

MONKEY RANCH

Poems by

Julie Bruck

Brick Books

Monkey Ranch

Our monkeys were striped
green and yellow, except
for the red and white ones.
Outside the house, a screaming
kaleidoscope of stripes chased
stripes, until they settled
in the branches at dusk,
to pick each other's nits.

Father tired of monkey
farming, took a job in town.
We starved our monkeys.
Day by day, they slowed,
and when I picture them now,
or dream of how it was,
they stagger in the black
and white of old newsreels.

It took them a whole year
to die off while we watched.
In those days, children did
as they were told, and Mother
always favored chinchillas.
But they used to wear such
cute little monkey hats—
red, white, yellow, and green.

Cold Cases, Adult Division

They're everywhere and nowhere—a man leaves his wife and children, the morning like any other, after making phone inquiries about private piano lessons, and appears to have been sucked from the face of the earth. Someone's sister plays a gig in rural Nebraska, walks from the club to her car, carrying her guitar case, ten—or was it fifteen years ago? *Cold*, say the police, *maybe gone of their own adult volition*, their families left haunted by a spectral outline, like the suggestion on the skyline of an old hotel, right after it implodes. This week the weather turned colder, but one park vagrant still wears his shorts and singlet, both the colour of dirt. He's draped himself in an old wool blanket which gives him the weight of a weathered sage. Or would, if we could stand to look at him the way our children do, when they're still too young to strip the world of miracles.

Once

Once, I wanted a particular man
to wake and touch me so badly,
I vacuumed the bedroom while he slept.
The harder I hoovered, the deeper
I wanted him, the more I hoovered,
the deeper his sleep. The more
he slept, the deeper my wanting.
It had yet to occur to me that
a man who sleeps while being
hoovered is not a wanting man.
It took much hoovering to drown
out that small complication,
which made me want and Hoover
for another desolate pre-dawn hour
a man who did not want nor wake.

Indécis

*In the absence of faith, indecision is
the mind's great stay against death.*

– Benjamin Constant

Chicken or shrimp,
sell or keep,
cerulean or indigo,
go, stay?
Duck or goose,
how much,
how soon.
Paper or plastic,
how tight,
how hard?
Closets bulge
with painful shoes.
Rugs stacked so
deep they ripple,
making it hard
for a person
to stand.
The air
palpitates, can't
breathe itself.
The worried air
needs rest.
Chairs
to the ceiling
and nowhere to sit.
The world
drums
its fingers.

How to Be Alone

Night-time is for sleeping, we'd chant
to set the clock, to relax her fisted hold
on the crib bars, the minute terry-bound feet
testing their new purchase on the mattress.
We were teaching independence, self-soothing,
how to be alone. If that fails, the book
advised, *There is no more today*, a phrase
so thick with terror, it took hold immediately.
Baby slipped off the ledge and we stood by.
She sank into the dark without a cry.

Girl in the Yellow Cardigan

A mother shouldn't do it, shouldn't watch her girl on the crowded playground from the high library windows, the only new kid at middle school, edging groups which form and reform with each incoming surge of backpacks and bodies. A mother shouldn't witness her clutch that neon green container, which she'd begged to forgo today (so she could slip lunch inside her book bag), and which I'd insisted she take to *keep things cold*.

On the schoolyard, she holds it stiffly, away from her body like an outdated purse with its short, awkward handle, a contagion. No, a mother must see this—the mother who, on this very first morning, prevailed because here's what mattered: the thing is insulated, has a special compartment for its little block of cold, blue ice.

My Father's Clothes

He wore a sheared lamb winter hat
from Russia until it disintegrated.
But the rest of his wardrobe never
took his shape. Navy sports coats
with brass buttons, grey business
suits—as pristine at day's end
as when he first slipped them on.
He could have been a dressmaker's dummy.

No one taught him touch, not his critical
parents in their Panama hats, custom
couture and alligator shoes, not the icy
Czech nurse who bathed the boys year-round
in Long Island Sound. No one showed him
how to live in his clothes, how an elbow
needs to worry its way through a sweater
like the nub of a spring bulb, poking
finally, through the rank, wet earth.

