

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: ON LEARNING TO PLAY THE PIANO WITH A
HAMMER

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By way of a libretto, these poems follow a singular speaker who figures herself within the simultaneous growth, passion, violence, and destruction inherent in the art, mythology, archetypes, dreams, and natural phenomena that she encounters, as a means of negotiating forms of grief and loss. For her, realities of sleep, memory, language, and consciousness regularly collide and threaten to eclipse or ruin one another, from which follows her interest in the unities of musical compositions, Latin language roots, and the structure of storyscapes.

ON LEARNING TO PLAY THE PIANO WITH A HAMMER

By

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I: ALEXANDRIA, LOST

AUBADE FOR THE FLOOD HERO

They never are as you imagine
them, the remembering animals

and the forgetting animals, the sacred
memories, scared and scarred and swollen,
that evacuate your body when waking

from the dream in which the man you loved drowns,
drowns again. Looking around, you want to believe

everything is as it was before you buried
what they could recover of him from deep water.
—It doesn't: morning means

the room gutted with light,
means the shadow carnage that surfaces

in place of the life that once grew inside this place—
everything bleached, blood-shot.

You hold back your hair, rinse your mouth,

run a damp hand across your forehead,
you hold the porcelain lip of the sink

for balance enough to search the mirror for answers,—

why is fear what makes us animal

but what we do about it, what makes us human?

why can you not build an ark of any kind and not risk losing

each of these halves to the other in a collapse of the distance between?

—Yes, the world you are to inherit is only a mass grave:

build an ark out of your body anyway, save what you can

before there is nothing of you for you to recover:

Noah knew this— even though he prayed

for cleared land when the waters receded.

It was never about destroying the world,

he told himself as he stepped off the boat

and over all their bodies. *Only the body.*—

animal and human alike

gone in whole reefs of exposed bone,

purpled skin, faces pulped as grapefruit flesh,

their bloated mouths black, open enough for the wind

to whistle between all the missing teeth:

I am singing this to you from the bottom of the sea.

***EGRET, ORCHID, IVORY, LEAD: IN WHICH MY MOTHER IS HELEN,
ABANDONED***

The same storm that wakes her wakes me— from the porch, I watch her, my mother in the dark, drawn into the sea at war, she, once again and inexplicably, rinsing her arms, her shoulders, washing her hair with the tide, consecrating herself to *element*. She, electric in the storm light, her frame a torch, orchid-white and alive, in the waves, would walk this shore for days, if she could, wandering beneath a sun that would never darken until finally her form, darkening berry-brown black, became that sun. A sea bird spears down, pierces the surf and, still hungry, surfaces; further out, a fish breaks water, a lead fist through a white mirror. All of this she corrals into herself, a ceremony for a memory of skin that will outlive her as she begins, from here forward, to forget all of herself from the inside-out. Here, the bird-spear. Here, the fish-hammer. Above, clouds threatening to ruins us all with their wanting—: grief carving through her, what sweat does when marbling down dry skin, Helen of Troy must have gathered the abandoned sea between her and her homeland and sealed it inside herself, must have locked it away something awful into ivory silos under her ribs and between her lungs and looked away from every sight of water every day for the rest of her days, that sea speared with wind, broken with light, a reminder of what the hungry will do for the drowning: *nothing you can know until it's over*. For as far as the eye can run, I watch a storm-smoked sky aching to give the god of the expanding wilderness within my mother's mind its name; from below, what cries up in the form of the wind that tears me starward by the hair: *body is only a metaphor for desert*, a being born up to chew up and swallow down the same dust and sand, breathe every day all that will one day claim, bury it deep.

BECAUSE YOU SAID I TOLD YOU WE HAVE ROCK RIVERS, BUT NO WATER

and sent a photo—: the smooth stones arranged to form a dark vein

across the marbled gravel of your Arizona yard, a wire-limbed cactus,
an unsteadied, unstained rock retaining wall, all your mother's painted

metal animals, and the side of your house, bare and waiting, where inside
you and your father break your hungers together, share your silences, moving

together in and out of the bleached sound of a radio tuning in and out on
a lost satellite signal, heavy and unmoved as the sheetrock walls between

your bodies, as the hard-dry hollows you pass into and out of, stepping
around one another without speaking, wanting without saying what daughters

and fathers want to say in such spaces, all nerve, all glass, *I can't lose you like this*
and *I can't let you see me like this*, heavy as your sleep thick with dreams of lemons,

lemon trees, tossing and catching them in sleep that you share without
sharing and wake from alone in the night, the desert air bending, pouring though

the dented window screen, running through the center of you still empty clear
as an untouched glass of water on the bedside table in morning, dark and exact

as the scorpions you and your father catch together, their slick shells
glittering in starlight, broken black glass across the raw earth—: I remembered

how you turned away the winter I said *my father is a time bomb*, remembered your face shrouded in shadow and cigarette smoke, your hands exposed, glowing red-cold,

ribboned with white cloud. Holding the photo, I remembered thinking how the way you held your fist against your mouth told me in return *all fathers are*.

