

Breaking Through

The girl across the aisle from me is praying,
and really, if you can't find God at 35,000 feet,
then you probably never will.

I bet this is a faster motion than anything she's ever known.
Her eyes are too buried deep in her hands
to catch the tilted city from out her cabin window—
a whole system of lights and motion
cocked at the angle of an ascending airplane.

We have burst into 6 am,
eye to eye with the sunrise.
Her face has come unburied just in time
to be rewarded with the closest view of heaven she has:
crimson and comforting across our portal of sky.
I say to her across the aisle the separates us,
“Wasn't this worth opening your eyes for?”

This is how all strangers should meet.

Raising Alaska

When the US officially promoted Alaska
from territory to state,
we entered a world unlike any we'd ever encountered:
hundreds of miles up the western coast
completely removed
and closer to Russia than to America.
It altered our every preconception;
in one handshake
Maine sank south,
California cowered east
and Texas was dwarfed by a beast
over two times its size.

When the school where I used to work
took in a program for at-risk boys,
we were launched headlong into a world
unlike any we wanted to believe existed.
Two blocks from our own homes,
closer to homelessness than to middle class,
They wrought havoc on our every standard:
dirty more after than not,
in the same clothes three days in a row,
these kids were sent to school by parents
who got by on the free lunch program;
they came hungry and ready to be fed.

Alaska was immediately dubbed
Seward's Folly after its purchaser,
but I'd like to think that Seward knew
that beneath those stripped trees
and barren landscapes, there was oil,
coursing beneath the surface like potential
begging to be tapped.

Our at-risk project was to cover the blacktop
just outside the playground
with a map of the United States,
'cause we'd found that kids
don't know geography.
And now it was time for these boys
who'd never set foot near an honor roll,
or an extracurricular activity,
it was time for these boys to teach them.

And if you listened closely to that classroom floor,
you hear it tremble as the potential started to gush.

The trouble with Alaska
was that it's too damn big.
Our standard maps were already packed
from border to border,
so no one knew how to contain anything
so huge and so high.
So we moved it.
Sank it south down the coast,
Tucked it neatly under the Gulf of California.
And we shrank it,
two hundred-plus percent of Texas
now roughly the size of Idaho.
And we contained it,
three hundred sixty million acres of potential
shoved in a white box
just above the compass rose.

The kits that came with the map were nice:
all five Great Lakes,
six different colors,
and then we got to Alaska.
Four of them could have fit inside Texas.

Historically, change always comes about
when one asshole can't keep his mouth shut.
So, when I went to the principal
to complain about Alaska,
I was told that this was about the *experience*,
that what these kids didn't get at school
they could ask their parents when they home.
But I don't see how a sense of accomplishment
is derived from a job done incorrectly.
And I know that *at risk*
is just a nice way of saying,
raised by one parent
who probably works two jobs
and might not host a
round table discussion on U.S. geography
when she gets home from them.

There was extra paint in the kits.
And upon closer surveillance
we discovered more blacktop
just to the northwest of our map.
And for one week
we watched Alaska ascend.
And this is why I teach
and how we learn:
Always with the knowledge
that there is more paint, extra blacktop,
another three hundred sixty million acres
of potential ready to rise up,
burst forth and claim its rightful place
As the last, the first,
the only Frontier.

Response to Every Person Who's Told Me, *You Must Be So Patient.*

Exes have called me impossible, and my Catholic mother
often apologizes for not understanding me enough.

Every morning my disgruntled feet
navigate the stairs that the rest of my body curses.

I roll my eyes at my roommate's greetings
and fill my thermos with the coffee he's made.

My drive to work is punctuated by fists on the dashboard
and vocal conjecture on the size of other drivers' penises.

The fifteen minutes before the bell rings find me gossiping
about coworkers and committing a hate crime on a photo copier.

I'm at Corinne's desk before she is
to help her write in cursive and I've
already drawn pictures above the big
words on Darryl's dittos in case I'm
not there when he gets to them.
I remind Ashley that she doesn't
need to apologize for how long it takes
to wheel herself to the lunchroom;
it's why we are all here. My sixth
period English class is not allowed to
giggle at wrong answers because we
are all just the same enough.
My thermos is in my right hand most of the day.

This is not patience. It is a love
I haven't learned to use anywhere else.