

ABSTRACT

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Tongue begins with Ovid's Philomela. Instead of presenting the female as a body with a gaping, empty mouth, *Tongue* presents notions of speech. *Tongue* moves through mythological poems that perform Odysseus's wanderings as a means by which a speaker understands "home" to be the human body, and the psyche's relationship to that body. Influenced by the way in which James Joyce's chapters of *Ulysses* perform episodes of Homer's myth—in language that does not try to match up a single "Cyclops" or "Circe" figure—*Tongue* subverts gender expectations and moves through myth, music, and subconscious narrative leaps. For these poems do not seek to present a single narrative, but to use mythology as mirrors reflecting story fragments common to a speaker, a woman, and experiences of "home." What are myths but transcriptions? The tongue is a fleshy and flexible organ.

TONGUE

By

Tyler Caroline Mills

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Third Coast: “Performance”

WATER-STONE REVIEW: “Odyssey”

I give thanks for all of my mentors’ guidance during my studies at the University of Maryland. I also give thanks for the support of my family and friends.

Imprisoned here, my voice will fill the trees

—Philomela, *Ovid Metamorphoses*

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Tongue

The problem is not night—people gathering in booths, drinking—
or the game where you select who to save from an apartment that's on fire.

But at night, the silver bathroom stalls in the Multiplex crack open
as if I am the last horse to wander out during the credits.

What I mean is, my thighs sometimes still feel like the whites of a poached egg.
There is logic to thinking about digger wasps, solitary insects that excavate

nests from the soil and then straddle their prey, usually an August cricket,
ashy as the blade of a waterlogged feather. And at night, the hermit thrush

calls, flutters to a new tree, calls, and soon the grove hosts a quorum
of these nightingale songs when there is only one traveling from tree to tree,

to an oak like the one shading my porch—I go there at night to breathe.
In the myth of Philomela, the King puts his knife down Philomela's throat

after he finishes, then cuts her tongue out. Before she becomes a thrush,
she weaves what happened: images in a bolt of cloth, a kind of flag.

The newspaper pays for them, the flickering paper flags
leaning on the bottom panel of the doors in the neighborhoods.

Again this year, before dawn, the truck door slammed—I heard
someone cross the street. When I woke, flames were mouthing the air.

Tell Me, Muse

The child's room balances single beds, mine, my friend's.
Blue light closes ship-decorated curtains. Unaccompanied
Bach under my arm, I bring my violin to the chapped sand slopes
along the Boardwalk fence—the thin stripe of beach,

same tide in morning as evening when the jumper-plane pulls
sky with its ribbon of advertisements, omens we stop
talking to read. Along the beach men replace planks of wood,
rotting boardwalk, and the summer homes have plywood

nailed over windows as though a hurricane ocean is swelling
the way my belly rises with my breath. I stretch out on my blanket.

Breathe. I wrote
Breathe, my teacher clapping her hands under the instrument's scroll.
There is a story. You are traveling from one place—the return,
do you hear this? Back to the beginning, listen, as though you never left,
as though you are returning.

My friend joins me with her backpack,
drizzles forest green yarn between her calves. She knits rows of loops,
pulls them out, goes inside to shower.

We had packed
so many people in that house, I barely knew the couple who drank
Diet Coke by the liter to have sex again in their room and argue.
New Jersey shore towns are palisades of concrete—one vinyl beach
house drops the shadow edge over the smaller house

where the front lawn would be and is rented out. Chain-link fences
wrap around each plot and glisten in the pink evenings, seeming
to move with restless silver cats. Sometimes someone burns sausages.
We go to gift shops, handle crystal shells, set the name key chains

swinging, and touch rims of purple hats that seem like a good idea
propped up on the arms of the hat stand as a child whines outside
the open doorway. *I want, I want.* In my dream, the ocean
swirls to the house and I climb out the window and on top the roof.

Our beds float, rafts that are too far, and the patch of tiles
shrink my feet. I am going to drown here,
violin inside, nestled in the heavy stones of my shoes.
We are going to drown—

I try to wake my friend,

make tea, sit by the window on a pearly chair. Rain.

I am at the part in my book when Stinking Lizaveta,
shoved against the shed, or held down in the mud—but no one sees,
you woman, O you woman. Outside the kitchen, the ocean rolls and rolls.

Oracle

There is a whale in my future: enormous, hidden under chopped-up water, and dumb.

An augur could tell this from the white-out splashes of sea-birds collecting in pools,
bobbing
numbly until lifting off in a patch of wind, landing together someplace else
altogether.

At the shore, in winter, I went to the boardwalk with a friend and sea gulls
covered the sand, skull-pale, picking and picking nothing. All turned black

pearl eyes at us as though we carried steaming loaves of bread. It sounds like
I made this up, so grackles too descended on us: oily purple blue plumage,

each tail a wedge, a sculptor's tool I gathered in the scarf I pulled off my neck
along with the sickle I picked up for a couple of quarters at the neighbor's

weekly yard sale, Saturdays, the driveway grouped with people slow-moving
past milk crates of wild, linseed-greased and more and more naked, dolls.

Violinist

Once, there was a knife, a bone sliver
of wood, a crate packed with balls of white hair
like my mother's weaving loom,
unscrewed, growing out of cardboard boxes,
strange plants in the basement,
her words appearing over my shoulder,
wrapping around the shuttle,
darting it through wool strings:

delicate fence, quiet knotted harp.

Backstage I rustle in my gown, worried, a dried flower
rubbing off leaves in the dark pantry.

This is tuning: pinching
a black peg between thumb and index finger like a dead bee,
the moaning—
weak chairs creaking underneath guests,
then a perfect sound—my fingers slide between sofa cushions—
four silver quarters, success, Eratosthenes
painting sun triangles with poles stuck in sand.

The audience is an airplane shadow
spreading across chairs like our house roof,
darkening, so close to O'Hare that each engine scream
cast our forms into garden statues for five seconds.

Now there is this moment:
when the slim canoe slaps against the dock,
empty, when the body must balance inside
petal-thin walls. An oar slides in water,
grazes rock.

I drift off, shoulders rowing:

a river bird, a Chinese ink-brush,
trees my father taught me to draw by standing under them.

This is why I spend years building stables
—finger-joints measured, solid,
strong enough to protect all the horses.

The Sirens

Pilot whales beach their black bodies
on sandbars off the Cape and with my grandparents

I watched them dying on TV that August,
when tourist children poured more sun

onto the whale fins with neon sand-buckets
of warm water, tried to push them out,

push them out past the stripes of gleaming
snails but they kept coming in again at high tide

and when water bled away from their heavy forms
they cried soft dog noises that humans also

make from a place in the ribs that opens
a chamber, a cathedral, where an echo

echoes and loses itself. Ear training involves singing,
knowing how to sing a series of pitches in your mind

before your mouth finds strange leaps
in sound with the tongue and throat, not a melody,

these facts to learn. Stuff your ears with wax,
fall asleep on the deck of a motorboat

near the jagged granite rocks people arrange
into jetties to guide the land, what some women

need, the ones who *had it coming*. I remember
braiding the hair of a friend's doll by myself in her bedroom

and the sheer curtains whipped rain against walls
and then the tornado sirens howled, first one,

then another, suburban wolves, as all the nearby
towns called and called to one another.

