

Talking Behind Glass

1

Sitting in the waiting room's folding chairs,
we watch the television with no sound
bolted too close to the ceiling.
Those of us who see each other every week
pretend we don't and keep watching tv.

The CO says it's time.

Beltless and shoeless
we line up
at the metal detector.
The shuttle bus weaves us
through the complex
to waiting sons, husbands,
fathers, brothers, lovers, and friends.

A circular line of razor wire
tops the outer chain link fence in a tilted arc pouring over -

and already I am going back -

to the top of the cresting wave in North Truro
on our yearly Cape Cod vacation.

You would crouch, waiting
for it to break over you, bury you,
then explode through the surface
beaming a seven-year old's
missing front tooth smile,
arms extended; fists raised.

2

I picture you
contemplatively walking
a fluorescent-lit corridor
in one of these brick buildings,
your thick-walled path inaccessible
as a monastery is to the uninitiated
and uninvited.

I enter, an interloper from the outside.
You emerge, an earnest, unconvinced novitiate,
from within.

Picking up our phones,
we talk behind glass,
words spilling
back and forth
like pebbles through a rain stick.

3

You put a sock
over the mouthpiece of your phone
as a safeguard from the pandemic,
one of the life hacks
you have picked up inside,
like how to watch the common area tv
by crouching at the food slot of your cell,
how to sweet talk your time in the hole
from a week to three days,
knowing when to smile and when not to,
knowing how to not be fucked with,
knowing how to not trust anybody.

Or maybe you put a sock
on the phone to stop my words
from getting too close,

or maybe as a reminder
to filter everything you say
and never to say too much.

4

You sit now with the authoritative grunt of an adult,
leaning forward, hands folded
in intense concentration.
Each visit adds distinction to your face.

Looking at you, I see you at every age -
at three you would take my face
in both hands as I carried you
and turn my head to see

whatever it was that momentarily
amazed you, at nine, in a photo,
leaping from the picnic table

arms spread with dexterity
and grace that embraced the world.
Now you sit in faded gray scrubs
leaning forward, unkempt beard,

braids taut and twisted back,
the sharp cheekbones rising from your crooked smile.
I look everywhere on your face
except your eyes.

5

When you were sixteen
you rushed out of your room
to the refrigerator
and tried to pour
chocolate milk in your ear.

I stopped you before any came out,
guided you to the couch,
and asked what drugs you were on.
Your eyes rolled back,
closed, opened,
rolled back again and closed in sleep.
You didn't answer.

I sat until three in the morning
listening to you breathe,
wondering if delivering the Narcan
would be as simple as they said.

You woke up and
asked me why
you were in the living room,
then walked back to your room, to bed.

I didn't know how to ask you then
or ask you now
how this all started
or if you want it to stop.

When you call from jail,
the pre-recorded
Miranda message
explaining we have the right
to remain silent
often isn't necessary.

6

When you were eleven
you sat putting on socks and cleats
as I drove us to your soccer matches.

I drove the same route to your rehab.

At your discharge when you were sixteen,
the counselor warned
in three years it would be
jail, hospital, or the morgue.

That was three years ago.

Now you are sentenced to eighteen months.

In that time,
the earth will travel one hundred thirty-nine
million miles in its orbit
tethered to the sun;

you will take twelve million breaths;

the moon will blast full force each month
then disappear in blackness
eighteen times.

7

The day I called the police
I found a twenty-two
in your backpack
and a three-eighty
beneath your comforter.

It was the blue one you'd had since five,
with a pattern of tropical fish.
You would spread it
on the floor at bedtime,
jumping around the edges

so you would not fall
in the water,
a game of hopscotch
to extend the day a few minutes.
You would do anything

to keep moving, to
keep going, as if
the ocean could swallow you
and you would never be
this free again.

8

At forty-four minutes,
the phone clicks twice
to indicate one final minute.
When it ends,
you will go where I can't go
and I will go where you can't go.

When you were born,
the white couple planning to adopt you first
left the hospital and never came back
when they saw you were a
different color than your birth mother.

I never told you this.

You look at the wall behind me
and I look at the wall behind you.
There is no clock
so we look at each other
like a photo mirroring its negative.

What can a white father
say to his black son in jail
when all these years we have talked behind glass
even when the glass wasn't there?