

Trembling Leaf, Heart in a Cage

Your bike perches from the hook in the laundry room. Removing it is the last task after a litany of morning chores. You place your hip against the seat and grab the handlebars, cradling its body as you gently detach it from the wall. You stand it on the back wheel and roll it out the door, carefully dodging the washing machine, bags of clothes to give away to the Salvation Army, your husband's tools and the stack of plywood resting behind the door. Since your alarm went off an hour ago, you've been on your feet and flying to put the coffee on, clear the sink, pack lunches, make breakfast, get the kids ready, pick your own outfit and get dressed. Answer questions, scold, clean. Eventually handing everything off to your husband so you can leave to get to school on time. You maneuver past the creaky door, down the steps, and lay the bike against the plastic play structure at the back of the driveway you share with your neighbors. After walking back to lock the door, you unclasp your helmet from the top tube and pump your legs against the crisp October air.

You refuse to feel fear when you ride. You suffered a brain injury from a hit and run when you were twenty-two, a car striking you in what the witnesses say was an act of aggression. The driver flashed his headlights, revved the engine, lurched. Waking up from a coma on your twenty-third birthday, you are proud of the physical strength and ability you have recovered. It is precious, this body-magic, and since the age of twenty-five you have been a bicyclist, blood coursing your veins as you trek through city streets. Mindful of people in parked cars who may open their doors, dancing with bus drivers as they make space for you, edge to the curb, start up and stop again. You see lights, you hear engines, and you are not afraid. Reclaiming the road and establishing a place for yourself within it, carving safety from a world of peril.

Cross the footbridge at the end of your street, pass the encampment at the playground, noting how many more coverings have emerged since before the weekend, greet the municipal workers clearing trash, ducking

under the branches that hang low from the tree on the sidewalk that spits you onto the street. Eyes open, alert. A student of yours is waiting at the bus stop, “Hi, Amy!” you yell as the light turns green.

You didn’t learn how to ride a bike until you were nineteen. You remember that you had a bike as a child, lavender purple with a unicorn on the frame. Your parents, too afraid to let you bike in the street, never took the training wheels off. You pedaled vigorously the lengths of your back deck, laps that shrunk by the week. You grew bigger and more restless, giving it up entirely. Clipped wings, the smallness of not knowing what exists beyond the cage.

Fear and free are two sides of the coin. The brain injury unleashed a bright invincibility as you blazed through the world. Not certain why or how you had survived, you denied any intrusion of doubt: you would continue to survive, there was too much God on your side. You didn’t have time to waste on extra caution, and your mother’s abundant anxiety only pushed you into a new, precarious yet brilliant confidence.

You inherit a 1990s-era olive green Bianchi from a friend and vow to build your own model by the time you’re thirty. You volunteer at the neighborhood bike kitchen, sorting greasy parts and studying from a mechanics manual. You memorize the routes of your commute, first consulting maps and online cycling forums then penning the directions on the back of your hand to consult on the ride. You learn to wait at the top of one hill for the green light so the gravity propels you up the second slope, and predict when you will need to change gears or to pause for a water break or keep pushing.

Your mom says that you get two things when a baby is born. “The baby,” as she rocks her arm with an imaginary infant, and picking up a heavy burden with her other arm, “worry.” Her body is tense but she is laughing, explaining that the worry stays with you for life. That you hold onto it for as long as the child is living in the world. To manage this worry, she sheltered you. You nudged and nagged to keep from bursting, jealous of the freedoms your peers enjoyed in listening to pop music on the radio, watching tv, dating and even inviting their boyfriends over—but the answer was always “no.” From her nervousness you understood that the world is a scary place. That she needed to protect you from outside influences at all costs.

When you consider the choices your parents made, you sense they were driven by fear. Two fearful bodies orbiting in the immense and fragile galaxy of inherited trauma. You understood from their thunderous silence that the world is dangerous, so loud and unspecified to blanket the world in fear. You pulled from the faint scratches of stories to create a landscape of deafening and universal fear – your paternal uncle was kidnapped as a boy and went missing for a year, your mother was molested by a stranger after answering the door at home alone, all of your grandparents died young. Alcoholism, scarcity. Without a community of fellow parents to name and process psychological hurdles, you imagine they must have felt isolated. Alone in the young family they had made.

