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The Work of the Hands

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The Work of the Hands

I. Signing

Eighteen years to the shrine by train.
I thought it must sound like rocks falling
On my hands.
At St. Anne's my father carried me
Just like the cripples.
You cannot hear devotion. Devotion is no song.

At the shrine the cripples walked, the incense begged,
The candles chattered.
You must burn things to bargain with the Lord.
Mute mouths moved and people turned.
The twisted straightened, the statues ran with tears.
My father prayed.
I scribbled the air with one request,
Held my hands over the candles.

Eighteen times to the shrine
Where only what was visible was cured.
The Lord works in visible ways.
Eighteen times home, my mother safely whispered promises
In my ear, and all my brothers
Shouted insults up and down my spine.
Eighteen times home, they thumped the floor
For my attention, thrust my name off their tongues,
Mangled the air with their thick hands.
My eighteenth lesson is: What cannot be heard
Is never innocent.

I have a language of quick hands.
The second letter is a vow and a beginning,
The third swallows sound.
The fourth directs the reader,
The fifth blesses all that follow.
The first letter in the alphabet of fingers is a fist,
And the last is a dismissal.
II. Killing

By my own hand,
By my ten fingers, two furrowed palms,
Twenty eight knuckles,
And the ridged fingertip portraits
Of days, regrets, and this revenge.
By the hundreds of fine bones, I swear
That is how I will take it.

When I was perfect,
Each finger supple and competent,
Before the bones ground one another
And the joints complained of directions,
Before I had been pressed into this body
And did not know what my hands cannot stop from my ears,
When I'd heard nothing,
There was no grief.
My hands recite my loss in aching.

My father died, my father died,
His hands severed from his wrists, hovering
An inch from his wrists, extending his reach
Into all my nights.

My mother bared her wounds to me,
And dipped my fingers into all her wounds.
And now I sign my name across my wrists.
Grief is an axe that never lowers.

By my own hand I will fall again,
Perfectly, from my own body,
Into the obedient hands of angels.
I will say, "You would not seek me, friend,
Unless you had already held me."
III. Priesting

I climbed the shoulders of the cross to see
How wide is the dominion of sacrifice,
To catch hold of an angel's foot
And be dragged from daily unbelief.
To catch sight of Creation's hand
Herding the sun over any horizon,
To catch the hem of the Virgin's mantle
Spreading blue behind the sun,
And be saved from daily logic.

I asked about my hands and mercy,
How faith seeped through my chrismed fists, how,
Though the mountebank's fist enclosed an egg,
His opened fingers reveal
The air, How the egg appears
In a child's ear. Whether
Belief hides within the question of belief.

When these fingers were my own,
Before chrism washed the earth from them,
I knew myself sufficient.

I watch the candles
For more than flame.
I beg the windows
For more than light.
I search the ambulatory shadows
For the thief of my faith.
My prayers creep into the vaults,
Startle the belfry doves.
The bread bleeds in my hands.
IV. Making

Without hands
I make a child.
Sleight of my hands,
I'm more creatures than I knew.
A spy swims through my secrets,
Fattening on my blood.
I'm in new hands.

Child, I pray for our good hands
To grow correct in what kind darkness I can give you.
I pray your hands grow strong enough
To pull down stars when you need light,
Quiet enough to keep your secrets,
Deft enough to sew scales on a fish.
Deftness will never keep you,
But good fingers mend things
And mending is a sister to creation.

I wait
For the first sure grasp
Of your fist around my finger.
I wait for your good hands.

*Devon Miller-Duggan*