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America of the Broken Heart

Allene Rasmussen Nichols

These rivers that pulse with your lifeblood
are dying, and these lakes and these hills
are covered with the detritus of used up
dreams.

This morning, a seagull lay
on my front porch, a plastic ring
around her throat. She gasped out
the language of a disappearing
land.

I was a child when my heart
swelled to the rolling hills
of your plains and I longed
to stretch out thin as a cloud
and sink into your forests.

I was a child when I first knew
the color of my skin and
the taste of poverty and how
locusts can cover a town
like a cloud, leaving behind
only the memory
of green.

I was a child when a man
stepped onto the pale disk
that shone at my window
and planted your flag.

I've known you
through intimate icicle nights
and honeysuckle days.

I've known your seasons
of butter cream and thumbtacks,
bullies and belligerent storms,
hunchbacks and giants.

America, lover, home,
Don't weep acid tears.
We who are America
aren't gone. We who are
America will no longer
be silent.

Your farmer, whose job was
to worship you-until the bank
took his farm away
is no longer silent.

Your immigrant, who risks death
in crowded trucks under the
unforgiving sun to take your
humblest jobs, only to be
hunted and despised,
is no longer silent.

Your worker, who flies
to the honey hive
of buildings and taps worn
fingers to the drone
of computer and copier,
is no longer silent.

Your schoolchild,
both bitter and wise,
inheritor of too little
and too much,
is no longer silent.

Don't wail anymore.
Listen closely.
We're singing.
We're singing the song
of muzzled dogs set free,
of blind liberty and her scales,
of twins who gave birth
to our voice
even as they died
on a Manhattan street.

Your heart was never simple,
not even in old black and white
films where politicians were actors
and actors bled words
and died on gray scale streets.

Maybe your heart was meant to break
because it encompasses too much
to remain whole. Maybe the belief
that it can heal is only the ranting
of a wild-eyed charlatan
turned parlor prophet.

But listen to the singing.
Listen to the valleys,
their echo and their silence,
bound to you like
I am. Bound to die and be born
again like Dionysus and Osiris,
like the first sweet sprouts
of an onion plant.

If any nation, any expanse
of land and sea and hopes
and promises and people
made new and old again
by the morning news
can heal, it is you,
America of the broken heart.