

New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”



FARMER OF ROCKS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Cactus Tuna

A semi-sweet taste
of watered-down nectar
bleeds out from the prickly
pear nestled
 on a crown of thorns.

In the desert you once
sneered over rifle sights
at the farmers drawing

rakes over the sun-
baked ground, and now,
as atonement
you're a farmer of rocks
and what comes with them.

Stained fingers tear through
leathery skin. Sometimes you
forget you're standing
alone in a cactus patch
red trickling down.

Grace is not this –
living on what grows where
nothing had a right to grow,
seeds fine as sand
hide between teeth.

And crows, refusing to starve,
land unafraid, pick through
the rinds, eat, take flight
scatter seeds on rocky places
and among thorns

even on tops of walls,
and maybe it's resilience
or spite
something finds purchase here.

We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays.

The mystery is often in the gaze of men
and women waiting for the sky to speak.

We used to spend days in the desert
waiting until the sky whistled and then
we wished we hadn't.

Someone's former
home, now sharp edges of cinderblock
cut upward through our soles. We kept
walking through the desert; everything
radiated, catching us in the crossfire.

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We spend days in the Hill country
beneath a blistering sun, a clean sky,
traces of blue that have faded,
burnt off but for the edges by noon.

'Say something,' we shout in our minds,
looking up as if it's God. Eventually
the sky speaks in the language of wind,
fear fills our hearts. Still, we knew
it would be this bad, yet wanted so much
to feel something – until the moment we did.

Run in Reverse

In dreams the ball bearings and nails and flame
are sucked backwards out of the truck, along
with the screams, and the shrapnel enters
The IED, a makeshift paint can half buried in sand.

The boy's face heals, his body slides back
into the passenger seat and after a momentary
glare at this pained country he turns and smiles
at the driver. It's a calm hundred-degree morning
and the Baghdad street is filled with shoppers
carrying bags, laffa bread, eggplants poking
out the top, Turkish vendors serving doner kebab,
their angry looks toward the truck
have softened now and they're joking.

Some days walking with my wife, I turn,
walk backwards just to say something silly.
It's that moment that seems truest. She is
looking at what's to come just beyond my shoulder,
no regrets about the past, and I'm trying to hold
on to what we left, moving against my will
into the future blind, the scene I'm trying
to make sense of, moving farther away.