The babysitter downstairs told me I heard
nothing and flipped the radio on, piled flashlights

near her sandals, so my friend and I checked

the basement but yellow clumps of sewage

had backed up to the bottom step, strewn flowers
of toilet paper clogging the wheels of the pool table

so in the living room we made sure the cathedral windows
opened to trees, so close to the house, so dark, and we

sat quietly, listening, knowing from school that when
the storm comes, you have to let the wind in.

Odyssey

Stained wood homes line the Susquehanna River
like rusted and abandoned train cars. Except—
look: windows glow gold squares in the rain,
baskets of rooms cradling the shadows
moving inside like wings warming smooth dark eggs.
A Winnebago pulls a rickety carousel,
the kind churches rent for town festivals.
Metal green & orange & lilac hooves
jostle above the road, past the granite outcrop,
the quilts for sale hanging above front porches
like sheets blotted brown with tight roses of blood.

Mennonite women wearing oyster-shell bonnets
wait with their husbands at the gynecologist.
Under the TV, they sit straight-backed in their chairs,
watching me brush through the doors—*another one*.
Downstairs, faded curtains groom the test room
into separate stages like a community
theatre. My nurse inspects the form
longer than she needs to, her latex gloves
pausing with the needle, an accusing pen
drawing into my arms that *did not fight*.

Something is about to disappear.
On Route 15, the rusted Winnebago pulls
its tangled bracelet of horses. Painted,
wild eyes watch through the reined net, stiff tassels,
the bare shoulders scalloped with undergarment straps.
I drive past the jumbled shapes of animals
tethered to poles. There is nothing to unhook—
when one horse collapses like silk from a hanger,
lying in the road like a long brown deer,
men in tangerine hats pull legs to the curb,
hug the slender neck, saw the head off, and keep it.

Telemachos

There is a sound—a fist? I see the man
in my mind wearing a sweatshirt,
the hood pulled over a red hat.
Orange sun turns silver on the cars,
warms the under-skin of clouds, rests somewhere

on the roof of a carwash like a paper disk
I had cut with red-handled scissors as the solar eclipse
collected noon into a shadow
among the gray trees outside, beyond our desks.
Stravinsky (from his writings) dreamed of a young girl,

her erratic hands grabbing nothing,
wrapping the air in scarves around her neck.
I drive down the highway sparking with hubcaps,
shredded trash bags, where ambulances shriek
every twenty minutes. I pull into a gas station,

wipe bird smears off my window with some paper.
Pump fumes smell like greasy hamburgers.
Your hair, your hair is red. A man behind me,
his pale eyes smoothing my shoulders,
drawing a cold line under my itchy T-shirt.

Your hair is red in the sun. It is not red, no. Sky
bands the nearby Dollar Store window;
feeling followed, behind some junky trees I see a crane
lifting from the concrete, gold, the way a harp
unfolds in an orchestra—not a wing, but a thin wild sail.

Violin Shop

Instruments hang from the ceiling,
stiff necks, bodies burnished gold,
curved like pheasants, mute swans, a rare condor,
so valuable that symphony musicians
borrow these forms only for specific concerts,
such as *Scheherazade*, where a violin solo
draws the hushed audience
inside itself like rows of oars
sliding on the flat deck of a Phoenician ship.
In the shop, luthiers worry—they wipe
varnish on their apron pockets.
Glass pots gleam yellow with boiled glue,
and slips of tan horsehair fan the worktables;
the silver tools small enough to fit inside my mouth
cannot make *Guarneri del Gesu* speak.
Rumors say the three hundred year old
violin hid beneath the bed of a man in Spain
while a bullet spat his wet blood:
a clean red arc across the floor. Black *f* slits
angle in an “antagonistic” way—the violin mutters,
complains under the chin of Berlin
Philharmonic musicians. I read this
in the *Chicago Tribune*. The shop owners
stood over the wood instrument, praying
for its voice, they brewed coffee,
rubbed its body with swatches of velvet,
then they called a man, an exorcist,
who probably laid the violin
down on the stock market page
as if it was a pumpkin, round,
hairy inside with seed-pulp, and chanted,
hollowing out its cavity: the voice that laughed at Bach,
groaned through Tchaikovsky’s concerto
that usually runs so fast trees blur,
that spoke out loud longer than you
or I ever will and wanted to comment
finally on how things really are, was cured.

Proteus

—his hands gleam with water or end up gripping the cannon bone of a frightened deer or a long blue candle dripping hot wax down his arm. Sex is like this, a spool of lace ribbon wound tight, taped to its own cloth, so you can work a little to unwrap it, place the loose end on the rug, run around the room, darting three times between the chairs until the quiet space is a white mess everyone wants to stick their fingers in. Then, there is sex for effect. When people write: Rape of the Mind, Rape of Man...

“I did not even know it, I don’t remember; I was wet—I showed him the blood on my underpants, rust-brown; I remember the deep stabs, how it hurt, how I gasped and choked it into a moan, and maybe I even kissed his shoulder after everything.”

There were five red doors down the street across from the playground and the police station where the town cars line up like duck decoys. My door was the third one—when you knock a woman opens it and asks *who are you?* And then she leads you up the creaky stairs, because it is just an old house after all, and there is an office in a bedroom, maybe once a child’s because there are still silver star stickers clumped on the ceiling, and you sit in a chair and the woman says you were raped. *You were raped. You were raped* so in your car the steering wheel feels like bones, so when you lie flat on your bed on top of the quilt you are a body.

You remember being a fifteen-year-old body in a room filled with wasps. A woman calls your name and you play Brahms. You walk back to the dormitory through a park with a fountain. The wet persistence of water on stone. Stone moving in the light.

You could have left your violin, its black case, there in the park, but you brought it, threw it on your bed. So you sat in the orchestra, back where all of the violins’ faces look like *a sea of little moons*. That is what one conductor announced. The concertmaster of a professional orchestra led the string section one of those mornings.

Do not cross your legs under your chair. The ground is where you get your power, your balance.

You straightened your legs, raised the metal music stand. A painted fan.

The Chorus Rubs on Children's Sunscreen

We grieve. We grieve. We crinkle the corners
of the sheets in our fists, try to fold the cloth.
A battle-flag. If there were candles,
flames would drip stalactites of blushed wax.
We know where the garbage bags are,
clean as un-licked envelopes, scented:
a knifed lemon. You there. We know
about you. You could be waking to an alarm.
Your pillow holds your dreaming brain.
You are allowed to be thoughtless, to live
in a normal way—wherever you are.
You walk to the farmer's market,
thinking in the freckled straw shade.
Flies bury stain-glass wings, blue,
in the moist locks of hair above your ears.
Or, you drive, strapping the triangle weave
of the seat belt across your heart.
Your heart can or cannot be heard
like freight-trains pulsing the air outside
our childhood bedrooms.
The neighborhood kids assigned roles
in their games and one child tried to spell
“hate” with a marker on a paper napkin:
I hat you.

