

CANOEHEAD

HOW I BECAME AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER

When I first met this canoe,
I thought it wanted to be a truck
(it had let water ram it up a rocky slope).

What good is a boat that prefers shore?

When I first put this boat on my back,
I knew then it wanted to be a plane --
not a fighter jet just a simple prop.

What good is a boat that prefers air waves?

When I feel the weight of the word
canoe (so heavy I could not think *truck*
or *plane*), I dread the heft of transport.

What good is a poem that breaks a back?

A river cannot flow how a crow flies.
Boats bob with or without human cargo.
This poet is a landing for words in transit.

RIVER WITH NO WATER IN IT

I run the Salinas River looking for water.
Can't run very fast with a canoe on my back.
Kayaks are sleek. Not my canoe. Stocky,
slow, dependable like a rotting rowboat
shuttling lazy lily-girls in an infamous watercolor
mass produced on mouse pads. My childhood
river is this continent's largest subterranean one:
it swallowed all I was saving for a kayak.

Canoes are arranged by weight, like girls,
and assigned colors. My canoe, Ruddy,
is 50-brick red. She likes to trudge
with me and the other cindergals
who do wind sprints in the dead riverbed
the army owns. A ghost current of boot
camp boys practicing for Nam slows us.
(Speedy obedience a sea of fatigue).

The whistleman, Coach, blows go.
We run, my canoe and me and the other
girls, arranged by height and weight,
to wherever he stands. We're training
for Mars. Space travel new enough
we work toward sending our fitness

our species' finest and fastest
to the nearest waterless red place.

Barks, skiffs, tankards and tugs –
all our ancestors got boats on their backs.
Irrigation and migration the same
mud puddle. Dust bowl drove Oakies
here. Now it's wet backs suffering
dirty work while tourists play kayak
where anchovies used to school.
Labor, arranged by heft, is canned, sold.

My canoe hates whistles (drill sergeant's,
coach's, foreman's). My canoe tells me
if we run fast enough the salt marsh
will swallow so much of me (ankle,
knee, thigh) I'll have to take the boat
off my back and crawl into it. My canoe
says she'll float me to sea. That's when
I pump my arms force my knee to chin.
Up down. Up down. That's when I win.

**"I LIVED IN THE NARROW THROAT OF POETRY,"
CANOEHEAD SAID AS SHE READ**

*I am a woman of letters, says
I am a book woman, says
nobody can close my book, says
nobody can take my book, says
my book encountered beneath the
water, says*

– María Sabina

“I am what I read. I am I am I am,”
said Canoehead as she read. “I am
Canoehead,” she said. “I am
a cyborg of sorts – part boat, part
hymen. My mouth is a boat. My boat
is a book. Nobody can float my boat.
Nobody can sink my book. I am
a cartoon of myself. I am
a symbolic cunt on parade. I am
a poet wanting to know
the weight of the word *canoe*. I am
an athlete in art school. I am
an American outlaw celebrating
the cult of childhood. I am
a sacred vessel. I am a cultural vehicle.
I’m *self as object* in a culture of narcissism.

I'm a woman shape in public space.
I'm a boat-carrying broad. A threat,
I'm a bad woman who can tip any
lovecraft. I'm a clinging good girl
underneath a carapace. I am
an improvization, an intellectual
free-wheel, an Anne Waldman
wannabe that likes danger and loneliness.
I'm a dick and this capsized boat is
a whale of a hull I call Moby."

That's what Canoehead said. Me?
I am none of the above: I am
just another Lori Anderson waiting
for snowmelt to fill my favorite river.

OUR BED NO LONGER A BOAT BUT A BENCH FOR YOU & OUR KNIFE

Who cares where we swam & how
to me each body of water was infested:
dead fish, sharp rocks, runoff and always far
too shallow to dive in. Save once
when a cage of a canoe carried us
across boundaries into open waters –
that was the furthest. That was the arc of us.

