

Five Letters to My Never-to-be Daughter with a Spell Inside

Lindsay Wilson

I. A Father's Right, I Already Know the Desert (This Kind of Family)

When your grandfather said, his face picked clean
of any humor, *I've already found the place for your grave*
if you hurt her, I simply shook his hand

because I believed in a father's right
to warn any man about to drive his daughter
across the great yawn of Nevada's belly.

As we pulled away, he said, *Do not fight*
over who to blame, and then he stepped into a stroke
under the slender shadows

of a Vegas afternoon. What I'm trying to say
is that he would have opened a revolver's mouth
for you and blamed nothing.

II. Daughter, why drag your hatchet tonight?

Why pace across the hall's slick-dark wood,
cast out the small black net of your shadow?

I have enough real ghosts to dance with in this desert
of old wounds. The old dog needs her rest,
and yet I wake to find her staring intently
at the sound of your hooved shuffle.

I am asking
more and more of the old books, mapping those lost
roads into the interior, mine shafts and dry wells,
their simple spells of protection. Just this evening
I swept the hall clean again, kept the dust-skin
in a mason jar left in the garden shed.

I could hear
your heart stirring.

I could hear the axe head rubbing
against wood. This is why, waking to your hatchet's
sharp grin on my end table, I can only fall
asleep clutching knives.

III. We All Come Undone

One summer I felt a rustling and looked up
to my rearview to see most of the heat-unhinged pages
of poetry books windblown from my back windows
like a jackpot's flight of paper-white birds
in a wake behind me. The wind swept most of them
into a doorway of an old office building
where a boy, each night, liked to lean on his one thin line
of methamphetamine. He blamed the birthmark
he picked at in the door's glass reflection before he noticed
all the poems piled like leaves across the threshold.
He sat beside an old sand ashtray lighting one burnt
end with another, as the Geiger counter of river
crickets rose behind him, reading each poem
until that single line of crystal seemed to be the yellow
leafy vein spreading across the horizon. He folded
his favorite into his boot before walking back
to last century's squat divorce cottages off First street
knowing mother will have begun her swing shift
at the Gold and Silver, knowing nothing would change.

IV. With the Dead-Lake Sand in a Circle Around Me

I lit the bird-nest effigy, then added the dried
thistles to your burn pile. Understand

I owned no seeds to offer that flame, that all
worlds grow weary like a way station,

that a window doesn't know the difference
between inside or out, that in every landscape

a path leads away, though, you cannot see it
from the basin's bowl. The first rule of the lost:

climb the highest hill. I waited there until light
began its slow vacancy, until the fire died,

then I gathered the ash and dead-lake sand
into a mason jar, and wrote your name

on the ground in the crossed slant shadow. I
returned home and dusted my windows

with that salt-ash, then composed a final bedtime story
to read to you, my ghost.

V. My Childhood Neighbor Lights His Daily Burn Pile

Vick spoke to me in broken English, a rake
leaned against the wall at the back of his throat.
Grandmother slapped me, told me, to always just smile
and agree. Grandmother said, *Remember he's a man.*
Even if he could speak Okie, you wouldn't understand,
but I understand now that daily restless gathering,
the broken words, the afternoons spent carrying
whatever twigs or blades of grass to a circle
of scorched earth where every evening Vick knelt
coaxing a small flame because we all want to make a light
from our losses. One dry summer night a sheriff
stopped, but he left once he realized they had no common
words for fines or fire. You see we've written
different laws for us old white men and the little
swept piles of bad luck we blow on to turn to light then ash.
You see sometimes we use these hot coals to bring
a fire back to life, and sometimes we use them to cauterize
a wound.

And you?

Little kerosene can, turpentine
and sandpaper, old jar of screws beside the huffed
rag slung over the workbench, stand with me at my childhood
window. Let's find the faint glow of those leftover
embers at the end of his gravel drive. Listen,
I promise your mother and I tried, but so many parts
of the body can be blamed for this damn shame, so fan the flames
our minds give us daily, light those trimmings
and green leaves, then part the smoke's curtain to my mind's
workshop. Find my hand on the arrow moving toward
the letter I. Little séance, Ouija board of fault,
little thing in the shadowed corner filing your hooves,
I love you and do not blame you for haunting me, but, please,
burn us down. Little imp in my head with your hands
of flint and kindling. Why did I ever believe, dry
as I am, that I would end as anything other than smoke?