

Quicksand Beach

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Published by Seren

Extract

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Mediterraneo

Lunch at the Italian with Mum
so proud of my belly
she's catching eyes with everyone
and ordering too much food.
The waiter predicts my date.
The maitre d' says you will be a girl
and soon, before I know it, all grown up
and having a baby of your own
and it will be my turn to pay
and if we come back then he promises
dessert for free. Mum grins expectantly
as I re-read the menu and your left heel
kicks twice for chocolate mousse.

D i a m o n d s

Let's not have an argument this year
about my birthday. You know what I want
because you always ask and always spoil
it by then not giving me diamonds,
choosing some less extravagant present
to symbolise the extent of your love -

orchids that die, a hat I'll only love
while it's in fashion, useful shoes. Each year
I try my best to want the very present
you wanted to give when really I want
you to want to give me diamonds
which stay in style and never spoil.

Where I come from it's traditional to spoil
the birthday girl, indulge her like a loved
child whether you disapprove of diamonds
dug up and traded year after year
to finance wars only despots could want
instead of food for those they represent

or not. But you seem to resent present
giving. Maybe my expectation spoils
spontaneity and makes you want
not to give anything, believing love
should be its own reward. Maybe the year
I manage not to mention diamonds,

even in jest, I'll get them: diamonds
you've waited a decade to present,
mine all along but for the asking, years
of petulance now threatening to spoil
the moment I accept your token of love,
its leather box leaving me nothing to want.

Or maybe you're right: I don't know what I want
and only out of spite say diamonds,
wanting the argument, a measure of love
superior to any birthday present.
But let's not have an argument and spoil
this celebration of my thirtieth year,

my birthday. Next year for sure I'll want
you to spoil me, please, with diamonds
but for the present I'll make do with love.

Eighteenth

There was a craze for fountain pens.
Fat lacquered ones, walnut-effect, gold-nibbed,
unlocked and lifted, two-handed,
from spot-lit glass cabinets and carried over plush
by silent nail-varnished assistants
to the desk where you and your mum or dad
would have been waiting almost eighteen years,
not talking much, you worrying because the pen
you liked best was also the most expensive.
We kept their pass-the-parcel packaging,
treasured for months the slippery, important plastic bag,
the velvety plump moulded to fit our pen alone,
room underneath for two free cartridges
and an instruction manual in fourteen languages, ours first,
the twelve-month guarantee, as if a pen could break down,
when what we liked best was its low-tech simplicity,
that we could want a thing invented centuries before,
that it could symbolise our coming of age.
We scribbled in sepia, wrote everyone cheques
for a million hazelnuts. On birthdays
we'd crowd into the library at lunch
and watch the tip of a new pen touch its first white sheet,
the hand behind solemn and quivering, unsure
whether to doodle or draw or let the nib
try for itself, licking the page in thirsty blue-black stripes
as if it knew this was the end of freedom
and that soon it would have twisted to accommodate
each hesitation, dot and loop, its every molecule
straining with something like love as I leaned in,
imagining a future shaped by neat italics
where whatever I wanted I need only write it down.

Paradise

It's a rich man's world and yesterday
I married him despite what mother said
about love, the only luxury
I never wanted to afford. Instead
the Caribbean, islands to swim from
and my own solicitous white sand
he promises. He knows about women
and sulphur. I can have all of Iceland.
Regular sunsets. The tailfeather
from a bird of paradise on the path
to the bungalow where fairweather
wives live with the poolboy. Already my heart
wishes for less. A pomegranate seed
with the light in it is happiness.
Jaguars asleep on the stairway sneeze
if I so much as think of his caress.

The Island-designing Competition

starts with two blank sheets and a box of pencils
sharpened by Dad with a carving-knife.
We hunch at the table, squiggling headlands,
inlets, estuaries, then filling in the ground between
with swamps and volcanoes, rainforest, glaciers, a ski-resort.
It has to be imaginative and plausible,
needs water, for instance, dungeons and schools
and villages with names like Hiccupbottom, Lurch,
Thornton-le-Spam. By lunch, my brother
has moved on to climate: his palm trees lean north,
his capital springs shanties in the aftermath
of last year's hurricane, and every bus-stop
harbours a scarlet dhow – for when there are floods,
his key explains. *Any excuse to draw a boat,*
I mutter, snatching the red for my stick men,
each to represent one hundred votes.
They stand in public squares demanding a recount
as the President mouths his acceptance speech
and such is the confusion no one sees
my brother's auxiliary fleet
tack past the mustard and salt and strawberry jam
and on through international waters,
gathering, now, in battle formation
half a league south of Quicksand Beach.