RUINED, I RUIN: IN WHICH MY FATHER IS ESAU, ABANDONED

And again, his hammers wake me, heavy, beating into the house an impossibly loud language that I try again to translate using the heart as a codex. *This time, I'll do it,* I tell myself, *this time, I'll hear what is being said*— not by the fist that grips the handle, swings down, but by the iron head that takes and buries within itself the impact. My father heaves and hits, heaves, misses, his hands touching our front door, then holding, shaking the doorframe by its wooden shoulders as if to say *don't ever leave me like this*—: in his pocket, another letter from his brother reads *I've won*, reminds him of all the ways a man never grows older than the day he realizes that, inherently annihilated, the heart annihilates, which means my father is close to sixty and is six, and his brother is still the favorite child getting everything he wants, their mother, alive, folded like smoke around his ivory clavicle, holding him, I imagine, the way I once saw a man on the metro holding to his chest a Stradivari viola— turning away, my father, now red in his face, faces the sun and creates in the sun the black cut-out of a large, bent man, the part of the story that gets left out: Esau, robbed, now left nothing by his father, and watching his brother's caravan evaporate on the horizon, curses under his breath whatever god had the audacity to form the heart out of glass and give it a single, impossible stone language: —*liar* he says as he places the letter in the top drawer of the foyer bureau and sets a handgun like a paper weight down over the envelope, and shutting the drawer, my father closes his eyes, closing inside everything he'll never say out loud, all that he'd rather nail shut alive or strangle using wind for rope, all that he doesn't want to bury as much as he doesn't want to need.

***SANDY ISLAND DISAPPEARS FROM THE WORLD ATLAS AS YOU SPEAK
TO YOUR FATHER***

from the fever in your sleeping body, crossing yourself again and again as you turn away from me in the dark, as I say *tell me what's wrong*, your shape marbled cold and soft in the damp light from the streets below, light enough for me to see the swallows tattooed along your ribs, the stars across your neck, the anchor at your back, the stories of the life you built at sea, stories that you wanted to tell him by showing him, stories stretched and shivering white as you pray into the mattress, twist the sheets into knots the size of fists, *forgive me for not reaching you in time, I'll row harder next time, I promise*. You were seven, you once said to me, and he saved you when you fell out of the boat. You were seventeen, and you couldn't warm him fast enough after you pulled him from the fishing lake behind your house the winter he said *if you consecrate yourself to the water, the earth will never let you forget it*. And again, you turn away, pray *Caspian Arabian Indian Mediterranean*, tell me how they removed an island from the South Pacific maps for never having been an island, only a dream, only ink, only story across void blue and bare and barren, only icon. And when I touch you, trace the swallows as through window panes, ask if I can turn the light on, you tell me *please don't*, call out to him through the black, *please, if you wake the storm, neither of us will ever find our way home*.

SEPTEMBER REQUIEM: IN WHICH SKÖLL SWALLOWS THE SUN

—which is the Norse myth about the wolf-god who hunts, pursues the sun around the earth, mouth open, lantern jaws sprung wide to consume, finally snap down around the glowing orb: how the people of that land once described solar eclipses to one another, believing that, breaking the neck of their only light, the wolf-god had damned them to darkness— *the kind that only burial understands*,

I tell myself when I find you asleep in our empty bathtub and wake you from another dream about drowning. Reaching up, you hold onto my ribcage as though holding onto a stone in the middle of whatever river threatens to erase you in sleep. You're grave-making, again. Through the soap, I can still smell the soil soaked into your shoulders, feel the weight of the dirt straining across the nape of your neck as

your shape curls like a fist into my chest cavity, pulling me in with you and down— *so this is how light must feel*, I think: exhausted, knowing that, once broken open, it will never stop running, trying to escape itself. Mother, you are your mother's daughter. People say this when they meet you. And it's not an answer, it's an apology. I'm sorry. *Sorry she's not here*, they say. Or *sorry about her, she couldn't help*

being herself. Sorry she didn't get to see how you turned out. And you turn away. Here's a riddle that keeps you up at night: *a man dies in a locked room with a hole in his head, there's water on the floor, blood in his hair, what happened?* Not unlike, *a man falls asleep and wakes to find that he's killed 200 people, how is this possible?* But more like *if your mother is X and your dreams Z, solve for Y— which could either be your father's memory*

or a bottle or everything else you didn't want to inherit. Something is always missing. It's noon: every window of our house is a mirror reflecting her silhouette from yours, carving your form out of sky, and leaving a plague's worth of grackles scattered beneath the wall-length glass outside, a constellation of wet, iridescent torsos shivering into stillness, a cosmos you rake into piles and burn like damp leaves—

why is that? That we bury what won't stay up or go down? We were raised to think more of our dead than as something to bury, raised to believe there's no way forward but down, no way out but through. We pray for what destroys us. I haven't lived enough to explain this kind of sacrifice to you with anything that isn't my body lifting yours from the porcelain to move you to your bedroom.

The cause of death is always an icicle. The murderer is always a sleeping lightkeeper: I'm sorry to be the one who has to tell you. I'm sorry how it's supposed to be noon, how the days are shorter now, how the woods beyond us have become an orchestra of abandoned trees, wild and hungry for wind, for anything that would move them without being seen, bodies aching for touch without contact, how you shudder

in your sleep by night and shout, howl into cloud by day for anything, something to obey you or come back to earth. Mother, the sycamores grieve for you like cellos: how else can I convince you that this kind of safety is love? *Come out—*, they say. *You must come outside to scare the wolf away:* an entire nation gathered beneath the sky, screaming to bring back the star that sooner or later blinds us all.

ALEXANDRIA, LOST

My body remembers how mother would stop in front of the window above the kitchen sink,
unknot her braid, and wash her hair without ever losing eye contact with the sea.

