Dear Mother, I am dying and Other Poems

By Ajibola Tolase
Art by Claudia Keep

Dear Mother, I am dying.

I held my breath for twelve
long seconds and I didn't break
my stride. I am past the evening
at the dock, the fog descending
like white stallions. I am sitting
on the pier where you last sang
to your father before he sailed
into the mist, hoping you will
sing to me before I leave. I am
not afraid of the dark or the
blinding lights that come after.
It is the silence that terrifies me
like walking in a tunnel and you
scream you are not alone so, the
echo comforts you like a friend.

Claudia Keep, Moth in the Light of the Bonfire, 2022, oil on masonite panel, 10 x 8 inches.

BACKWARDS

I promise to not return
if this city won't meet
me with warmth. I do
not care for its women
and their brief love. I have
no sympathy for the woman
at the post office who mailed
her husband a love letter
addressed to another. Fuck
this city and its muddy lattes.
If I knew the woman in my
arms were married, I wouldn't
have reached for the music
in her mouth. From now on
I will board the first train to work.
I will take a rear-facing seat for
a chance that the train might travel
backwards into the city of my youth.
You will be waiting with the anger
that burned my book of sonnets. And
I will have nothing to offer you
besides the unsweetened tea
that I have come to like.
I love you is as true as a train
traveling into the past. I am
reaching, like the woman
at the post office reaching
into the collection box
for a letter she sent decades ago.

Claudia Keep, Watergun, 2020, watercolor on paper, 6 x 8 inches.

DRUMSTICK

Killing a chicken seemed
an easy task for my mother

who has never butchered.
She pinned both wings

and claws under her feet,
ran a finger against the grain

of its feather to reveal the skin
of its neck. If the animal were

granted a word, it would say
please before my mother made

a small cut. She pressed its
tiny body until it stopped

throbbing under her palm.
The chicken came back

to life in a bowl of boiling
water meant to ease plucking

its feathers. It ran around
the kitchen in circles. Its head

drooped from where the knife
grazed its neck. My mother

rushed towards the door,
screaming in a manner I was

certain matched those who
saw Jesus walk out of his tomb.

I am a believer in the power
of hunger. My mother and

I ate drumsticks before we
bleached the kitchen floor.

Claudia Keep, Pool Swim, 2021, oil on wood panel, 12 x 10 inches.

NIGHT

For several hours in my bed,
I thought about the bartender
who told me she thinks she would

die soon. The few times she was
by the coast the tide rose over
the levee in rage she was tempted

to drive into it. She moved back
to the country for this. We were
strangers talking in a dwindling

bar and I hoped she would get
busy. I don't know more than
she told me. Last year she was

tortured in a room so white
it felt wrong to think of it
as a prison in Serbia where

she lived. I am not puzzled
by her delight to have come
home to her mother but my

father's return years after
his closet space was cleaned
out. For many days, I did not

know what to say to him.
I thought he would stay gone.

Claudia Keep, Pink Half-Moon Over Newark, 2022, oil on masonite panel, 10 x 8 inches.