

“In Jezero Crater” and Three Other Poems

Kate Gaskin

**In Jezero Crater**

Whatever was there has gone  
to three and a half billion years  
of dust. On Mars

a rover picks up a rock  
and turns it over  
in a river delta webbed

with dried arteries cauterized  
by the sun. Daughter,  
who lived for only an hour,

I too search for you  
in the most barren places,  
a vein that rolls before

a needle, a dawn that breaks  
dim and drawn. I wish for you  
an emerald canopy,

sapphire water, a world  
where belief is a fact  
that can be held

in my palm like a stone.  
Here on Earth, you disappear  
*star-ash, sun-soot, moon-glow*

while somewhere above  
in the red star of another planet,  
a robot measures

ancient silt into a vial  
for human hands to touch  
with wonder. What do I do now

with all this love?

## Diagnosis in Reverse

First, the witch turning from the door  
made of spiced cake

and sugared almonds. Then the birds  
offering the bread back

to the forest floor, the children  
skipping backwards into the gaunt

yawn of the house as the mother's  
long hunger begins

to soften, her hearth dark with smoke.  
And then a spark,

the children in the back orchard  
eating apricots heavy

with juice. Pale cream in a bowl. A vase  
of primroses. Foxglove stirring

outside the open window. The father  
coming up the summer path, easy

with evening. Hansel humming.  
Fresh bread and long light, long light.

## Snow

That was the winter of two snowfalls—flat stretches  
of dry roadside sedge hard with frost, and then

a slow accumulation of snow falling  
on the steaming streets of Montgomery, Alabama

into potholes, over the roof of the corner store,  
its meat and three buffet wafting fried chicken

and okra with every warm, humid swing  
of the door opening into a frigid December noon.

I had been gone so long, lived in another flat  
city on the edge of a patchwork of prairie

under a July sky, bluest over never-ending  
rows of corn. But what I meant to say about snow

in Alabama is that it came twice that winter,  
unusual, heavy and wet, weighting the camelias

until they bowed to the ground, their thin stalks  
like broken necks. That was my winter of crying

each day on the short trip to my son's kindergarten  
past rows of bougainvillea planted so close to the road

their green fronds brushed the sides of the car  
I had to pry him from after I parked behind the school.

That year we took him to a succession  
of medical offices, each one beiger than the last,

for test after test, while doctors with blank faces  
offered shrugging shoulders and stimulants

and antipsychotics that made him better and then  
suddenly worse. Once, he bit me so hard

I slapped him. This isn't about my son being a little  
shit, or every time he kicked me in the shins,

or how once I had to drag him from a children's  
museum back to the car where he hit me for half

an hour. Understand, this is a child who could barely  
talk, who walked around bleeding and rarely noticed,

who ran from us as soon and as fast as he could  
for the sheer joy of running. If I close my eyes

I can see him in his snowsuit, pulling his sled, the year  
we moved back to Omaha, my husband helping him

build a snow fort so big that, beside it, he seemed  
a tiny red dot in a vast field of white. I'm taking you

forward in time now. I'm showing you he probably  
gets better. But first he got worse, my mother

a social worker—35 years—for the poorest county  
in Alabama, sitting at our kitchen table in Montgomery

saying, *he's the kind of child I removed from homes*  
*he's the kind of child people abuse*, a bright blur

of Vyvanse chewables, drops of Dyanavel, Risperdal.  
But the snow! Two times it snowed that winter

as I staggered to my neighborhood one-screen  
movie theater to sit in the dark and cry

while beautiful men kissed in a sunny Italian villa  
or a former Lakota-Sioux rodeo star cared for

his autistic sister in the Badlands of South Dakota.  
On my walk home, snow burdened

branches of sweet olive, their deep glossy green  
buckling beneath a heavy crust that by morning

was hard and sparkling. Snow is not rare  
in Alabama, but it's novel enough

that when 13 inches fell in 1993 everyone called it  
The Great Blizzard. We didn't have power

for weeks. I was barely older than my son,  
falling and falling in snow that soaked my jeans

as I rolled the body of a snowman and then finished it  
with charcoal briquette eyes, a carrot nose,

my dead grandfather's black fedora. I kept  
the photo my mother took on my bedside table, kissing it

each night, promising myself as soon as I could  
I would leave for good. Even at ten I wanted

less heat, fewer shrub pines, more snow, city lights  
glinting in an icy North I could only imagine

back when I was sure a new place, a new life  
would fix me. It snowed twice that Alabama winter.

In the summer I taught him how to pull stamens  
clear from honeysuckle blossoms, touch the drops

of nectar to his tongue. What does it mean  
to get better? Now, in our yard, he falls backward

into a snowdrift, makes an angel. Listen—  
there are church bells in the distance. A pair

of cedar waxwings tut-tut back and forth  
across holly cupping small pillows of snow.

## Lightning Dragons

It's a terrible thing to say,  
but imagining my son's death  
comes as naturally to me

as watching a cat trot off  
with a bird clenched in its jaws.  
Today, there is a crushed

cedar waxwing in the street,  
its golden tail feathers splayed,  
the red cherry of its chest

popped open like a mouth.  
I found it on my run and thought  
how impossible it is

to be so small, so easily undone.  
This boy of mine runs  
away from me into busy streets.

A museum's noisy crowd  
swallows him whole. At school  
he cannot sit still or listen.

Once, his teacher said he threatened  
another child with the sharp end  
of a pencil. I did not

believe her, but what I believe  
will not keep him safe  
from how others

inevitably perceive him,  
and so I imagine  
what it would be like to lose him

as he tells me about dragons,  
how there are four types:  
sun dragons, moon dragons,

rain dragons, and, his favorite,  
lightning dragons that hatch  
from eggs that erupt

in shocks of electromagnetic  
radiation. See them flying now?  
He points to the night sky,

its feathery moon and stars  
like puncture wounds, while above us  
heat lightning unsettles

the dark.