



The Good Left In Us

Julia Steele Allen

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Stone's Throw Press

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Author's Note

This is a collection of poems I wrote between the ages of 18-28 years old. It is a mix of personal poems, political poems and fictional story-poems.

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Instead of God

El Paso Greyhound Station

I might have been a deeply religious woman.
Gone to the convent, ordered myself a life of
cold, wet chamber air, early mornings,

waking to the sound of heavy-clocked wooden shoes.
The mumble, the rich fabric of tradition, the starkness,
the severity. Living with hard soap, pursed lips.

God.

But instead, by some shovel of chance, I am here,
pressed against this cold Greyhound glass.
Early morning, on my way, to see

You.

And I'm wiping smiles off my teeth. Smearing them off
with my hand-back, my shifting eyes.
This smile of desire, showing its face

after all these years.

The Grand Concourse

Concourse: n. 1: a meeting produced by voluntary or spontaneous coming together; 2: an open space where roads or paths meet

The old Korean couple run a small gift shop
around the corner from here,
by the 99¢ store and the bodega and the cigar shop.
It's the kind of store where you buy a winter hat
or a small plastic doll.
People say, "They've been here forever.
Or at least 30 years."
People say, "They've never bothered nobody,
they never bothered no one."

But at around eight last night,
some boys tried to rob
the old Korean couple
of what they'd earned
off the neighborhood:
Latino, Black and African.

All they had were some box cutters,
and who can say
what happened between when they went for the money
and when the old man was stabbed,
his and his wife's faces
slashed in so many directions
they were made unrecognizable
to their own children.

Now they're in critical.
The boys on the run.
One of them got caught
and was found to be 16.
The other one's still running.
He's just 15.

Channel 4 has come and set up tent.
Every channel is here
with their sixth sense for tragedy
leading them uptown or down south
to Brooklyn.

White money telecasts another story
of black violence.
But who reports on the daily disaster
of no heat in the apartment?
No teachers at the school?
No food in the cupboard?
And rats running the streets?

Rats could be rent-paying tenants
their nests so grand
along the bush trail
of the old Grand Concourse
where garbage waits for pick-up
two days too long
and there's no landlord
to plug up the holes.

News helicopters suck nectar
off the Korean gift shop,
closed for the day and from now on, I'd guess.
Everybody stands around to see
as detectives in longcoats
piss to mark their territory
scratch and sniff
the walls
of the neighborhood.

People turn their gaze to the ground
as detectives eye them for clues,

blame them for the news,
the story already written
before it was ever wrote.

People shake their heads and say,
“What is the matter with these kids?
What has happened to our youth?
They don’t care for nothing
They don’t care for nobody.”

The school crossing guard tells me,
“It’s because kids don’t get beat anymore.
Everybody says you gotta talk to them
and everyone knows
that don’t work.”

Mothers
in front of the Associated supermarket
on the corner, at the school.
The Principal tells me,
“This is what happens when our children
don’t get their education.”

The people stand on the corner
watching the store.
Some turn their gaze to the ground,
and some
keep their stares straight ahead
clean as arrows.

While longcoat detectives spin in circles
and news helicopters
suck nectar
off the closed Korean gift shop
in the neighborhood,

Latino, African and Black,
where the apartments have no heat
and the rats live rent-free
on the old Grand Concourse.

As somewhere,
outside,
a 15-year-old boy
runs
trying to lose the blade
he can't seem
to let go of.

The Young & the Restless

Day after election day
Republicans smear themselves nationwide
like blood on a counter top.
The people sit listless and stream-eyed,
quiet, except for the heartbeat within.

Nana, now 84, sits in front of her TV,
as days palm each other, dancing close,
in Seabrook, Texas, where light gets caught
in the floral ivory curtains and the hard, thick grass
full of ants, parched earth, cracked cement.

The clouds pass overhead, and somewhere
the sound of development:
its mechanical, inevitable crawl and crunch,
its chew and spit,
the old brick
for the pre-fab new.

It comes closer, but never arrives at Nana, where she sits
in her easy chair mid-day, watching The Young and the Restless
without a hearing aid, the volume on high, the words running
across the screen to catch up with the heartbreak of the characters.

Nana, in her United-We-Stand t-shirt, Nana watching
weather, talking about rain, about the hurricanes
that have stirred her up in times past.

I ask Nana about her life and she tells me
about making her children's clothes by hand,
washing them every Sunday,
and how the washing machine
changed everything.

She tells me about taking care of people:
parents, siblings, husband, children, grandchildren,
great grandchildren.

About nursing to their deaths:
friends, mother, husband, brothers, sister, son.

And I see how death wears on a person,
softens her corners, paper-thins her skin,
makes her repeat herself as she tries to steady-out.
She puts a hand on the old counter top
when her “head goes swimmy,” she says.
“Another one of my spells,” she says.

At 84, Nana is built like a woman
who grew up washing clothes by hand.
Her muscles are round river rocks.
Her knees still spry.
She crouches to find something
hidden in the far cabinet,
tucked with the cotton sheets,
folded letters in her bible.

She watches the elections in her Republican State of Texas.
She notices the changes, the hard way people are becoming.
How no one knows their neighbors anymore,
how things used to feel simpler,
how it has never been so hot, how it has never
had this much rain.
She can't explain it. She doesn't try.

But loosens her grasp
on the counter top—
loosens her grasp
on the day—
frayed edges soft
slipping out
from between her fingers.

Windfall

1: something (as in a fruit) blown down by the wind; 2: an unexpected, unearned, or sudden gain or advantage

Now the world is measured in wooden bins.
Today I finished five.

“How many?” the Russian asks me
as soon as I get in the door.
(Mid-forties, wearing his “Firkin Good Guys” t-shirt,
blaring his house music,
waiting to set his vodka on fire.)

I hold up five fingers.
He frowns.
Him, only four.

They always put me in the row next to Phil,
the deaf whizzer in army pants.
He runs strides on me.
I keep beat
with the old guy on my other side.
What’s his name?
The one with a dark-haired woman
tattooed on his arm,
sagging from age.

In daylight, I know only
the tap touching of apples,
the hollow sound of dumping them
from my tin pouch
into the open wood mouth of a bin.

(Do it slow now
so they don't bruise;
you get fired
if they bruise.)

By late day I am caked in pesticides.
A tacky dust, a nightfall.

I shower,
cook a dinner of oatmeal,
slice in some apples,
tasteless.

Go to bed
in my small room
at the end of the row,
frost on the trees.

Eagerly, I make ready for my dreams, my vivid life.
In the dark-eye, I go exploring on an unmarked canvas.

My dreams are richer here.
Something about seeing one color all day
makes my dreams shine bright
like a penny
and grow wings.

Last night I saw leaping sets
of stark white fishes
jumping up
from between the floorboards.

In my dream
I walked among them.