Swimming under thunder, you electrified me.
There was danger & it was easy to imagine
earlier inhabitants inhabiting us. We gave
the squat canyons incomprehensible tones:
we had all the water and the depths it came in.
Only the rain could stay. We shored ourselves,
then moved again. You shouting the strokes.

Every demand you made on me, my first dandy,
dissolved: the bogged logs released from the dam.
I float on a gold surface as sun dances this lake.
I climbed the chain link that locked in this shore.
Water owns the world & the stranger is merely
an usher. McBride Lake laughs. Would you really
take our kitchen knife to your throat if I told all?

**"IF YOU LET JULY SLIP AWAY" (Like After Pain) "A
FORMAL FEELING COMES"**

I sweep, stroke of a cold hand,
January snow off the back
off the borrowed canoe that was
our July our long lake.

Otter, eagle, apparition –
the ark of us comes
to a conclusion. You help
unlock the canoe, steady it

on its stern tip so I can slip in
bow under the yoke I solo
the load. Two-seater tipped:
splash – air/craft now, for one.

Knee deep in want for another
open shirt, I sloop up the slope
the street that is our Swan song
to seek public space to reshape

the cunt that is now my silly hat
solid thighs step step marble step
I circle the State Museum
to exhibit my stone butch self.

Architecture, as in “brace
yourself,” balances my labor
with your grief. You lug
the great work of walking away.

I edit you out of the video
forget snow & blue & north lake
let grid, column & arch escalate
the escape. “Punishment?” the limo

driver asks. No, there’s pleasure
in the shape my boat back makes.
In the form, the end is the form –
shoulders blade enough to thrust.

To be carried away one needs
a shell to limit looking back
an armor (amour) that moves
onlookers as if water in my wake.

MEDITATION IN HEAR SPACE

All the new thinking is about body.

In this it resembles all the old thinking.

The concern, for example, that flesh *in* pleasure reduces the quality of a mind *at* work. That the boat between a girl's thighs is temple only to midwives who assist in labor and assure reproductive output.

Or, the other notion that a finger dipped in that boat is art only if pain is inflicted *or* if electronic devices measure cultural buoyancy. "Her hull is a hollow that harbors too much yammering."

Canoehed heard them talk about her last night in a tone she knew as jocular. Because of grief,

she understood their talking that way rendered her
a construction she'd come to oblige. Still, there is
this frozen pond Canoehead remembers:
she was safe and could walk on water, wade
out on the ice as if a snowbird. The crystals
sang beneath her feet *and* ushered light
that felt like flight. Her companion's laugh
was no work at all. It hardly had to do with boats.
Art, we say, is short for artifice. Canoehead knows.
Still I keep for her stories I was told: *where*
deer sleep, *where* the dog was buried, which rock
is the reading rock, which rock knows love-
making. There are days when thinking is

as numinous as flesh. *Body* is a word in transit.

**STITCH AN X IN EACH DAY'S DISH RAG AS A KISS
TO COUNT HOW LONG THIS CURSE LASTS: ONE
BREATH, TWO BREATH, THREE**

Sold child, on her knees brush-in-hand, shoves
more dirt west – the way her mother went.
The way her mother went: mule to the wagon
or war widow happy to be a hole again.
Who knows? Sold child spits her mama's name
to cool Thursday's bucket of lye, spits to float
her sad sad selves 'cross the M-i-s-s-i

I miss you. Send sod from your new roof
to shelter me. I'm building a sand bar
to walk me across this muddy abyss you
put between us. River Man's house is damn
clean 'cause I use his filth as fill
to slow the flow by the whippin' willow.
How many do you mother now in Mormon land?

Soul Song, on her knees brush-in-hand, drives
her mad mad selves deep 'til knuckles buckle
at bucket's bottom, 'til steam rises
off wet welts. Which will is it when
flesh's sting bites back: do not cross the river
for her, Jessie. She dunked us (bucket of lye).
Our hair a brush. Our face all bristle.
She held us under. Just let breath save us.

