

Everyone is Looking for the Ladder

Everyone needs a ladder, a footstool,
a chair that won't tip over,
better than using a dented wicker laundry basket.
To you it is merely a ladder that corrals
sparrows waiting underneath, that helps you
fling a dish towel at the hand-length bat lodged
in the garage, to dislodge the gutters' peelings
of newly dead leaves and displaced feathers.
But I say the ladder is golden as saffron,
the rungs still lilac plumed, I say the ladder
helps me see the sky is a lake, and the sinkhole
around the choke cherry, the chasm where
the newly dead move on.

Everyone needs
a ladder that's like a deck,
or with sturdy rungs like that of a deer stand
to locate the sweet spot where a non-authorized
death occurred. The pine warbler you didn't
notice on the ladder's rung colliding with
the marsh hawk's grasp, happening without
a wind shift. Without this ladder, you wouldn't
know the back acre is an ossuary, and the field birds
rise as if an ordinance. Nor is this ladder like
the ladder I still have from the abandoned orchard
that I dragged in sideways into my kitchen, so that
when I am caught in thoughts of low-lying fog,
of my sometimes recurrent depression, so the note
on the after-care statement coldly said,

I can go up and visit the newly dead, the sparrow
I didn't see come in with the garage door open,
laundry hanging.

A golden ladder—would I even want
to paint on it? Amber and marigold pools of circles under it,
and rungs not yet buckled with use. Are those sparrows
wading under it alive or also the newly deceased?
PTSD stoned? Sorrow zombies? Nor is this ladder
a rickety worn one I've also had, the color matching
the self-inflicted sparrow cuttings. There is a concrete
slab where there was once a dog penned, a walk with
choke cherry trees above, the few cherries the sparrows
close their feathers to; the sparrows roiling as hub caps
below; so many cherries they swell up like a story. Sometimes
I think it is my story, the way the ladder tips against this tree
as if trying to climb the tree itself. If you climb this ladder,
be careful, you will rock back and forth, one leg shorter
than the other, discharged into the memory of the recent
dearly departed, a broken back, irreparable nerve damage,
grasshopper wrist fractures, and a bad temper ptsding
after another alcoholic numb bout. That's why
the sparrows are stoned.

Yet
everyone needs a ladder to hold their weight,
where they can curl the hub of their foot into the rung
just to feel the pleasure of the long smoothed wood.
I don't need to tell you that I moved the orchard ladder
where it belongs now, now that I no longer need
to get to the attic to see the starlight. Ignore the gutters.
I climb nearly to the top rung to feel the ladder doesn't tilt,

the paint marbled pull out shelf still dangling, one side shorter than the other in the clammy dirt, peel the duct tape, hammer the wood frame holding the plastic over the window as if applying a poultice for a wound.

Yes, everyone is looking for a

ladder,

like a misplaced push broom, everyone needs a ladder, better than a hammock and a beer; everyone needs a ladder to train the variegated morning glories on, betting to see which color makes it first to the top; everyone needs a ladder to hold their weight, grasp their hands, hug the rungs, make a perch, near the choke cherries above the sad brown backs of the sparrows.

Janice Zerfas

Inspiration: *Everybody is Looking for the Ladder* by Eric Parbel