Her body in the dark: white light colliding with a black wall—
Even when the house flooded, the living room forming
a constellation of furniture suspended in seawater,
her body still shone like a lighthouse.

All night, nothing drowned;—
her body: echo of light in the silent fabric of the sunken house.

Later— when the last fire we built in a wash basin on the roof had died,
we could still hear the embers crackling against one another—

My sister said *it's like the sparrows that found their way into the attic that summer it was so hot that
all the windows of the house shattered at the same time.*

Later still— before light, before the water receded enough to see the tops of cars in the street below,
we could hear mother speaking to the dark in her sleep:—

LITANY FOR THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER'S HANDS

For her hands like paper lanterns carrying candles through the dark of the wintered house,
for her hands like glaciers across cheeks filled with sun in August,
for her hands like anxious birds on nights she re-arranged all the furniture in the house
while we slept,

for her hands like wind through a house near the sea, the doors they ripped opened and closed,
opened and slammed,
for her hands and the wine glasses they held and filled, held and filled, held and filled and broke,
for her hands red and raw, ripping the flesh of a chicken away from its rib cage, cracking
the breast bone, and rinsing the meat beneath the kitchen sink faucet,
for her hands in the kitchen sink cleaning, always cleaning chicken, tomato, artichoke, wine glass,
fire irons,

hands like bone-colored lace hovering above the piano keys,
hands like the sea below the moon, reflecting a map of the moon: all glacier, all crater,
hands like smooth cold stones pinning me beneath the water streaming from the bathtub faucet to
wash blood from my hair, eyelashes, hands as I said *I'm sorry—I loved the wrong man*,
for her hands holding my hands so much like her hands when I said *I'm sorry—I can never
bear a child*,

for her hands like ivory animals lighting candles before knotting into themselves to pray,

hands like lemons warming on their trees in the California sun,
hands like cigarette smoke in the dark, heavy white ribbon marbled through black velvet, sifting
through the silence of the house to turn on a light, to lift a curtain from a window
without glass,

for her hands sending my sister's body into the earth, unfurling a bedsheet like a sail across
an empty bed, stuffing empty clothes into trash bags because *they don't belong here anymore*,

for her hands when I begged her to make bread, begged her to knead the bread in the sun so
the whole house would smell of wheat and light,

for her hands hungry, always hungry for what they themselves cannot taste,

hands I begged to make and make meaning of themselves,

for her hands that I begged to show me how to lift a lid from a pot when
everything inside it is burning: — without question, without sound.

***THE DREAM IN WHICH MY BODY CATCHES PAUL CELAN DESCENDING
INTO THE SEINE***

is always shaded with lilac. From the bridge, I can see him taking off his shoes.

He aligns them with the stone steps above the green waters. Before my father died,

my mother measured his sleeping body with her arms and translated the dimensions into earth. She took off her shoes, so as not to wake him. Then, she took off his shoes without waking him, even though he'd asked her not to, even though he'd said

I'm not ready to go yet. The water that floods the frame drowns all the colors:
it's raining outside—all the seeds I planted yesterday, bathing in the bruised river.
From the bridge, then under the bridge, I form a bridge out of my body.

II.

ON LEARNING TO PLAY THE PIANO WITH A HAMMER

ORPHEUS, ASCENDING

out of the underworld, doesn't yet know it's only ever been in his nature to, looking back, lose everything: maybe what we know of love is not unlike what we know of death. Even now, years after, my grandmother still wears her dead husband's clothes around their house, drapes herself

in faded golf shirts twice her size to garden or sleep. She says *they still smell like him*, tells me about the handgun she keeps under the pillow on once-his side of their bed, —things I think about when you take my hand and help me into your bathtub to smoke cigarettes through the cinderblock window hole

in the wall. We breathe out standing in a wintered dark blacker than burned animal skin, flick our ashes like dead stars into the standing water of the sink, and I won't say what I'm thinking there, won't tell you *this is how I want you when I'm with you*, but maybe later. And if later, then only this: *Listen to me,*

from here, there is no way back for either of us—turning away will always feel the way burning sounds. No,—not even that. This: *I love you the way suicide loves porcelain.*

FOR THE SUMMER WHEN I WAS TEREZA, HOLDING THE STONE

that would crush the head of the black bird/ broken at the wing because
she couldn't find it/within herself to bury it alive. *Better to bury the dead*

than the living, better that I be the one to heave down/ the stone that will shatter
the egg shell skull, she says/ without saying, her frame arced, a cypress trunk

a doorway, a cathedral window, all that kinetic/potential energy held in
place by a keystone—: which means I want to hurt/ you and want/ you

in the same breath because that's all anyone really wants/ when someone
has been gone/ for so long, because blaming a distance for absence is as

useful as swallowing salt at night and expecting to be/ an ocean by morning.
Tereza holds still, something endless crippled/ into being mortal. Let me

tell you like this: *I failed/ you*, a part of her believes, unearthing the bird,
wrapping it in her scarf and walking back/ through the city, back to the little

flat, back to her dog and to Tomas/ who, gone for so long, returns home
always at night with, in his hair, the smell/ of some woman's crotch. She

holds up the stone and is St. Paul before Stephen. She holds it higher/ and is
Atlas, is the coyote/ who sets the catapult meant for the roadrunner upon

himself. *Failure*, says the stone. *Failure*, says the bird. *Sacrifice*, my body/ says
turning away from yours/ in this dark we share with the walls but never each other.

