

Midnight Oil

--by Sheryl St. Germain

how to speak of it
this thing that doesn't rhyme
or pulse in iambs or move in predictable ways
like lines
or sentences

how to find the syntax
of this thing
that rides the tides
and moves with the tides and under the tides
and through the tides
and has an underbelly so deep and wide
even our most powerful lights
cannot illuminate its full body

this is our soul shadow,
that darkness we cannot own
the form we cannot name

and I can only write about it at night
when my own shadow wakes me, when I can feel
night covering every pore and hair follicle, entering eyes
and ears, entering me like Zeus, a night I don't want
on me or in me, and I dream of giving birth
to a rusty blob of a child who slithers out of me,
out and out and won't stop slithering, growing and darkening,
spreading and pulsing between my legs
darkening into the world

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what it might feel like to be a turtle, say,
swimming in the only waters you have ever known
swimming because it is the only way you move through the world
to come upon this black bile
a kind of cloying lover

a thing that looks to you
 like a jellyfish, so you dive into it and try to eat it
 but it covers your fins so they can't move as before
 and there is a heaviness on your carapace and head
 that wasn't there before, and you are blind
 in the waters of your birth

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When the summers got too hot even for those of us born in New Orleans, so hot that our ancestors' bones sweated and complained in their vaults, my father would decide it was time, and the family would pile into the station wagon and drive down to Grand Isle, where we'd run along the beach into the Gulf as if into a lover's arms, smash into the salty waves, swim until the sun went down and we were red as boiled crawfish.

Mother would have made a pungent crab salad, with quarters of crab marinated in garlic and olive oil, lemon and celery. Sometimes we'd have boiled shrimp or crabs. The grownups would stay up drinking and playing cards at night while we slept the sweet sleep of children who don't yet know what stygian rivers run in their veins. Exhausted from swimming, hair still damp and smelling like the Gulf, we'd huddle together in the big bed on the screened porch. The smell and sound of the waves rocked us to sleep, dreams of pelicans and gulls and flying fish filled our heads and hearts, and we were content.

On rainy days when we couldn't swim my father taught me how to play pool in one of the hulking bars that used to front the beach. The bar's gone now, like the house we stayed in, destroyed by hurricanes that wipe out

every human-made thing every few years.

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Oiled Birds, edited from Wikipedia:

Penetrates plumage, reduces insulating ability, makes birds vulnerable to temperature fluctuations, less buoyant in water. Impairs bird's abilities to forage and escape predators. When preening, bird ingests oil that covers feathers, causing kidney damage, altered liver function, digestive tract irritation. Foraging ability is limited. Dehydration, metabolic imbalances. Bird will probably die unless there is human intervention.

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I'm looking at an old photo of my brother, right after he got out
of prison. He's twenty, sitting on a beach chair at Grand Isle,
looking gaunt and pale, but smiling.

It was the first place my mother thought to take him
when she feared the grime and shame of that other place
might have tarnished his heart too deeply.

She knew he loved this island, where simple things
like saltwater and clean beaches,
birds and fish, crabs,
might act like containment booms,
keep the demons away.

He'd die a few years later,
his liver polluted with what he thought
would make the world bearable,
and a few years after him
my father would go
from that same staining.

Now, when I look at these beaches I love,
greasy with oil as far as I can see,
when I think of how this island
and its marshes should act like filters,
I think of my father and brother,
I think this is what
their livers must have looked like
as they moved toward the end, darkening,
becoming pebbly with disease, finally

too black with blight
to filter
anything.

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It's June in Pittsburgh where I live now, hot and muggy,
and it feels like a day my father would've said *let's go*.

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People don't want to look at the pictures anymore of the birds
and turtles, the fish, the oiled beaches
they want to go on to something else
they don't want to hear about the old fishermen
who may never fish again
the ones being trained to clean up instead of fish

It's an old story, really, how we always dirty what we love,
and I'm tired too, have seen way too many pictures
of oiled birds and the oiled waters of this dear place

and I've heard way too many pundits and politicians
and newsmen analyze, blame and predict

and jokemen joke:

let's call the Gulf *the Black Sea*.

Dear CNN: even the devil would bore us
if he was on 24 hours a day

there are times we need silence
as much as we need news

or a poem that creates a silence
in us where we can feel again

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How people from Louisiana have described the oil:

Brown and vivid orange globs. Tar balls. Thick gobs. Red waves. Deep stagnant ooze. Clumps of tar. Consistency of latex paint. Sheets of foul-smelling oil. Patches of oil. Caramel-colored oil. Tide of oil. Red brown oil. Rainbows of Death. Waves of gooey tar blobs. Bruised internal organs of a human body. Heavy heavy slickoil. Oil sheen. Oily stench. Melted chocolate.

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*An eye for an eye, my father might say,
a tooth for a tooth.*

Let's ask those responsible,
and some of those are us

to walk deep out into the waters
of this once beautiful island,
the waters that once teemed with speckled trout,
oysters, shrimp,
let's ask them to walk far out into it,
to swim out with long sweeping strokes,

and then,
when they are thick and covered
with the stuff, when it's in their hair and blinding
them, stopping up their ears and mouths,
when it's sticking to every pore
in their body,

then
let them try to swim back

then
let them try to explain