MOATS

1. Her Ear Early in Servitude

The Mississippi is a snake moat
in front of her she sees as *not yet*
She is eight years old and all is
behind her (the war that swallowed
father the wagons the paddlewheels)

If she falls into it
backs into the surrounding female
the surrogate breasts
the fall is into *simultaneity*

Her earache starts in the heart
(the distance west to her mother's
womb an open-mouthed plain
her arms not wing enough to cross)

This is why she lets her master's wife
funnel the honey comb into her ear
lets the old hag light the hollow
so heat and bees' work suck up
the full weight of words stuck in her

The Mississippi is a snake moat

in front of her she sees as *soon*
she is nine ears old and all is
behind her (the wound that swallowed
mother the fast lash the hot iron)

So she falls into it
backs into the surrounding female
the surrogate breasts
the fall is into *simultaneity*

Air the wick of a hollow candle
a causeway for ear wax to ride
feeds flame in that moment's match
sulfur singing in the nose

Last of mama's work-worn lullaby
frees the hammer at its anvil
until *then is now* and *now is too*
late to mouth the words on tongue

1. Her Mother's Death Bed

The Bitterroot is a rocky moat
beside her she sees as *not yet*
Her mother is eighty years dying
the past of their separation is *before*
Now in her hands ma's head ma's hair

If she falls into it
leans into the sunken female
then nurses the wounded breasts
her leaning is into *simultaneity*

Hearing loss starts in the heart
(the distance from womb to wrong
so-long an open prairie dogging her)
all muted by that first goodbye

This is why she lets the one who fled her
nest in her hands bad ear down
She eases old age onto a boiled onion
so heat and layers of thinning skin soothe
the full weight of words burrowed in

The Bitterroot is a stone moat
grave in front of her she sees as *soon*
her mother is ninety ears old and all
she wanted to say she could by touch

letting her mother know the master
marred her (fast lash the hot iron)

So she falls into it
leans into the shrinking female
then nurses with her wounded breasts
her leaning is into *simultaneity*

Eyes wash all sting away
she tenders as does the onion
a pillow for ma to hide fear itself
the weight of her birth place resting
on the root memory *now* sung as *here*

Outlasting ma's lullaby she falls
into the echo of master's hammer
the gulf greater *now* than *then*
the space between blows a thunder
river's rapids wheel her *over under*

THE RITUAL OF WASHING

The telephone –
Every time it rings
She checks the kettle
She checks the door
In the living room
Or at the landing
Surprises herself
Flowerpot on a burner
Fork upright
In sink's steel wool.
She scrubs not knowing
The mind is only
Wrong furniture
Cobwebs she can't dust.
So heaven is a house
Like in her youth
Hope detached from things
She cleans.

*

After the funeral
She looks for him
In grocery bags
She's filled with shoes
So many on the motel floor.

Grieving grows constant
In her opening and closing
Of the drawer
Below the holy book
She beds the shrouded shoes
Then merry-
At-the-tomb lifts
Them out. Then in.
Had she been him,
A shoe clerk, she'd fit
Us each by hand
Kneeling when we sit.

*

Now, across the many
Vows I'm still
Making sense of it.
I take to my knees
Scrub brush for hire
Hear her bristle
On wood. Ingrained
The knowing how
To wash for others.
(Floor so clean you could
Lay out her silver
If she hand any

In her scissor drawer.)
So clean the walk.
The weight of a full being
Pressed through hands,
Ritual grounding for when
The body and mind fork.

**WE TURNED IT UPSIDE DOWN & LET THE YOUNG
ONES CRAWL ON TOP OF IT**

boys safely outside your wounded womb
you fingered the metal Mother Mary I had

fastened to the boat's bow by your yarn
(moss, rose petal mauve, milkweed)

no need to tell you how much forsythia
was offered how open ocean salted prayers

you insisted on sparklers that 4th (a Brit,
you showed us how to face bodily defeat)

night's sky in hand waving the milky way
your 4-year-old fingers ribbon flowers

at my neckline, brushes my hair back to rest
his head (he nestles in a gentle gesture – you)

we wait in line to enter the planetarium
to learn (y)our place in this universe