FUGUE FROM THE BURNING PIANO

At some point during his concert, Yosuke Yamashita's sonata fails, flames licking the lid, warping the wood, the strings melting everywhere, here's a fact for you: a song played on a burning piano

can never be replicated, not even by its own voice, its body cracking under all that heat and pressure, wailing a single concerto of black smoke into the sky, releasing sparks like starlings, all while he plays on

and down, his hands striking the keys until they are numb and blind with ash— listen, I kept your tongue in my mouth long enough to learn it was a hammer and held it there long enough to know that all music

starts in the skull, not an instrument's chest, kept it there, a reminder that the muscle bending mine was the same that spoke into my neck *nothing is complete without a few holes in it*, which is to say a man's mouth

is, if it is nothing else, a wound trying to close another and itself and failing, that's all: bodies are always happening to us, and they're all that happens. Even when Yamashita walks away, the music goes on

without him—wood and metal breathing together and each other and loud. And someone starts clapping: it's not over, but someone is trying to applaud what has passed or to join in as a mallet.

ELEGY IN WHICH GEORGE RAFT DANCES THE TANGO WITH CAROLE LOMBARD IN BOLERO (1934)

as Raoul de Baere and Helen Hathaway—their dancing,
a sequence at the center of the film, somewhere before he’s
fallen in love, but after she’s decided that she is no one’s,
especially not his, pawn. A band plays Ravel, and lifted,

lifted again into the light, she becomes blinding, for him,
light—the kind he can’t not crush, or try to, into himself
or the music in the same gesture: she is Daphne, is Eurydice,
is Ariadne, is every woman who lives, dies just beyond

the reach of the hero who, as he tries to save her, claim her,
she saves. They’re dancing, and you can almost see him
falling for her in the moments when, searching the air
above his body, he is sure that he will drop her: something

the body doesn’t learn about its own gravity until another’s
is in danger, her body arcing over and around his head until
she is mercury, is stardust, until she is all that an explosion is
without sound. And this is only a few years before Lombard’s

won a coin toss that will put her on a plane and that plane into
the side of a mountain above the Nevada desert, years before
Raft’s reduced himself to a caricature in his films: the gangster,
the shark, the loner, a man on the run, inhabiting that caricature

until dying, years later, at seventy-nine in Los Angeles—
when I say this, what I'm getting at is the human experience
knows approximately thirty-six plotlines to describe itself
to itself, but knows only a little more than *never mix business*

with pleasure in the way of saying *I'm sorry how I wanted and failed
your body against mine* and having it mean something, anything—
they dance, and you know her arm arched and anchored around
his shoulders, his face tilted into her elbow as they turn, is ruining

him. *I'll have to leave*, he thinks. *I'll have to leave this country or join
a war, or both—* he swears, maybe, that, *before this song is over,
I'll wreck her with air*. In eight years, Lombard will be dead and
her body, alone for eighteen years until Gable is buried beside her

in Glendale, and in the days following his death, Raft's body will
share a mortuary hallway with, for a while, Mae West. *If I can't
ruin you*, he thinks, surely, *I'll find, at least, a way to make you into
something I can love enough to sacrifice*. And, if not, then maybe:

I know now what will kill me, and I've chosen to protect it with my life.
He catches her in the final beats, and slowing, he lowers her
to the ground and falls over her. He's eased her body into a pool
of light, and now, as he balances above her, she's a mirror.

ON LEARNING TO PLAY THE PIANO WITH A HAMMER

Here's to all the chords I invented when I was too tired
to turn the page of music in front of me. Here's to that page
and to all the pages that no number of nights spent practicing

will ever resolve. Here's to the dishwasher, chiming *clean*,
to the dishes I never put away until I unearth enough dignity
to not eat another dinner standing over the sink: here's to

doing things in the wrong order. And here's learning to say
the wrong things in the right order and, then, to finding out that
there is no order, there's never a perfect time to tell someone

*I've wanted to kiss your neck since I met you or I'm sorry that I checked
your cabinets for prescriptions, I wanted to see if you were broken, find a reason
to push you away before you could find out all the ways that, broken, I will*

—but I'm learning. I'm learning how to touch again, so here's to
that, to learning how to cup the face that kisses mine, to hold and
be held. Here's to holding onto the mythologies I invented

when truth was too hard for me to swallow, to the *bodies*
I've used to hide my own, as if bodies were capable of hiding
anything. Here's to my body like a ruined cathedral,

all its ghost walls frosted in snow, all its faded Madonnas
and its sparking constellations of smashed-up prayers:
they counted for *nothing*. Here's to all those prayers—

the ones for open parking spots, open wounds, the ones for
the last gallon of milk, the ones spoken when the airplane shakes
and the cabin lights flicker and flash, the ones that come out

sounding like *my love life reads like a fucked up internet history*
and *I want to get hit by a car. Any car*. But were supposed to
sound like *let's write the story where everyone gets to keep*

what they find and *I want to get hit by your body*. Here's to running
through traffic in the rain, to not looking where I'm going, to keeping
my head down and my eyes closed, even when I'm by myself.

