that is poetic or prayer-like.
This is also a poem for the father who combs his young daughter's hair
smooth with a perfect side part. A poem for the father who measures
radiation and scratches on warheads, eats salt. It is also a prayer

for the father who stacks cases of black market air conditioners and caged
roosters in his garage in Miami, circa 1961. A poem for the same father,
in the same garage, baby food jars lining shelves, lids nailed to wood,
filled neatly with screws, bolts and eyehooks. Poems and prayers for the father

who gathers tidal currents, knits the bones of an old woman back together
again; for the father who gets bit by mosquitoes for a living, collecting
alligator heads on the side; for the father putting the worm on the hook
so the girl doesn't have to. For the fathers who remember belt buckles,

and for the father who forgets he has a father, a prayer. For the father
who tells stories of Vietnam, how his platoon was shot dead in their sleep,
how they missed him, a prayer. For the father smoking cigarettes, burning
a hole in the arm of the chair while falling asleep, many prayers. Prayers

for the father who takes the family cat to the edge of a field in the country because it won't stop pissing on the rug; for the father who unloads a truck packed madly before a hurricane; for the father tucking his son in after fetching a glass of water; for the father who leaves his son standing in the driveway

with a 67 Pinto on blocks, needing a new carburetor, returning only when the son wins the lottery. For the father with no father, born of immaculate conception, no prayers needed. The father with several fathers, born of a hopeless romantic with a knack for hustlers and truck drivers, hope and a prayer.

The father who helps his son paint his bedroom black, the father whose father lost his job in the Great Depression but still sings Ragtime to babies, his babies—poems and prayers. For a possibly fictitious father who gets sent to Cuba after a bad case of malaria and electric shock treatment—poems and prayers. This is a prayer

for the father who is too tired to contact his father he hasn't spoken to in twenty years, and also a poem for the same father who takes photographs of lightening bolts over rooftops, sweeps the floor each day, and dreams of great rooms filled with water. This is a prayer for the father who shoots guns at targets and animals

and sometimes people. Definitely a prayer for the father who shoots guns at targets and animals and sometimes people. This is a poem and a prayer for the father predicting weather patterns and watching sound waves in Tibetan singing bowls filled with cornmeal. This is neither a poem nor a prayer for the fathers

reading on toilets, though maybe it's a prayer or a poem for the father who's insatiable collecting habit has him filling his house with things like sock monkeys, chandelier parts and chicken wishbones. For the father hooked up to life support, teeth in a glass by the bed, one last prayer. This is most certainly a poem— and a prayer— for the father

correctly guessing the percentage of the moon's visible disc illumination, and for the fathers, under that moon, pacing the checkered hallways, waiting for children to be born. This is a prayer for my father, who hears voices. This is a prayer for all of our fathers. Through the gritty or glittery glare, this is a prayer.

Toss and Catch

Look at the way she hangs in the sky above him,
a buoyant point tossed and suspended atop the sturdy
upward stretch of his torso, a small rain of sea

trickling from her wet baby body and polka-dotted swimsuit.
Her joy is unmistakable. The concentration of her father
as he waits to catch her before she hits the water—palpable,

though you can barely make out his face. Waist deep
in a muddy sea, his reflection is a blur on the surface.
Also missing from this picture is my own salt-

stung heart, am best left behind
the lens to capture these fragments and cling to them
like a life raft, later print, frame and arrange them to

remind me that happiness does, in fact, have its place in our life together.
What you focus on will grow itself into perspective, they say.
Like how, behind them, the day is a striking, clear blue, save

a few clouds that mottle the sky. See how a bird flies towards them?
But then what do you make of the pier, or rather, what's left of it, how it
spikes out of the water in the distance? And the horizon line—

even the horizon line is slightly crooked. I did not shoot
the image that came later, the one where his grip
on her slips. Where she goes under, swallows the sea,

baptized into the reality that every moment of joy
has its counterpoint. She cried some, but soon enough,
our girl is airborne again, and though her small hands

don't quite let go of his wrists, she lets herself be thrown,
be caught, continues to love the shimmering throttle
as she tumbles through air, gravity repeatedly pulling her back

towards his arms, which stay open and ready, wait to catch her
and everything in her life that goes with it, which, despite my perpetual bent
towards longing and loneliness, I learn, will always include me.