

Instructions on Not Giving Up

By Ada Limón (1976-Present)

More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out
of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor's
almost obscene display of cherry limbs shoving
their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate
sky of Spring rains, it's the greening of the trees
that really gets to me. When all the shock of white
and taffy, the world's baubles and trinkets, leave
the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath,
the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin
growing over whatever winter did to us, a return
to the strange idea of continuous living despite
the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then,
I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf
unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.

(From *The Carrying*)

Notes on the Below

By Ada Limon

—*For Mammoth Cave National Park*

Humongous cavern, tell me, wet limestone, sandstone caprock,
bat-wing, sightless translucent cave shrimp,

this endless plummet into more of the unknown,
how one keeps secrets for so long.

All my life, I've lived above the ground,
car wheels over paved roads, roots breaking through concrete,
and still I've not understood the reel of this life's purpose.

Not so much living, but a hovering without sense.

What's it like to be always night? No moon, but a few lit up
circles at your many openings. Endless dark, still time
must enter you. Like a train, like a green river?

Tell me what it is to be the thing rooted in shadow.
To be the thing not touched by light (no that's not it)
to not even need the light? I envy; I envy that.

Desire is a tricky thing, the boiling of the body's wants,
more praise, more hands holding the knives away.

I've been the one who has craved and craved until I could not see
beyond my own greed. There's a whole nation of us.

To forgive myself, I point to the earth as witness.

To you, your Frozen Niagara, your Fat Man's Misery,
you with your 400 miles of interlocking caves that lead
only to more of you, tell me,

what it is to be quiet, and yet still breathing.

Ruler of the Underlying, let me
speak to both the dead and the living as you do. Speak
to the ruined earth, the stalactites, the eastern small-footed bat,

to honor this: the length of days. To speak to the core
that creates and swallows, to speak not always to what's
shouting, but to what's underneath asking for nothing.

I am at the mouth of the cave. I am willing to crawl.

(From *The Carrying*)

How to Triumph Like a Girl

By Ada Limon

I like the lady horses best,
how they make it all look easy,
like running 40 miles per hour
is as fun as taking a nap, or grass.
I like their lady horse swagger,
after winning. Ears up, girls, ears up!
But mainly, let's be honest, I like
that they're ladies. As if this big
dangerous animal is also a part of me,
that somewhere inside the delicate
skin of my body, there pumps
an 8-pound female horse heart,
giant with power, heavy with blood.
Don't you want to believe it?
Don't you want to lift my shirt and see
the huge beating genius machine
that thinks, no, it knows,
it's going to come in first.

(From *Bright Dead Things*)

On a Lamppost Long Ago

By Ada Limon

I don't know what to think of first
in the list

of all the things that are disappearing: fishes, birds, trees, flowers, bees,
and languages too. They say that if historical rates are averaged,
a language will die every four months.

In the time it takes to say *I love you*, or move in with someone,
or admit to the child you're carrying, all the intricate words
of a language become extinct.

There are too many things to hold in the palm of the brain.
Your father with Alzheimer's uses the word *thing* to describe
many different nouns and we guess the word he means.
When we get it right, he nods as if it's obvious.

When we get it wrong, his face closes like a fist.

Out walking in the neighborhood, there's a wide metal lamppost
that has scratched into it "Brandy Earlywine loves
Jack Pickett" and then there come the hearts. The barrage of hearts
scratched over and over as if, just in case we have forgotten

the word *love*, we will know its symbol. As if Miss Earlywine
wanted us to know that—even after she and Mr. Pickett

have passed on, their real hearts stopped, the ones that don't look
anything like those little symbols—they frantically, furiously,

late one night under the streetlight while their parents thought
they were asleep, inscribed onto the body of something like
a permanent tree, a heart—so that even after their bodies

have ceased to be bodies, their mouths no longer capable of words,
that universal shape will tell you how she felt, one blue evening,
long ago, when there were still 7,000 languages that named and honored

the plants and animals each in their
own way, when your father said *thing* and we knew what it meant,
and the bees were big and round and buzzing.

(From *The Carrying*)