We protect our eyes.

Sunroofs cut the parked cars drooling oil
from their pipes.

We protect our skin.

Smell. Bowls of grapefruit skins weigh the trash,
a system of scales:

You.

You are a man.

You are sleeping somewhere.

A Bold Bluff

Forget about homing pigeons.
Send cadmium-feathered crested malimbos

to Conceptual Prison
down the street from 2218 Leavenworth—

where sapsuckers dash above wires,
frost-bite gray with dirt,

with hunger, these singleton pilots
performing nose-to-nose and nose-to-tail turns

beyond the cartilage skins of the windows,
the bricks & bricks & bricks.

I want to retire to an island,
alight all the candles lined up in their drawers

in the prison chapel, the altar cloth
shimmering the color of carp.

Johnny Cash asked the guards
if he could just have a glass of water

I heard in the recording from San Quentin prison
and I am wondering where fire-fronted bishops nest,

stern plumes of feathers, a burning way of staring,
drawn in the sun in the book's illustration?

Nail those yellow tomatoes so warm in that painting
to the right of the kitchen window.

Drag in that bag of charcoal if you can,
sift out the pulverized pieces, the fine dust,

the pounce: which used to be used to transfer a stencil
design when sprinkled to an underlying surface.

Minotaur and Maze

It is all a misunderstanding. The rusting car tucks its envelope shadow between other metal domes, reflecting the dim orange lights that wash the floor in gloss. Around, around the levels, C5, the growling ventilation fans remind me to walk with intent in the garage. Know where to go: this is an important lesson—each time I learn it. In the coffee house swept by red curtains where I often get the chipped *Queen of Hearts* coffee mug, a man tells me he is bidding on Jerry Garcia's toilet—small and porcelain white, no shit stains, just something to screw on his walls under its authentication certificate. Like Duchamp, steal ready-mades, from people with wine-stained teeth: in Columbia, street vendors sell iguana eggs boiled in salt, punctured with string, hanging the way only eggs can hang—smelling of rot. Eat reptile flesh. Eat any object left in a warm crumpled ball of aluminum foil on the train seat. Red red sauce. Before I was born, my parents rented the downstairs apartment to a man who never threw out his nail clippings, the yellow shells stuffed in sandwich bags, tucked inside empty corn cans, lying under months of cigarette ash dusting the *Chicago Tribune* stacked daily to the ceiling in teetering gray walls, enough words for anyone, even for me to cut up and steal until my hands cramp open. But continue, continue about how I pressed my first carnation under Shakespeare, a heavy book I found, and the boy drew pencil mazes on notebook paper for me to trace, and now he is so fucked up his eyes cannot focus beyond his matted bangs. I jab a wall with my elbow. The lesson, to learn where to go, open the similar doors of all the rooms I've lived in and end up in my own closet, cushioned by stacks of towels smelling of sweet chemicals. Then eavesdrop on my neighbors. Can I hear them breathing through the wall? Eavesdrop on myself, listen to my damp feet sticking to tile, pushing footprints, wet, that evaporate, of course, of course they do. So breathe on the mirror—a tuft of cotton brushes over the mouth. Do not admit *I am lost*. Stack as many milk glasses so they smash in the kitchen, so there are heavy footsteps cracking the stairs, so a broom misunderstands the floor: *brush, brush, brush*.

Rations

After sleeping all day
on a friend's pull-out,
she and I buy toilet paper.
All the oily bagged pastries
sweating in the convenience
store's window face
the scaffolding of the 7 train
my friend takes to the schizophrenic patients:
the young one who hits on her
in the booth of a deli,
the woman who believes
she was raped. In the apartment,
cats sulk under the dust-ruffle.
We wash a handful of plastic forks,
eat over-boiled ringlets of pasta, rinsed,
sauced and heaped in yellow mugs.
The woman on TV works in an aviary:
Swallows rape each other.
Across from my bus I had passed a melon
building with a sign, *Sun Yum Temple*.
A woman tore white bread
for a cluster of battered-looking pigeons.
I stood there a minute. She left,
then came back with a broom.

Cleaning Out the Inside

Pour fifteen grains of rice into your hand
and guide the ice-white, jumping chips to the face
of your violin, then in the cheekbones, fanned,
these gentle f-hole carvings of fern or lace—
yes, inside, the lining of willow-wood: cleaning
little rice, the dust's loose, the voice rains,
raining the trees that bow to the silver-green
lake where a horse and cart's loaded with chains
to secure the carp along the mud town's road
past the violin shop, where Jean Baptiste's artists
plane the willow and sand the maple good
for the ribs and unbraided white horsehair with mists
of water and a bone comb as they stretch
then unwrap bread and cheese over their sketches.

Nausikaa

until they had washed and rinsed the dirt away –vi. 93

Nothing happens here, but it might: angry
red bandannas group the men near the door,
dryers line the corridor with a gray charge and heat
hangs around the silver baskets chiming
together as people bump past holding their week
in sheets. Nothing happens, but nests
of hair wind hatched shadows
frantically around the legs of the linoleum folding
table where there is a stack of infant
undershirts, clean slices of bread, on wine-blue
pants. A man stammers *no watch*,
holds his bare wrist to me. Here. Autumn
jackets smack against a porthole
window and two girls chase each other around
their mother's legs, tumbling into ribs
of light rippling the green pool of a blanket.
The bras inside my pile of towels are lemons.
Through the window pink with fluorescence
and hand-smudges, cars are swans
waiting in an olive grove—
the streetlamps look nothing like trees
the way cars are not birds in the glass
morning, a ripping sheet of aluminum
foil bringing in all of us with our garbage
bags of clothes we give to the current
of machines and wait together under the TVs
where the same woman pretends to cry
about nothing! And in my hands, dripping
camisoles take to their shapes without my body.

The Museum is Under Construction

Coronations and jousting tournaments.
A hundred years to build—in Medieval
Europe “there was no precedent
for secular interiors on such
a large scale” and the peaked whale
ribs of the roof swallow you.
The vaulting, more sculpture than roof,
is like interlocked and twisted hands.
I’ve been there, but now I’m reading books.
Sitting on your jacket in the grass,
you are drawing the Smithsonian
museums from the National Mall.
Bicyclists and Italian Greyhounds
pass you with paintbrush shadows.
Wet. The hair washing the page gray.
This cathedral’s castle glass up there—
slashed milky slits and gold dashed
hands of the clock, rosettes where the three
and six would be—is not the Tudor Palace,
begun in 1514, or the gilded mirror
I saw tilting the room above the writing
desk and opal-inlay bird-footed chair
pushed underneath. People were shorter then,
their beds were also shorter—see the canopy
bed between the second droop of the velvet
ropes, the museum’s conscious effort at
consciousness, keeping us away
from flowering sedge and the false
colors of the photographed stars
and lunar craters sloping, a black lake,
as though hands had pushed and pushed the moon.
Let’s pretend we understand things.
Now the empty lakes are systems of rays.
Now let’s read maps of Jupiter’s satellites
or *A Beginner’s Guide to Hieroglyphs*.
Drawing them, not what they mean:
the vulture’s angle at the back of the head
is explained by how the features
in that region behave, vaulting,
water fanning out, disturbed.