Your colleague calls out “Be careful!” as you exit the front gate of the high school where you work. You respond with a wink, irreverent, “I know, it’s dangerous out there...” and he comes back with sincerity, “No, it’s dangerous right here!” You roll your eyes and sail off, weaving through cars picking up their kids from school, a van taking the volleyball team to their away game. There are potholes and broken glass. You know where to dismount and wait for the walk signal. Violence lurks in the shadows: you look ahead and past it. Conscious, breathing, alive.

When you landed in the Intensive Care Unit, your maternal uncle was the first one there. He has not forgiven himself. You were living with him at the time you were attacked, nervously waiting for me to return if I went out with friends. He blames himself that you were hurt, his baby sister’s little girl, his heart, a constant presence in your childhood. Your mother blames herself. Your father blames himself. When you advanced in your recovery and began to make plans to travel, your uncle said, plain-faced and without blinking: “I wish you could stay in a bubble.” Your parents nodded in agreement as they looked on, creases of anguish at their temples. You felt the walls closing in.

What you know about fear is that it freezes you. You were so afraid of the pain during your labor that you froze against the movement and flow you needed to open with the contractions. It was terrifying. You didn’t want to be afraid, you were ready for the baby, you were mentally prepared for the birth and nonetheless your body tightened and clenched and stiffened. You gave your best and bravest effort to counteract the crippling fear, trying to tense in your upper body and release in your lower. Over your head you

squeezed a stress ball and visualized containing the pressure above your abdomen, that grueling warzone of growth and renewal. But the paralyzing effects were too great and only with the epidural could you focus your breathing and energy on the softness, the opening, the love meeting love.

“I wish you could stay in a bubble” sounds a lot like “It’s your fault for not staying in this bubble we created for you.” You didn’t speak to your uncle for two years after this encounter. You could not carry the guilt from an unprovoked aggression that brought grief to your family. You wanted to scream “Sheltered doesn’t mean safe!” and “I can’t live like this!” Instead molding your own form from the messy scraps that surround you, a chaos that sticks to your bones as you shake it off and off.

Fear is a quivering feather inside your chest. Fear is the wind toppling a pebble, leaf, or plastic toy off the porch. Fear is walking into a hall of mirrors or across a razor ridge of mountain.

Safe is the hug and sparkles from your toddler meeting you at the end of your day: “Hi Ma! I missed you! Come with me?” tugging your finger to the stack of blocks on the carpet. Safe is the warm droplets of your shower, blessings and salves.

Sheltered is the melding of fear and safe, a patchwork of defense and denial. Artificial fusion of the hardest rocks, cross-fire orchestras of misunderstanding.

Free is the burn in your thighs at the penultimate twist of the trail home. Panting free the breaths wash over this square patch of earth, pavement above soil, layers of clay capped and spilling from between the blisters. A telephone wire frames the horizon, sneakers dangling from their shoelaces and your heart in your throat. The air washes your face, unfurls your hair tendrils, keeps the flame burning inside of you with its soft gusty oxygen.

For the East Bay Bike Party the mass of cyclists descend at Fruitvale Plaza the BART station, buzzing and warm before pushing off into the dark, cutting through the night alone /and together. Slicing the road over potholes, past industrial warehouses, across the bridge into Alameda where you backbone the bay’s belly /at the shoreline /lights flaring indigo lifting your heart lime /fluorescence filling tangerine joy your tank. The sweat on wing’s heartbeat /your protection.

The front of the caravan waits at the red light and pedals forward when it’s green, but three hundred deep means the light turns yellow and red

again but we roll through, the reflective bright vested protectors standing to block the intersection, past highway on-ramps it is terrifying and thrilling and the tears pool in your eyes, welling your chest heaves knowing you are doing this, claiming space, coexisting with cars and subverting the power relationship with them.

The holidays come and with them two high profile vehicular assaults, in New Orleans and through a Christmas market in Berlin. You can't take for it granted, not being hit /hurt but you go to the next bike party anyway, first one of the year. It's Friday and the parking lot at El Cerrito BART station is filling with cyclists of all types, all of you brimming with excitement. You roll through neighborhoods and the people come out of their homes to wave, cheer, record your journey on their phones the glitter of friendship and fame, celebration. Through the tunnel at Point Richmond, dancing against the deep blue curtains of the earth, you feel the light of the moon on your face. Looking up you see the stars you are biking under the stars across the curved planet with ducks in the marsh to your left and seagulls at the shore to your right, a chorus of frogs in your ear until nature fades into the freeway's soft roar. Smoke from the Richmond oil refinery billows and fogs lift off the hills studded with lights mirroring the night sky.