Here's to my father saying *the Lord hates a coward*. Here's to
being that coward. Here's to hoping I don't have another seizure
and forget myself all over again because I'll have to excavate

my body for the memories buried there. Here's to digging out
those memories like bullets, and here's to burying myself
everywhere: in the basements of libraries, in the ladies' room,

behind the wheel of my car, in the pharmacy check-out line, in the arms
of strangers, in the snow that poured down the winter I sent a letter every day
to a man whom I knew would never love me back by the spring—

Here's to having anything to dig up at all, a place to start, to trying

to go back the way I came. Here's my name, my address, the shapes
of my parents' faces and the exponential return of memory, here's

the light through my bedroom window and me finding myself
still in the world. Here's to finding my hands on the piano right
where I left them, to remembering. Here's to remembering all

the dinners I ate and threw up, ate and threw up because I wanted
my body to mean something, anything, to me. Here's to my mother
standing in the rain outside the hospital that she drove me to

so doctors could strip me naked and save me with a scale
and a feeding tube. Here's to my father's hands around
my rib cage, still counting my bones when he hugs me,

and here's to my hands knotted at the nape of a man's neck,
to running my fingers down his spine and hoping it's not too late
to say *you make me breathe as I did the first time I heard the cello.*

Here's to wishing my hands were made of hammers
when I can't sleep, to playing the piano all night with
the lights off. Here's to that piano and the faded photos

lined up like eyeless dolls on the lid. Here's to drawing back
the curtains and flooding the house with light after waking up
on the kitchen floor, after rinsing my face in the sink.

Here's to finally learning to angle every photo in the house
away from the sun in the morning, to hoping nothing
will fade after I'm gone or while I'm still here.

ELEGY ENDING WITH LINES FROM A REPORT OF THE CARRINGTON EVENT

1. The sky threw up another plane. Wreckage everywhere. Twisted metal beams heaved through sleeping houses, across power lines, aluminum panels flattening tractors and trees alike. *Carnage*, a reporter said. *Something to do, maybe, with fluctuations in solar energy, a loss of navigational power.*
2. For days after, the same images of *after*— a camera panorama of rigs in the South Pacific fishing for a Boeing 757, for a black box, a body, a voice; then, a camera following Ukraine officials through an open field, through neighborhoods. For days after, different arrangements of all the same words: *loss, unclear, missing, dead, declared.*
3. My seizure that morning was the first one I'd had in three years. And the first one to give me a concussion. In the emergency room, a nurse handed me a paper with a diagram of the human head mapped out in black copier ink, arrows pointing to a spot on the skull marked *impact.*
4. Apparently, I'd hit the edge of my bathtub when I went down—
5. Nothing you can't see coming if you know what to look for: changes in electricity, flickering broken traffic signals of nerve and consciousness, the body tired of being tricked with pills wanting, threatening to override itself, wanting down— things I took your hand but didn't tell you that one night we made angel hair pasta.
6. I could feel everything shifting, but I didn't want you to have to be the one to hold my head still because I knew that I wouldn't remember you when it was over.
7. I thought I was protecting you from me by not warning you about me.
8. I lay on my bathroom floor for over an hour. Not because I was unconscious. But because I deciding whether or not to call and ask you to drive me to the hospital.
9. Apparently, you're not supposed to lie down when you have a concussion. You could fall asleep and not wake up.

10. After years of breathing that cut off and on in his sleep, my father finally saw a doctor who told him not to fall asleep without a mask that would force air into his mouth while he slept.
11. In the event of a loss of cabin pressure on an airplane, oxygen masks will drop from a panel above you. *Even if the bag does not inflate, they want you to know, know that oxygen is flowing.*
12. You were in West Virginia putting together office furniture with your uncle for the summer. Parts of wood and metal and fiberglass everywhere, you said about the factory. It's a wreck.
13. I didn't call. On the way to a hospital in Takoma Park, I asked my friend if she knew why we can now photograph a memory in a conscious brain, but not find a missing airplane in the Pacific Ocean, why an airplane might fall into a field for no other reason than *we can't explain, but we're working on it.*
14. Hour 18 became Day 2 became Day 5 became Day 9 became Day 31 of no plane, no explanation, only camera footage of sea folding and refolding sea beneath the sun.
15. I spent that week in bed with a bag of ice on my head, watching documentaries about the eye, and making paper airplanes. When my friend came to check on me, she thought it would be funny if we wrote write stupid things on the planes and threw them off my apartment balcony.
16. Laughing, not unlike brushing my hair for days after, made my head hurt.
17. Nothing you can't ignore, if you know what to look for, know what you're doing.
18. It's like this: the eye is a failed thing. It's mostly a pity to have two: no two eyes see the same color, no two eyes can fully define more than a thumbnail-sized space at arm's length, at any given time.
19. It's about memory, it's about focus.
20. My friend crashed her plane into the Toyota Prius in parking space #154 to tell them *Obama loves hippies, too.*
21. You'd stopped calling two weeks before the seizure, something that, another friend told me, probably had to do with the sex.
22. I was still finding our things. Everywhere. Your shirt on my closet floor. My dress under a sofa. A handprint, a button, a contact lens. Carnage.
23. For days after, they were still digging bodies out of the burned earth.