From Books with Australian Hopping Mice, the United States

Steel Corporation, a Multi-mode Telepanel, Gorbachev, Shelf

Ends, and a Permanent Erection in Them

In a town museum, standing in front of the metallic pink dishwashers and a General Electric oven, my grandmother pointed out all of the nozzles and delicious chrome handles that are each the size of a glove. *My mother's* she breathed and another woman wearing a yellow raincoat agreed as a guard barely pretended to be paying attention. Gorbachev, when visiting the United States during the Cold War, was shown an American kitchen and on television the black-and-white flecked ovens, everything in its place, was as bright and shined as a perfect dream could prove, and Gorbachev said something about it in History, where I sat in front of Greg Y. when his hair was as blue as a Bic pen, and now he drives the only taxi that town has since you can walk from one end to the other in fifteen minutes. *A Shelf end, that is what this is* says the town when a cartographer pins it on a map. But the dot could be one of those imaginary towns, joke places with dirty names, some slang for “permanent erection” in a language no one would get, placed next to a creek that also might not exist. Pausing to ask these questions is confusing, as though you are standing inside a bookshop where the owner is speaking German to a Canadian man and the encyclopedias, the cartoon children's books, even the strange postcards of faded places such as paper mills read in Czech. The United States Steel Corporation would have made a terrible postcard, but someone would have bought it anyway, along with a multi-mode telepanel to weld into another multi-mode telepanel, to make a glittering, soon to be dilapidated sculpture rusting a blood clump heap at the edge of town, where the high school kids make out, at least that's where I went, after dark, in summers when mosquitoes picked welts into the legs so everyone would know where you were anyway, standing in a sweet, cool dark, the long grass tickling the knees, under the sculpture until the sun softened to orange and a deep purple, as though your younger brother was playing with the living room light-dimmer and would soon very quickly flick it on. I saw other animals in those fields, muskrats skimming the edges of the creek, and pretended they were only Australian hopping mice, harmless because I discovered them in a book that someone else used a little while, for what they could, before leaving it behind.

Wandering Rocks

Some people say they like certain music without thinking.
In rehearsal one conductor yelled,
Don't ruin this temple, don't spit on this castle.
In Greencastle, Ireland triangular stairs wear into the stones.
The tower is a chute darkening the dirt
where parents, angry about their daughter,

buried a man alive and his arms thinned to oak twigs.
We can pretend this is a moment in time,
if you like. The steering wheel locked in the blue
Voyager van near the stench of Gary, Indiana
and my mother coasted us to the shoulder,
a patch of Queen Anne's lace, weed flowers,

while my father pulled over the art truck,
a rented U-Haul packed with family blankets,
her strong weavings, a sculpture with his own wisdom
tooth glued to it. But what I remember best
are two thick chains weighing down the German shepherds
that choked at us behind the auto garage.

Sun heated their necks metallic blue and chalky gravel
collected on their muzzles. Is art more real
when it is described or named?
In college, I watched a performance artist
pour gasoline on a piano someone dragged past the football field,
and she lit it with a match that sparked inside

the wood's holes where brass foot-pedals stick out.
Strings popped pitches—A, D#—and the grass
glowered and the crowd got bored with how long it took
for the keys to explode yellow, collapse, the black back to lean,
and I stood near some composers, music students,
the last few watching. One said crassly *it's like Beethoven—*

*chord-chord-chord-and chord and you think it is done, then—chord—
finished? No—chord.* An event can be a parody the way nakedness
pretends to be naked as that morning
I touched the sun in my hair, pushed it
from my eyes, rubbed makeup off my eyelids,
felt my face, flushed and hot. The first door, out of his room,

led to stairs. The stairs led down. The morning was autumn,
when silver frost crusts the grass, the kind of morning

my parents like to wake up to with their coffee,
sit by the smoky window, notice the cold tree
moving with things: one with rosy feathers crowning its head,
one my father thinks looks like an egg dipped in dye,

one that is large and almost blue. I forget their names.
Is anything more real when it is described or named?
I confided in a friend and she told me *he finished*
what he started, meaning, finished inside of you,
meaning you wanted it, which she told people

when she was finished with me. That summer
I rented a bicycle, rode one length
of an Aran Island, past huge intelligent cattle
blinking in the sun from behind low stone
fences and the walls of ruined houses where wind
wore the roofs away. The path followed ocean
to one of the island's cliffs and a semi-circle stone fort,

Dun Aonghasa, built so farmers could see invading ships.
I climbed through the short square opening in rock,
and the ledge was flat as the sky. The wall felt almost safe.
I lay my belly on the warm pink stone,
slid to the edge, put my hands where the rock
cuts down, curled my fingers over, thrust

my face out over nothing and water—
turquoise and yellow, crushing, glassy, up and up.
I smelled the spray, looked out where a finger
rubbed the horizon silver. Out there there were
no ships glittering—who would invade this small
farm island, with its stony fields, its seal pool

on the other side of land? The small round heads
looked like human swimmers, bobbing in water, disappearing,
reappearing, even smaller, even farther away.

Entering the Mouth

The serpent as an instrument is a kind of plastic recorder but with three holes spacing the outer curve of the first loop and three spacing the skin of the belly, the last torpid twist. We learn to play the way children learn everything: by listening and watching.

I held an instrument
to my lap while a whole wall meshed with notes
glowed from the transparency, tinged an onion-white,
our severe teacher slid from a folder on the piano,
this translation, like an abbreviated postcard
from the cliff above Giant's Causeway

I sent my mother:
the hexagonal heads of basalt glittering
a diamond path to the water one of the summers
after my Fresh Air Sister had to have a molar pulled—
her wails muffled in bloody gauze packing her cheeks—
by the dentist my mom swears was rough,

ripping the root from the gum, and there was something
about him, his voice or the way he handled
the long beaked pliers with his latex skin,
clamped her jaw and gave her mouth
to the fluorescence of his upstate practice.

Lotus

Sit in the narrow beak of the canoe and push the oar
against the green hands the current breathes against the frame.
Placid. Black pines opening at the water.

The wooden handles drag bugs lacing the water's silver
and now the sun steams the lake the way my mother and father exhale
an iron over their smooth blue shirts. My grandfather

showed me the doves in our yard,
the ones that look like opera singers filling their breasts
before exhaling, feathers gray not with dawn,

grieving in pairs, their tails swooping up
to the cracked ledge of our carriage house.
I imagine gold hay inside. In pairs, one knows

another: wrapping the kitchen dishes in newspaper,
answering the telephone when it opens up
the night from its place on the piano.

Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* by T.C. Mills

New Year's Eve in Central Park: the flat lake an apricot
before Lucky Cheng's where our transvestite waitress

brings a crown of balloons pinched and twisted
like circus dogs. How quiet we get when they dance,

these new women laying their hands down their flat thighs
and rose feathers trailing from silver heels. *Real, real:*

the age of innocence begins in an opera box
and ends with a dark-haired woman's apartment

window. Or the age of innocence begins with my cousin
holding a green razor between her legs

in my bedroom after not eating the Easter cake
we made with egg whites and almonds,

my hair wrapped in a fist at my neck.
Or the age of innocence begins with rehearsing

Wagner, violins lost in *Tristan und Isolde*, the conductor's
hands pulling the shirt off of no one in front of him.

Cyclops

The infinite trains, how I counted
rusty green cars lumbering near the black cave
bar that opened to neat red stools, a greasy man
who stared surprised at the trees.
All perspective is is a dot
you can plan on any page—
my mother's metal drafting ruler showed me—
and then draw solid cubes so a house
can hover above crayon spikes of grass.
I am afraid. I have seen sheep puff like dandelion seeds,
some spotting blue as though thumbs
pushed ink on their backs.
Farmers spray dye on the rams
so after rutting with ewes,
used ones are marked.
The more a thing is investigated,
the more it burns closed. I saw
a museum display these photographs:
Paganini's ghost wearing a cloth devil mask
pushing on his violin, and others, a serious girl,
her hair parting her skull in half.
People show others how no one *is* there,
still turning cold doorknobs into their rooms.
And the more a thing is investigated, the more it burns.

Aeolian Harp

When language fails, there is sound, wind
 chimes rustling with the potted fern
growing near the screen door that frames
 sidewalk squares and a young woman running
her exuberant gold dog.

 On this porch after school, I cared for a child
found in an empty factory,
 in China. Her thin calves
curled around my waist.

 Her new father was in the garden,
among the sugar-snap peas
 rubbing together and glimmering
as though moving with rain.

 Upstairs, doll-sized nightgowns
folded into squares the way canvas sails
 can be pressed closed and I tried to calm her,
told her about the rabbits living in a book she held.

 She opened her eyes at this,
just aware of my voice,
 the way my sister now turns her head
away to the car window, to Market Street's
 pizza shop signs, orange words,
and the heavy trees spreading night under them.

 She slides off her thumb ring, rubs it,
balances the silver circle on one jean kneecap,
 her pink comb of a hand behind an ear.
My voice comes from another place
 where tall lights guard the shapes of cars,
the parking lot dim, ordered, and quiet.

Laistrygones

carried them away for their joyless feasting x.123-124

There are two hours left

There are files of lanterns

Lanterns pulling through the trees

People lick them

See their mouths open and talk

The road unrolls here

On TV people are fucking I think

It doesn't sound like English

My hands and I are naked here

Rings of moon grab the man from his hands

It is after midnight

He lies down

Staircase

The flat fish ribs

Separate and finish

Finish just

Finish

Pit

My last bruised apple rolls among the hard onions and my memory
of the refrigerator box upside-down in the grass like a castle.
Even last week, when my uncle said his friend owns Thomas Edison's voice,
I could imagine it, stored between a silver-spoon collection and a row of shot-glasses
stamped with *London* or empty beach chairs. So I have my canvas
bag stuffed with plaster masks, the decaying horse-shoe crab,
its hollow rib-cage crusted in sand grains, the last white houses
standing, vacant, in Centralia, Pennsylvania, wreathed in smoke
like early-morning fog settling on fence tips, where to get rid of garbage
someone threw a match in a trash pit, igniting an anthracite vein.
Fire races through underground mines. Roads buckle above ground,
fold into earth so poisoned most people fled. Even the government gave up,
ignoring dusky coal crevices, caves, the flames spreading wild for miles—enormous
flushed heart. The ruined trees, the barren soil patches exhaling gauze shawls
of carbon monoxide. The sign jammed in chunks of cement:
Ground Prone to Sudden Collapse. I'm standing there.

Standing Still

A bent arm from the cardboard whiskey box
packed with plastic dolls almost hooked one man's
pant cuff and the peach mattress staggered to the porch
of the house that breathed out all our things,
tired in the hot sun. A soft couch
collapsing with flat cushions baked in the grass.
Everything looks cheap outside each time
we pack it, carry it to the back of a truck,
drag it upstairs in another house—
door propped open, boxes wrecked like bottles
along the new driveway where mermaids would have lived
before I stopped drawing. The last time
I remember their blue faces appearing
lonely in tar, black-ribboned clouds
pulled breathing trees close to the house.
In Northern Ireland I stood in the ruins
of Dunluce Castle and learned about a mermaid
cave hollowing limestone under the teal water.
One night when rain rinsed the castle's stones,
its kitchens cracked away from the cliff,
showering the night water with dust,
iron kettles of porridge, and all of the cooks.
A cobbler stayed standing in the far corner of the vanished
room, maybe licking a spoon or gripping a sash
rippling empty over the cold sea-spray.
The Countess of Antrim refused to sleep in the castle,
so she moved out that night, taking what she needed:
terrestrial globes that once peered from her observation towers
so she could touch the ground with one finger,
guide its spin, then clamp the moving earth tight in her hands.

Circe's Notes

1.

Socrates made the decision
to be executed and good
art is executed well.

2.

Women carry cellos on their backs to the train as wind
tunnels their hair. One person can execute Bach
fugues, goldfinch hands on the instrument's neck.

3.

Obey rules of the State?

*You remind me of my daughter—
let me look at your necklace.*

Small pearls. What rules?
No one wants to hear them.

In a public garden, a tree
wears a skirt of hard green apples
with a white crescent
bite out of each skin.

4.

I need more symbols
to hook into my ears. Mirrors.
Where did you buy those?

I picked glass
pieces of Corona bottles
from packed Jersey sand,
lined some slivers with kitchen
aluminum foil that wraps cheese.
At the hardware store
I bought hooks, rough ones
that can fasten porch swings.

Swinging mirrors. I like how they reflect
swatches of my cheeks as though they're paint
samples from Wal-Mart—Summer Peach, Dusk Caramel.

And during sex: Strawberry Yogurt.

5.

Maybe I should've taken them off
so they wouldn't rip the man's lips.

I wanted a potbellied pig, just as a pet. They are smart.
They get upset when they smell bacon bubbling in the pan.

6.

Imagine a pig, crying. For another pig.

It Could Be the Head of Nicolaus Copernicus

Archeologists pulled from the cold dirt packed under flagstones
of a Gothic Cathedral near the Baltic Sea.

It was Copernicus' broken nose, his eye sockets,

blackened and incandescent. In the photograph
his skull is yellow and brown. An artist's rendering
shows the old man's expression, his pink lips

frowning at dim red Mars pulling against stars,
white dusty mold that pulls backward: retrograde.
Trains seem to move backward. When I sit in one

window seat watching a girl's wild braids
whipping the opposite glass, then her mother, then glass,
my train moves backward, the tunnel dark, the way an icy

Adirondack river dragged me into the slime
red buoys marking where we could swim and the soft dirt
pulled away from my feet as if I jumped and never landed.

