DIRTY GAME
is the Way,
THE TRUTH
and the Life



MAKENA BRANDON

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They buried the headmaster on a Saturday
in a suit the school had lent him for the photograph,
forty years of chalk still in the creases of his hands,
and the man who ate his pension gave the eulogy.
What a voice. Rain on a tin roof, soft and sure.
A good man, he said. A rare man.
The crowd nodded the way crowds nod
at anything that costs them nothing to agree with.
A phone went off in the third row, playing a hymn.
Somebody hushed it. Somebody always hushes the hymn.

My grandmother told it by the fire like this:
the hyena called the animals to talk about theft.
He climbed the high rock and wept for the missing goats.
The goats applauded.
They had not yet counted themselves.

I have a seat at that meeting. I have sat in it for years
with my receipts folded small in my shirt pocket
like a ticket for a train cancelled before I was born.
I still keep the ticket. I still look up at the board.

They say honesty is its own reward.
I have seen the reward. It takes the bus.
It stands in the aisle with its elbows tucked in
and gets off a stop early to save the fare.

Ask the minister what he did before office.
I served, he says, and that is true.
Something was certainly served.

A little for the clerk, and a little for his boss,
a little for the boss's boss, and the budget takes the loss.
A little for the tender, a little for the pen,
a little for the cousin who says we'll talk again.
A little, a little, a little, and see:
the clinic has a ribbon, a plaque, and a key,
and nobody has the key.

We curse the roof and rent the shade beneath it.
We say shame with our whole mouths,
then we save him the good seat,
the goat's best portion, the part with the bone,
kept for the ones we fear or hope to be.
We love a clean hand the way we love a saint:
framed, on the wall, at a safe distance,
and in no danger of being asked to help us move.

On Sunday we thank God for the harvest.
He, who sees everything, has been given a window seat and a plate.
And somewhere in the small print of all of it
a practical voice, unembarrassed, says
what the old book said, turned to face the other way:
I am the way. No one comes to the table but by me.

Nobody argues. That is the terrible part.
Nobody even looks up from eating.

Now the line at the graveside. The widow first,
her hand held out like something she was asked to carry.
Then the man himself, receiving, pressing shoulders,
thanking everyone for coming.

I was third in the line.
I had the receipts in my pocket.
I noticed, with the part of me that still counts,
that my hand was steady,
and his was warm.

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