24. Someone in a field, someone in a barn. A limb in a tree and a tree and a tree. A piano keyboard of black body bags over snow.
25. For days after, they were still trolling the ocean for a voice.
26. For hours after, I kept throwing up, something the body does when it recognizes *impact*. A nurse held an oxygen mask to my face and told me to breathe.
27. The oxygen tank beside her read *empty*.
28. I wouldn't call what I saw on the television's live stream gray or black or white or red crash debris.
29. This is what I would call what I saw: an old man's hair stuck to the inside band of his sleep apnea mask, a bathtub and a bloodstain, a drop-tile ceiling, a bedsheet blushed with light through a curtain near noon.
30. You'd slept so deeply afterwards that I'd believed you must have been inventing a god for me. In the dark, you: luminescent. In the dark, we: burning. Our bodies: arcs of energy looping out, away, and back into themselves. Again and again.
31. At the time, from what he knew at the time, Carrington couldn't predict what could happen if the sun threw up, threw out its energy into space. Just that it would. And did: in 1859, a solar storm large enough to wrap the aurora borealis around the earth for twelve hours.
32. It happened sometime just before light and if you had walked out into your yard there, the news anchor said, you could have seen what looked like a star blowing itself apart before wanting, coming down.
33. It wasn't unlike the way I believe prayer works: even if I'd called, there was no way of knowing you'd gotten the message and, if you did, no guarantee you'd respond.
34. It's not unlike the way I believe God works: even if the bag doesn't inflate, know that oxygen is flowing.
35. If he were here now, my father would gesture at the television and tell me *it's not like you can blame the sky for something like that—*
36. *Nothing you can't see coming if you know what to look for.*
37. Apparently, you might say, the algebra of memory and the algebra of an empty woman memorizing bathroom ceiling tiles have a lot to learn from one another.
38. Like learning how to fold, what it means to fold.
39. And when. And where: bodies pushing apart,

40. we turn away from each other to collide with a dark soaked solid with sound from the traffic circle below, all that steel and glass and bone flooding in through the window left open through which the city sky can be seen— *apparently like a luminous cloud through which the stars of the larger magnitude indistinctly shine—only the light is greater.*

FUGUE FROM THE DESTROYED PIANO

What use is it to love what cannot/ hurt me in the end? In the third grade,/ a girl from my class let us all pet her hat/ made of real rabbit fur. I didn't want to,/ but she took my hand, moved my fingers to/a spot where the skin parted dark and soft/ and deep— I think I can tell you this now,/ tell you what it felt like/ towards the end with you:/ having beaten his piano to death with it,/ Ortiz finally heaves his axe/ down, strikes the center of the instrument's chest cavity/ and leaves it there, wedged/ just there, and leaves, which is to say,/ every time we fucked, I could feel not just you,/ but every part of you/ crack, split open as you tried/ to shatter yourself inside me, without/ me. —I think my fingers were still inside/ when I asked the girl if I was touching the mouth./ *No*, she said, *the bullet hole*.

III.

FOR THE MIRRORS INSIDE YOU

ANOTHER NAME FOR AUTOPSY

is the stone that opens and closes the river

inside you, is you studying your mother's hands
until you remember they're your own, is how long it's been

since you mended a coat in your lap or a man

in the small of your back, consumed oysters, forced a body
open enough to teeth the meat out. Autopsy: it's been years

since you buried what didn't burn in the forest fire

that took your house, since you learned enough to know
destruction grows on trees, to fear falling asleep any way

other than black-cold in August— August, all bronze and gold

and bleeding at the knee, all artifice. Autopsy: *how I want you*
and *how I want, more now than ever, to be something*

nailed, fastened easily into brick wall or sea floor— it's iron

spiked through your center, it's your limbs planetary, orbiting,
considering you for sacrifice, testing you as a window

tests a bird because another name for autopsy is the body

built the only way it knows how: to betray you. *Here, cut me
open until I sing*—all breath and animal music,

beating itself to death from the inside-out. *Here,*

*sail me open, unbroken as a lake, knowing release as a lake does:
what it means to hold still and surrender yourself to the sky.*

STRAVINSKY PLAYS AS YOUR MEMORY RETURNS AFTER A SEIZURE

Such mornings are their own breed of cruelty:
your head against the window, your breath bleaching the glass—

you can feel yourself becoming every prayer you ever
prayed when your body was in danger, everything cold,

everything bloodless, damp and empty. Traffic bleats below you,
the number four train screams, the neighbors above

play the *Fire Bird Suite* loud enough to make your ribs throb,
your arms splintering everywhere, nowhere at once as you try

to protect your center. You want an anvil to fall on you
like in the cartoons. Something to ground you, something,

anything to hit you hard enough to remind you why you can't
remember your name or your address, only verses—:

*in my dreams I see myself on a wolf's back / Riding along
a forest path / To do battle with a sorcerer-tsar / In that land*

*where a princess sits under lock and key, / Pining behind
massive walls. / There, gardens surround a palace all of glass; /*

There, Firebirds sing by night / And peck at golden fruit. There,

the color of your sister's hair. There, the shape

of the Japanese maple beside the driveway
of your parents' home. There, the brass crescendo

when the hero finally learns the secret to immortality.
There, the number seven train like a crowbar

through your window. You think how you could
make a compass from a photo of your father

and a ceramic bowl from your mother,
balance the device at the center of your chest,

and make your way out from there.
You learned how to do this once— *No*,

you think, *better to hold still, wait*. It's like lying on
railroad tracks: something will eventually hit you,

either while on the outbound or the return.
You breathe in and tell yourself, *memory = train*

after train after train after train. —From here,
it doesn't really matter which direction you turn

when every direction turns you back.