Empty water seemed to grow yellow plants, sun,
the illusion of light. Train track beams charge with electric
current but signs warn about this, fastened to lace fences

surrounding the platform. A hazy Saturday, the cold day moon
hung permanent over the White House. The trains ran slow,
thousands of people walked with signs suspended like low kites,

some remembering calmly Vietnam, and past the quiet
Washington Post office building, there were five women,
Rubens nudes who could have left the Smithsonian

and aged, standing on the curb, their clothes colorful puddles
bright in the street. They stripped waist-up, interesting breasts
smooth as butternut squash in the sun. They yelled about the right

to stand there as women, the right to fight and someone laughed
behind me. The crowd looked past them, leaving them behind
as though they held out paper squares printed with: *Heliocentrism!*

Why Planets Seem to Move Backward! Crazy words. Pull up
pavement flagstones for even more pavement, more glass
glittering, feet walking and walking and walking.

Ossuary

Kutna Hora, Czech Republic

But inside the bone museum, go in, go in, show the girl behind the glass desk
your ticket stub. This ossuary smells like the inside of a violin,

an expectancy of sound when the tawny summer shoes of that family pad the stones.
A monk boiled people he couldn't bury during the Plague, then the Crusades,

and these are the bones—he pulled the chalk ends apart and re-fitted the knobs of
arms
to make this museum, thirty-thousand bodies used like matchsticks.

Skulls huddle along the ceiling, or between the ceiling beams and roof above
the bone chandelier made from all that's left. Squint, the place could be limestone

or ocean-worn coral, pocked, smooth, grown together. The roof umbrellas us.
Our cameras spark here and there—dull brown beetles lighting up beyond us.

Remember home, how the insects sparkle the peonies,
the chiffon, bulbous-headed flowers bowing to the alley of the church—

when building the choir room, construction workers split shovels into graves,
the tombstones dating to when the town faced the river, when trading boats

docked, unloaded, and some of the brick homes honored with metal date badges
face the water still, having survived the floods that lifted soil from the banks,

that silenced the town, rose to the tips of wrought-iron fences and covered the burials,
the stone markers later cemented with the bricks in the decorative courtyard

behind the building where people stop now to shake rain from umbrellas,
silver blades opening like jellyfish blooming in the electric water.

Scylla and Charybdis

1.

It is this way with remembering: a door
is a sketch on butcher paper,
and the artist's black frame bed
actually within the bone-white
Egon Schiele museum belongs there
the way horses eating
pull together along Pennsylvania
highways like a pile of my friend's shoes.
Where I lived once birches twirled
green fans. Here I am
again: our back gate was left unlatched
and the school bus's white eyes opened
for my brother and me on our patch of road,
the rust streak where a man scooped up our dog.
Walls seem to fall into each other and catch our hair.

2.

The hot beach towel is soft in the sand.
My wet knees stick to the slippery magazine
pages of fern dresses, the slivered jaws of women
who lean absently on wrought iron lace.
My sister and I peel the leg openings of our bathing suits
away from skin, measuring honey.
Our grandmother's thumb-speck
fishing hat moves as she checks the wind and holds a toy
red spool, grabs the kite's bone shoulders, fights it,
lets go—I am reminded of the way dancers spin
sweat in the blued light, their mouths
taking in air as though they are singing.
There are wings behind a netting
of pulleys: a flat tree trunk, the prow of a ship,
waiting for a machine to drag it on.

Water Ballad

Assigned to a table with Kristin Johns
and gems tucked in a box.
Our washing spigot gleamed bronze,
dripping our Xerox:

Moh's Hardness Mineral Test.
A metal file and glass.
Her T-shirt stretched across her breasts.
We knew, the whole class.

"Do you want to see my baby?"
Kristin Johns asked.
"I got a picture of my baby
here in my bag."

Pearly talc is softer than gypsum,
but mirrors scratch both.
Gypsum looks like a rose blossom
I dutifully wrote.

At thirteen I'd seen sonograms
from when Mom had Abbey.
At thirteen Kristin's sonogram
showed a ghostly baby.

Smoky quartz can crush talc,
a greasy white powder.
The baby's face was white as milk,
its fists closed on a ladder.

"My daddy says the baby's ugly,"
Kristin Johns laughed.
"He said my baby *is* ugly,"
Kristin Johns laughed.

She rustled open a Tastee-Cake,
put the picture away.
The baby slept in its glossy lake
someplace far away.

Oxen of the Sun

In a story, the farmer leaves his flock,
tromps through the tall yellow grass, nearly braiding it
with his black boots, and hears something and walks
until he finds it, folds the muddy hooves

against his belt and takes the thing to the shelter:
there is water, knives, a flat cold stone, rubbed
blood. Wine. In another story, the jazz club,
a man's hands moving the air between his legs,

I noticed the raw slabs of meat marbling his mouth.
Not listening to what I was saying. The bottle empty,
green on the table, the warm trumpets, stone
shapes of chairs in the dark as if I also read instructions

for grilling hamburger: *flip when the blood rises.*
All of this. Even after the few times at dinner on Thursdays
when I went to the unmarked room where thin windows
held light around the mouths and chins of the other women.

The hour moved gold along our shoulders.
Slow. And nothing else was done.

Kalypso

When my class climbed in the rickety wood carts,
rode down the mine shaft in the tunnel's cold
air, the anthracite miner breathed
cracking gasps behind the dusty light
fading dull the way I stood on the back deck
pointing the flashlight my mother beamed
down our sore throats past the blue whips
of birches to some stars. Nothing.
And what exists continues blandly.
And a longing, to collect the pink clouds
smearing liquor store windows and wedge
air pockets from the red clay before
I shaped the bowl I never meant to give.
No. I have your face in my hands. Your ID
photographs. The almond silk opening
of the wallet. *It has my blood.*

Lesson

Flames ice the grass. Nests of hornets murmur the wild smoke. Clay steams.
Screaming horses, snorting ash, pass barebacked. It is not enough to want to leave—
consider the tapestry knotted near the hearth, the pots and pots of boiled lentils.
All of the nights breathing in that one place, the dark room where dinner spices still
hang

above the face the way wind sucks in an open window. Lot had fed the visiting angels
bread his wife flattened on a stone with her palms as the men of the city circled the
house.

The men of the city wanted to fuck the angels. Screaming horses passed
Lot's wife as she climbed the hill from the Valley of the Salt Sea—

the tents below ripped from the ground held light like blown glass.
All those nights breathing in that one dark room and remembering:
blood on the thighs, wet as tongued saliva. Blood webbing the skin, staining
the skin a sandstone orange when most men will not enter.

On the hill Lot's wife heard her past self's hair catching fire in the city.
This story is supposed to be a lesson, my mother reminds me.
You are not supposed to look for your past self: a woman who is always naked,
bleeding lightly in the sheets of the man kneeling above her. Go back.