He never pressed his shape on any of us—
only his uprightness, intention, his need
to be going, the Russian hat riding
his head like a black fur envelope.
And when he grasped his children
in affection, say, fingers around the back
of a neck, he always squeezed until it hurt,
and we could only pull away, leaving
his bewildered hand groping for a pocket,
and finding it basted shut.

Boy At The Window

Let's just say he fell because
he was up there in the middle
of the night, prying the damn
thing open with his fingers
from the outside, his taut body
filling the frame. Let's say
you panicked when you woke
with his shadow on the bed,
that you swore, rapped hard
on the glass with a travel
umbrella that just happened
to be lying on the nightstand.
That you didn't tell anyone
there'd been an incident,
or glance down to see if a boy
lay crumpled in the courtyard,
or had returned to the shadows
that produced him. You did
not look for this boy's mother:
he shouldn't have been at the window.
You're a mother of daughters,
and cannot be trusted with sons.

The Help

Polished brass doorknobs, retrieved
newspapers, vegetables, mail, meat,
new clothes from that day's ads.
They carried in thick glass jars
of yogurt, and sweating bottles
of Guaranteed milk, left between
back doors with a handwritten note,
correct change. Planted annuals,
deadheaded perennials, weeded lawns,
watered all. Raised children, waxed
floors, starched shirts, poured
milk, filled pools. Baked cake.
Scrubbed toilets, washed curtains,
beat rugs, ironed sheets, aired rooms,
fed dogs, cleaned silver, waited
table, scraped plates. Every night,
a checked apron, discreetly folded
on a shelf in the tidy kitchen
closet, before the last one out,
in thin wool coat and worn overshoes,
climbed the snowy hill to catch the #66,
support hose, work slippers, school
pictures of her nephews, and a book
of paper bus tickets to last
through the month, deep
in a shopping bag from Harrods.

Final Season

Family Day, Bay Meadows Racetrack, 2007

Every ten minutes the indoor arcades swell
with the roar of men losing the rent.
Small kids queue for an Easter egg hunt,
their pastel line threading between wizened
regulars, who've stepped outside to smoke
and wince, Racing Forms held against the sun.
Four more weeks of bright silks unspooling
but the place feels tarnished with retrospect.
A jockey walks by with his fly-weight saddle,
his face the colour of veal, as monitors
stream the fifth live from Santa Anita.
We watch the horses fuss and sidle
to the gate—each a gleaming ton of coiled
muscle—and in this slim window, our
forearms pressed to the singing rail, know
the exuberant, thundering release.

Today's Handicap

Comments from the San Francisco Chronicle's daily horse-racing stats.

Beat up on maidens.
May never look back.
Dull one.
No clue.
Can run with these.
Capable if fired.
Bred to be quick.
Hard one.
Lacks tactical speed.
Out of his gourd.
Been chasing better.
Back with own type.
Good heat.
Has best jock.
Best is needed.
Hung up in lane.
Never made a move.
Nothing yet.
Drops off.
Beaten favorite.
Knocking at the door.
Has won on the lawn.
Can't be overlooked.
View from afar.
In clever hands.
Cheap but honest.
Can't recommend.
Hits rock bottom.
Must do more.
May forget to stop.

The Winningest Jockey

He could hold that assumed prayer position,
be plucked gently as a lifted cricket from
the foam-slicked, heaving winner of this race,
its nostrils blown, and be lowered to the next.
So go the days. At season's end, a long bath,
his pose unfurling like a Magic Sponge™
until he walks upright, and we lose his sparse,
red hair to the parking lot—a bowlegged
slip of a man, moving from one sun-struck chassis
to the next, mumbling, searching for his truck.



Julie Bruck is the author of two previous books, *The End of Travel* (1999), and *The Woman Downstairs* (1993). Her recent work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Literary Mama*, *Maisonneuve*, *The Malahat Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review* and *The Walrus*, among other publications. A Montreal native, she lives in San Francisco with her husband and daughter, and two enormous, geriatric goldfish.