NOX MANUALIS

A is for aperture, an opening with no guarantee of closure, a broken window dark with damp smoke. B is for your bones, exposed or otherwise. C is a crematorium, a way to leave by entering. D is for doorway, a way to enter, but not necessarily leave. E: exposure. *I tried to fall asleep in the snow on the day they burned you.* F is ninety-four degrees Fahrenheit, the beginning of hypothermia. G is glass, the condition of my skin as it froze. H is hypothermia, the outcome of trying to sleep in the snow. I is the ice in my water glass splitting the silence over our kitchen table. J: *just*— K: *know I*— L: *left an empty plate in the* M: *microwave if you're hungry, in case you come back from the dead in the middle of the* N: *night*, a nerve, exposed or otherwise. O: your oranges, forgotten gutted exposed on our kitchen table. P: the panic of cardinals collapsing on our snow-bleached yard. Q: the queries I left for God in the votive beside the cathedral reliquary. R: the roof lifting away from our house, landing like a broken bird in the yew tree across the street. S: the skin on the roof of your mouth, the shape of your body in sleep, the sleep you lost through the floorboards the season you spent wanting a way to fix things before they could break from weather or wear, the sleep you lost through yourself and you scarred with night like the sky scarred with cloud from the storm that carried you, the storm that carried you into the river, the silence your body spoke when they pulled you from the river, your body swollen into the soft slick shape of sleep— T is for *noli me tangere*, do not touch me. U is for *ego postulo ut sepeliam*, I need to bury. V: my vena cava, exposed or otherwise. W is a crematorium window filling with black smoke. X is the dark window of an x-ray of your chest cavity filled with water. Y: the lost yellow teeth collected into a cereal bowl on our kitchen table below Z: a zero, a hollow black frame hammered and hammered and nailed white-hard into the only wall that faces the sun in December.

FUGUE FOR THE SKY BURIAL OF YOUR FATHER

Because he lived above the tree line, they could not burn him. They could not

bury him because the ground would not break. So they stitched him into his bedclothes, carried him up the mountain, and let the *bodybreakers* do the rest, let them

carve arm from arm from torso from arm from torso from leg and

leg and leave the rest intact, leave his body broken beneath the sky, and leave and send word to you that because a body is always broken in more ways than

the eye sees, someone you loved had died and you need to collect the rest of his things, that you need to solve for empty shirt, broken glass, empty hands, fields of years frozen silent in their sleep— If stasis had a better name, you would know what to do.

If white noise meant any shade other than the stone dark of a closed eye, you would remember that a hammer can also build, a shoulder can also hold, nightshade can wake,

you would remember the swollen song the body sings to itself as it stitches itself back together

in sleep. And you would sleep. You would let the train that carries you home carry you past the forests that were not there to burn, over the ground that could not break—

You lay your head against the window until it becomes a glass chest breathing sky. You say, if there is a chest, it is his chest.

ATMOSPHERA FEMINA

after Berndnaut Smilde

You can hear them speaking low in the waiting room,

if you listen. You can hear the women sharing their stories. *Listen, it is better to pass a child through you than to have him cut from you. Listen, they will*

tell you to lie down on the metal table covered with a white sheet and breathe in:

this is not birth; it's dissection— amputation from the animal mind that speaks, Leave me alone, I need to be alone: I need to be crushed, I need

my child. One woman says, I had my son at home, I caught him on my knees,

it was beautiful. Another woman says, I remember only this: they dragged my daughter from me, they told me she was sleeping. Someone touches you and says

it's over. Someone hands you a paper cup of water and says it's over. Someone

holds shadow images up to the fluorescent light, says, it's like this, here is a normal pelvic cavity and here is yours—but all you hear is

here is where a man should be and here is where a child will never be.

This is how you came to regard the weather in your body:

here is a church, its white-washed walls, all its missing windows, the nerves of exposed brick and the dusty light through the rafters. Now,

add a cloud: cumulonimbus, hovering just above where an altar should be.

Here is an abandoned factory swimming pool ballroom studio apartment foyer— and at the center: a cloud, formed as carefully inside

as it might outside. Sometimes, there is no answer, but prayer: panic
from a body now holy and unforgiven, sacred and scarred. Sometimes,
there is no answer to prayer. At night, when you fold your hands across yourself

and try to remember a time when you didn't believe there was a dead cloud
suspended within you, the body you desire most is your own,—
you think about how, when your mother calls to speak of the weather growing

above your home in the south, its dark migrations of water and light, she reminds you
*watch the sky for signs of danger: the condensing of clouds, a collapsing of wind. Listen,
for the sirens, she says, and take shelter while there's still time. Be sure to keep your head
to your knees, your knees to your chest. Lock your arms to protect the center of your body.*

VOX ANIMALIA

after Zanesville, Ohio, 2011

My father has fallen asleep again in the living room, fallen into another dream about *animal*: his father descending into the Pacific to free an anchor, his father drilling a well through twenty feet of bedrock, his father sawing off the barrel of a shotgun, soldering on a pistol grip. Good for putting down a sick dog or a broken horse. Good for swallowing until

the metal tip grates the back of the throat: the muscle twitches as he pulls the trigger, only manages to blast away the jawbone, part of the skull. Pulls again, collapses into a heap of meat on their garage floor. In the dark, my father names all his animals, his mouth moving as though approximating distance, as though eating— he, sunk into the couch again, says *I'm afraid of what I can't control. And I'm afraid.* In his dreams,

my father, the body and the body that buries the body: things he doesn't say when he makes jokes under his breath about sucking a bullet like an after-dinner mint, eating a bullet, jokes about grave-making as he arranges flagstones on the front walk. *Put them down deep enough, dig until you hit ice or water or rock. You don't want the neighbor's dog turning up a hand or some shit like that.* I wish I knew how to ask him what his dreams

dig up and drop at the foot of his bed: his father, the storm at the window and the animal just visible on the other side of the window. Memory is only domesticated madness, I think. Caged and sedated. What becomes of us when we share our dreams with those of the dead? What hungers claim us after our ghosts have swallowed us whole? Beneath the storm, my father's body tenses, folds itself inward, his dark shape

piled onto the couch. *Don't touch him*, my mother warns. *He's sleeping*. Watching him from the doorway, afraid to turn out the light, I see the field I saw once in a book about life on earth: in Ohio, a field of animals—tigers, bears, wolves, lions— dead in wet clay, shot after being set free. In the photo, they look like they're sleeping. They're a portrait of the end of the world, their bodies turning the ground into a mosaic of Eden. *This is*

why we don't cage a wild heart, the photo says, and *this is why we have cages at all*.