Get the woman out. The men wanted to fuck the angels. A sheep is on fire now
and running. Turn back and get the woman out of the room. Another horse
screams past, barebacked. Ash, the stairs must be ash now, and empty.
Snapping wood ribs of the room. The cellophane lens heat casts. It will wake

the woman. There won't be any woman lying in a strange bed. She will get out
so there won't be any woman on the hill. There won't be any city burning
behind her, hot on the back of her thighs. The sweat. There won't

be any woman.
Turn back, watch.

Eumaios

Inside the enclosure he made twelve pig pens -xiv 13

The swineherd feeds them: carrot scraps, a pat
of butter, leather gloves, yellow corn from a dented can,
brittle bones of a dill stalk clumped in an owl pellet
chunk of bread, translucent apricots, each a mouth
“o” of pleasure, the hunger of the body.

Kids throw tennis balls and the jokes on Popsicle sticks
in the park’s creek. Description. If there is no need to know
about a place, then here: in rain, leaves
the color of sand pressed the street curb,
licked sidewalks in the dark. Then, some mornings
air smelled sugary with varnish before the factory
stopped shipping out beds and closed, the wood
planks blackening where the slow trucks would load,

unload. Dogs still squat there by the fence, loyal to sticky
grass, even in rain. Even in sweat, and in a piss
brown stall. I am too tired now to think
through myself in a mirror, the gas station
window, the dip of a spoon. Gold
dirt ashed air as I watched horses being
prepared for jousting, once, at an autumn festival.
One horse pawed a hoof in dust, poured rippling
hair to the earth. A man fed it from a pail,
rubbed the body calm for a man. Now a water tower
beams a heavy white from the corn as stars
shift over this field and the next one, washed
familiar with the egg-manure smell of sows.

Performance

This bird is just imitating people imitating crows, Why Birds Sing

The story involves a whole village kept busy
making earthenware jars while the hurricane
a hundred miles offshore kicks up the oily green ocean
and the only two people who won't escape
are sweating in an abandoned stable the rain slashes.
They are naked and touch the dirt floor with their fingers,
thinking someone is about to pull open the door.
Characters can't know the real crisis: Dorothy doesn't remember
Lion being the farmhand who pulled her from the pigpen
before she glittered the dead witch's shoes—
glint, glint, glint—back to where she began.
But in real life, the cherry picker parked across from the post office
extends its silver basket. The tiny human figure
looks like he stands in a toothbrush cap up there
and he's reaching for the black seam dangling the stop lights
when a car hits the truck and the crane swerves the man,
and he falls. He dies. What then? We can only control
some stories: babysitting, I would turn three pages at once
during the fifth bedtime book until the girl sitting on my lap
asked about the train and why this time the conductor didn't wait.
I would be caught, like now, when I am nowhere but pretending to be
standing in the Pittsburgh Aviary watching flamingos
step through a pond, the white plastic pipes churning, bubbling the surface.
One cartoon pink leg lifts a wet claw, dips it back,
stepping into the ventilated wind with the others
like plastic flamingo lawn ornaments our friend staked in his lawn
and switched around at dusk—sometimes three turning their backs to one,
sometimes all seven forms seeming to proceed to the curb in the fog—
as though the neighbors would have to consider
the ornaments becoming birds and moving themselves.
This is suggested plot, though, like when a child
asks you to keep the bedroom door open
after you tuck her in so (you think) the vertical strip of light
can illuminate the bookcase next to her pillow
when she really wants the lion tucking his paws under his mane
and guarding the foot of her bed to know
he can exit by pushing his nose on the door.
Now I am listening to a white-crested laughing thrush
chortling up by the aviary's skylights
and a blue parrot muttering at the blank clouds:
“I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die,”
which could be a climax if there was a story

followed by a rainy walk to the car,
the powder-gray bats I've never seen here before
dipping from oak to oak as randomly as meteors.

Disguised, Athena Says:

Hey I wish these jeans would zip.
That woman finally cups her daughter's
rosy pear shoulder and pulls the girl

under a tacked-up sheet, cornflowers
on the curtain dividing our stalls of stiff carpet.
I love this thrift store. The girl is naked

again—there she goes, tumbling, her head
wrapped in a T-shirt wrinkling pink sparkled letters.
I am tired of following my owl along the river

in these boots—and look what parking lots did
to the heels, from walking and walking,
so my bed even smells like the heap of dirt

I scooped from a hole by the porch
for that new birch, or was it a blue pine?
The girl's foot kicks the curtain and she hangs

a banana-sized slipper from her toes.
The thing is soulless, looks infectious.
Where have those slippers been?

The gardener also asked this in the *Red Fairy Book*
while the sisters sleep all day in their row of beds
having lined up their slippers, the toes damp

from sneaking out and running through silver forests.
The leaves were hammered scraps of metal.
The gardener saw, concealed by a cloak in a raft:

the violins, finger-cymbals, light and hips and incense
ghosting the muslin castle curtains where the women danced.
In the tired morning he dug a hole under their window,

filling the dirt with a fern or a sweet-pea.
He knew what he was doing, hiding in the clothes.
One morning my brother's friend

wore my sneaker—he shoved his huge foot
into the black leather, his other foot in his own shoe,
tripping and awkward on the sidewalk past the corner

where the three churches are. I saw him.
When he came back to the house,
dumping his books by the door, he kicked both

shoes off—mine was the one gold with dust.
It was mine: the woods, the Buttermilk Falls.
As someone wrote about the whole thing:

*she bound upon her feet the fair sandals,
gold and immortal that carried her over the water.*

In the Chapter “Rodin in Love”

Rodin asked her to model the feet and hands.
Sitting cross-legged on the rough wood panels,
rubbing the gummy clay warm, molding a palm,
thumb, the whiskered crease at the base of the nail.
Does it matter which embracing, naked forms
grasp each other’s lust with her hands, not his?
I just read about how she gave up her own form
experiments to shape the heel of his bodies.
In school, after an Art Institute visit
my class took a boat tour of Lake Michigan’s dam.
We all wore safety-vests like sandwich board
advertisements and looked at the yellow bellies of the dead
fish slipping through the wake of the motor.
Yesterday I could smell the fresh salmon
steaks, the salty fish smell, through plastic wrap,
and peach curls of frozen shrimp packed in Styrofoam
disks sitting on the shelves of the meat counter.
The wet, pink smells, the contained sweat-salt
of the leg-crusts caught in each other, the blunt brainy heads
pressed to head—it all smelled so strong
I almost picked up each cold, labeled, priced
sea-meat and took it home like the time I stood
in the sandy parking lot at a bay where shellfish
farmers or somebody dumped pounds of clamshells
that stink and jewel with the fat jade flies,
slid some of the chalky shards in my sack,
zipped in their moist, wet-can smell, the me-smell.

