A death of mourning & Towers of Babel

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A death of mourning

There was no piling of bodies at the double doors
Flanked with ushers clad in black and white
There were no wide-hipped church hats adorned with a steeple of feathers.
No dark bellowing organ to chorus the sluggish processional of weeping.
No handkerchiefs or starch suits rubbing shoulders of man to man
Greeting grief with sagging grins and hardened half-hugs.
There was no raspy “good to see you,” outfitted with gold-capped smiles
That breathed early bacon and grits,
No burly legs in stretched sheers and aged black flats.

When I see my people en mass like this,
I can’t help but think of one life as being all of our lives
And one death, every death we’ve ever died.
We used to wear t-shirts with a tree relief
Of the names of our forebears hanging above the canopy.
Now, each year, a branch is broken.
A leaf like Frankie leaves,
And falls for good.

She returned her own body.
She redeemed her passage with desire.
Took herself off pills and machines and treatments.
She willed herself to the same ground my great-grandmother tilled,
And now they have both fallen out of time.

They have met the great matriarchs and patriarchs on the other side of the river
We always sing about,
Except now, there is less moan and keening,
Less striated melodies, less belief behind these mouth coverings
And we are in no church,
But a home for leave-takings.

At Frankies’s funeral,
We packed in the time
Like the morticians did the corpse.
We sang two short songs with a 15-minute eulogy.
We sat still, beneath a fluorescent roof
Cued by faceless men and women who sang general benedictions
Over her dead body.
Did she ever wonder
And hope for more,
Even as she flung her body down
And her spirit leapt from her last breath?
Could she have ever imagined the weight of strange soundlessness
Filling the parlor?

Will all of our endings be this ordinary
And non-pompous?
Will our rituals be this stale
With the odd formalities of fist pumps and handwaves?

This dying of language,
And worse still,
A death of mourning.

Is our future sitting forward
Quietly behind masks?
Towers of Babel

The new Lords of land
come not with their boats but blueprints,
button-up shirts and Khaki cloths of conquest,
their gilded tongues slither euphemisms.

They are praised for their expeditions
by kingdoms of city and state
who hand them flags for the nomenclature of “new” neighborhoods and decrees to herd the indigenous to reservations;

their feet steeped in paper trails of eviction notices,
foreclosures and property tax increases,
the soil of their stories plowed through
to ground palatial estates,

satiate the longing of young professionals
who need posh boutiques,
dedicated bike lanes
a bevy of bars and waterfront views.

Old money takes their pulse
in the adrenaline of urban escapades,
the luring lights of downtown skyscrapers,
high rise towers of babel that shines wealth into their windows.

Beneath them, a world wilting in the nation’s debt
everyday workers who cannot make rent
who make new cities of tents
stretched along underpasses and hailed cultural trails,

or who those of a different language
whose names disappear from shelters, soup kitchens, and statistics
who the aristocracy will call squatters and surfers,

and agencies will name, “at risk”
and churches label “the needy,”
newspapers, “the vulnerable”
who no one will name, “The New America.”