

FOUR POEMS BY LOUISE BERNICE HALFE

Finding Bone

She used to go in search of buffalo, elk, deer,
sparrow, weasel, any bone
when the shawl of midnight descended.
The bones would lift her as if spring
were awake in her feet.
Her grandmother used to pulverise the bones,
mix the powder with sweet carrot, bear
and bitter root. It was, nohkom would say
to open the passages to the heart
so she could breathe the musky
fresh air.
These days she wished she could waltz
with Patsy Cline, or square dance
with the Métis fiddle.
But,
she no longer knew how to laugh.
She once saw on TV a woman whose
tongue reached across the room
to slurp like a dog on a handsome man.
It was just like that, she thought when
she saw the snake weave toward her,
tall and muscular.
She held her hands in her pocket
where the trinket of teeny bones
reassured her they were the salve
to her fervour.

God of nightmares

She thinks of the man who was eaten by his pancreas
how she moped through those biting days
how she stood like Romeo at the hospital window
wishing he was Raphael, she'd climb his hair
and tear it out of his skull
all this for setting her on fire.
But she thanks the god of nightmares
that it was only a few years
that she was imprisoned in the convent
of her books. Those questioning years he stole
the nights where her husband gazed
wondering to where she had disappeared.
She thanks the god of nightmares
that the acidic fire left blisters on pages
where her pen rose to meet the spirit
of answers her eyes searching
through the bibles of philosophy, psychology
sweat lodges, fasting and marriage contracts.
All those years she rode that fire's tail
whipping herself to frenzy for having fallen
into the gluttony of desire.

Skeletons and Cannibals

She's gone underground too often
and she has no desire to go there again.
Giants dwell in her reality and in her dreams.
They are not ordinary giants. They thunder
into her not wanting her to forget they exist.
They illuminate the sunrise and stardust;
she sees them when the curtain
of blindness has lifted
but only after she's done a tremendous
amount of digging. The giants have thunder bolts
or carry hammers that knock the breath out of her
as she attempts to run from what they know
where darkness can drag her to their den.
She hates going to these trenches
and yet once their talons clasp her neck
there is no letting go. Once in a while
she ignores their blistering hold until
her blood has lost its trail
and she can no longer remember
or feel their presence. But,
that is a lie.
Their talons are forever squeezing,
memory runs in their blood.

Others are dwarfs that hang onto her skirt
hem or pant legs; she drags them around like children
afraid to be left behind. She sees them too often
strong little women whose tears
run like brooks, creeks, and turn into raging rivers.
They climb onto her lap, clasp her neck,
pull her head down and she cannot lift her eyes to see.

In the underground world no one sees or hears
the battle between the giants and herself.
No one sees how the dwarfs holler till their throats
are scorched from the burn of wanting.
She can name them, yes, but not today
for she doesn't want to go into their darkness.

“it was a pure”

For you
“it was a pure”
longing burn like watching fire
creep on a piece of paper or a matchstick
fire blistering her finger tips. She recognized you
as while you walked through the woods,
sunlight against your dirty dark hair.
You’ve nestled into her shoulder
for the last forty years
lips pressed into her forehead.
If she could she would confess
all of her transgressions burden you
with sorrow but what was the point
to that? You can’t live on that love alone,
you said one day as you counted
the last of your grandfather’s coins
so you could have shelter for another
month and have a meal of macaroni.
She would tell your children
much later how you worked
as a carpenter building log cabins,
how an old girlfriend showed up
while breastfeeding your first born.
She would show them the diamond you
gave her for your fortieth anniversary.
For you, “it was a pure.”