Penelope's Firebird Weft

Red linen wings: orange, long, draping the back of shoulders like a raincoat. It is not the dust, not human ashes in vessels heavy with gray teeth and a chip of bone that my mother pried open with her brother in the Crematorium in New Jersey—the European relations. Bring out the pencils and remake a self. For the school play, we had to repaint the stage black every year. When the Doctor missed his entrance because he was backstage pressed between the full-length mirror and the curtain-rod hanging with zip-up calico dresses, his mouth open and warm, someone had to keep talking, saying *drawing room, drawing room*, become the strange person who suddenly had an opinion about scalloped potatoes, three-volume novels, Stravinsky, who wrote *forte, forte, forte, forte* five times in the end of *L'oiseau de feu*, louder than any voice, loud enough for the trumpets to crack their pealing calls, look—look at the wings, look the ashes part, look, the sharp eyes, the feathers open, shake the tree leaves like me, the way I was, walking to school in the light carrying the folded backpack loose across my shoulders. A chip of bone. I am waiting for the cue, the thin baton you can buy from a catalog and practice with. Am I wasting your time? Grinding my teeth down, practicing scales so my fourth finger can become strong. When I buy a yellow rose, when I answer the phone, when I stand on a drain-pipe, when I think the blues in the stained glass window glow true, when I open my mouth, I see white smoke, smoke next to the diesel truck, smoke inside my red sweater folded in a drawer, rising from my dirty underwear heaped in the corner, smoke trapped in my unmade bed, empty and warm, a nest of linen.

Knot

a stitch that fills a tiny area such as the petal of a flower

Among the tarragon and wax tomatoes,
hummingbird red and heavy as water-fat
balloons, your youngest son rustled the rows.

The heavy hands of the wild shade leaves laid flat
in dirt he also pat under snapdragon
heads pink in their mouths pinching open, the petal hats:

talking. The winds wrapped in your cardigan
caught squeals—his sisters leapt from the bus and showed
you lantern slips of homework lit by sun.

He brings me to this curb—your past home's gold
in bedroom windows, the creek a sip of milk,
its trees leaning forward, glowing in the snow.

Zephyr

The shredded zucchini grass of the soccer field
attracts sweat bees. Two white goal nets
face each other in the August afternoon
the way *yourself* really means *the one
identical with you*. You are interrupting again,
opening the door with a *wish*, rumpling
a heap of heavy corduroys against your chest.
Do you hear that? Even the fat gray cat's
having a good time, or the catbirds are back.
Call out, *tisk-tisk-meow*, through the screen
with me, make your voice into the tissue crinkle
of the yellow pages. Come here. I love you.
They're answering: a taffeta rustle in the leaves,
beat-beat, freeing the pulp-veined cherries.

Library

Twice in your life you will breathe Caesar's last breath,
sucked in whirring gold and glass revolving doors,
the draft grazing these stone lions closing lips over teeth
at the foot of the foyer—apparently no one has much to say.
Each step is so shallow it is a surprise, accordion-folded paper
stretched flat. Go up the steps and you know why you're here:
murals of John Singer Sargent's flushed, draped, back-lit women
turning faces toward the pan flute, to each other's closed mouths,
to the lemons growing green to white in the brushed leaves.
This is a library. A sheet hangs down one wall.
Taped-up signs read: *In Repair, In Repair, In Repair.*
You are noticing carved gremlins or cupids, whatever they are,
trapped at the ceiling, fat legs bicycling the air.

There is no escape from where you've put yourself,
from the ice sculptures blurring light in blue prisms outside.
Twice in your life you will breathe Caesar's last breath,
suck it in and recycle it, cooling the coffee sloshing in the cup.
Something's been done to you. You sit on a bench in the hospital's cafeteria.
You know this building's monolithic form, how its green light
breathes across open fields at night, fields your friend's father sold.
You can walk here from the conical rows of firs
blocking the spears of the back fence—young and dark.
Cardinals love the evergreen prickles, someone said.
Red streaks landing, ruffling in, ruffling out. Not like smeared blood.
Not like anything. You are home now, recovering
your shoulders in a sweater from under your sister's bed.

Tinsel Halo

Sun wraps the other balconies in wet wax paper—these apartment towers,
trees flickering wetness, holding air, moving air through nests of leaves.

Pencils could have sketched that radio tower fading in clouds soaking the almost
light when the sun catches up with my mood, too late for the comical mail truck,

jewelry box on wheels, hurrying past the back fins of the cars' exhaust pipes,
like opera binoculars peering at the dumpster. The soul has just enough time

to take a bookmark out of *M.C. Escher's Etchings*—photographic insides of castles
where insistent people march up flights of steps warping up the wall, a fisheye

lens curving the earth—or *Picasso*, the part about his desperate Blue Period
in Paris, where he'd lead his models upstairs and they'd step from dresses,

lie down, knees opening, hair undone and tangled in blue clouds
around their kohl-rimmed, wide, bored eyes, and they'd exhale cigarette figures

of smoke, the sun moving the indigo window's shadows across their feet and then
they'd sleep: crushed pigment and water. Like carnation stalks soaking blood dye

up to petals and the fringe explodes! The sky. At the ocean. The tidewater as warm
as the twist
from the tap you wash your hands with, and a fishing vessel slits its razor shiver of a
wake,

that lip of white against the green glass veins pulsing the water, pushing,
pushing the body that lies on its back and stays here and stays here, stays here.

Cosmos

A peacock is rumored to pace
rose bushes in Vojan Park
and I'm reading silk tags
that measure shoulder bone
to beneath one breast,
then a circumnavigation:
the back from nipple to nipple.
Sequins pooling my hands
are pond green, decadent as dance
costumes we ordered from catalogues.
We wore olive canvas suits,
fluttery skirts, and gold glitter
striping exaggerated brass
buttons: *heel, toe, heel, toe,*
march, march, march.
And we saluted the flag,
wherever it happened to be,
twirling, whipping our noses
to the corner of the studio—
our foreheads seeming still.
But this, this dressing stall
curtain lets in too much light.
Women brush its woven panels,
waiting—the clacking of hangers,
translucent, some hanging glassy
almost-torsos. Women. Women
emerging from the walls
that contain this quadrant of space.
Gunmetal grommets fasten jeans
stepping on top of racks: legs,
wire outlines. Some entirely human
forms can be universally understood,
like outlines chalking an alley
while the real body, swaddled in sheets,
is lifted and carried away.
And outside of this is Prague,
Prague's horses, poppy-red
masks tracing their sinuses,
and the stairs that drop underground
every shuffling hour to bars
and that man rushing from a grocer's
tucking bread under an arm.
When I look in the mirror again,
I push my breasts with my palms,

take them away, and then my friend
in the next stall slides her curtain.
Another pair of feet and it closes.
How will this shimmering set of scales
feel underneath all my shirts?
I will catch the hook behind
and wear it awhile and shove it
in the trash, in Vojan Park,
in the gardens of the Monastery
of the Discalced Carmelites,
taken by the Order of Virgins
where a statue of a man
striding on a fish's back
greet you under a weeping willow.
The man was not a military hero
or an anti-socialist. But his tongue
still pumped blood when his body
was unearthed—he must have been
a mystic the way an explosion of cosmos
lisp above tall pale green stalks,
zings of petals. But these flowers
don't grow in Vojan Park. My mother
planted a packet of the seeds one spring.
The cosmos leapt up our fence,
a fuchsia threshold ruffling along
the quarry road and our house. Those cars!

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