Mouth open, breath ajar. My father, the animal and the animal that buries the animal. He breathes in, breathes out. Then, he breathes in, not out. He holds still—something that happens, perhaps, when dream gets in, but can't escape. Then, exhales. *Father*, I want to tell him, *I would have opened the cages for all those animals*

that day. I would have let them run. Father, after we have lined our bodies with raw meats and after we have raised the gun to our mouths, after we have pulled the trigger, memory is the last to get out, the only animal we can never, otherwise, release. Father, do you think God will put us down deep enough when we die? In the dark, his hands reach up for his mouth: he is either trying to push the barrel away or trying not to miss what he aims for.

FOR THE MIRRORS INSIDE YOU

Catching your reflection in a bay window on
a street you wish you'd lived on as a child, you say *I am not my mother—*

*my mother grew more root vegetables than wild flowers, my mother cut her hair over
the same sink used for cleaning chicken, scrubbing stains out of tablecloths, soaking beans,
my mother stuffed our mail in boxes alongside my drawings and never let me eat stone fruits
even in the middle of July because she said I'd choke on the pit.*

You want nothing from the heirloom tomatoes seeds and the window boxes you inherited,
the newspapers magazines telephone books catalogs you could've thrown out but
didn't, you ask nothing of all the photographs from all the years you wished
you didn't have to be the one taking the photographs while your parents smiled in
Venice in Madrid in Niagara in Toronto, photographs still in need of framing—

In your apartment, you pour a glass of Merlot, you turn your television on: you try not to
remember that your mother lost three children before you and didn't tell you until
you knew you could never have any of your own. *I'm fine. I am not*

*my mother, a bird of light seen but never touched, my mother both the body that
turns to salt in my dreams and the body responsible for the turning.*

This is what comes from loving the feel of glasses against skin, the muted television,
the rocking of the boats your hands form when washing dishes. This is what happens
when you survive someone who does not want to be survived, when the mirrors inside you
insist something other than the infinity of a *you* facing what made *you*:

after a while, you fail at trying to translate what you've been handed, you start wishing for something else, something other than a single motion of sky, the turn of a wrist.

PATRIS FAMEM: IN WHICH MY FATHER IS REPIN'S IVAN

I shouldn't repeat the dream in which I alternate between dragging my father from the Cahaba River and returning him beneath those waters, holding him under again, the way I'm shouldn't say how this dream happened every night for the years he and I didn't speak to one another: he didn't understand why I stopped eating, just that I did. A man's starving daughter is an embarrassment, an eyesore, at best— a dumped mattress in his front yard or an oil stain on his necktie. *It's not fucking algebra*, he'd say then, lifting me to weigh me, shaking, gripping my shoulders the way a sink basin lip is gripped, to hold a body up, *you put food in your mouth and swallow*—which could've meant my mother, near fifty and still throwing up her dinner at night, sometimes until morning, or could've meant why, sometimes, I would find him asleep in the bathroom with her locked in his arms, their shapes tucked into the wall space between the sink and the commode—but all of which probably meant: him, I imagine, watching his father take away his dinner plate and smash it over his knee to say *from now on, you're a guest*, him, my father, clearing our refrigerator with a blind mouth in the middle of the night, him trying to eat enough for both of us every night in those days, him as a dazed young man in a photo that he handed to me

one day when everyone else had taken the groceries out of the car and left us alone together in the garage, him nodding at that photo and saying slowly *you know it's bad when you've run out of vodka, but you drink the Collins Mix anyway.*

Ten years later, and my father still starts every call from Birmingham with *what's shaking?* and stays on the line long enough to hear that I've eaten

something, anything. *That's some sad shit*, he says one evening when I point out Repin's painting in the museum catalog on the kitchen table: eyes torn red-open, vacant and bare as a brick wall in a burned-out building, Ivan cradles the son

he's accidentally bludgeoned to death in his arms like a basket of glass fruit, his stare fixed on the light hovering over the carpet, light, maybe, from

a window with a view of a city burying itself alive with snow, swallowed hand-over-fist with cloud, drowning in black birds—a body gripping another body to breaking, Ivan says, it seems, his mouth hidden flush against the split

peach of his son's ear, *I will never see destruction*. Pushing back from the painting, then the table, my father says, *I'm hungry* and looks away. *I'd rather eat my hands*

than use them to bury my child is what he's trying to say, wants to, but can't, patting my shoulder, pecking my head. He opens our refrigerator and stands in the ivory light long enough to see his breath cloud the air— this means *I can't lose you.*

NOX CORPORA

In the beginning, you thought *if I could hold still long enough,*
I wouldn't need another body to determine what I want from my own.
But even now, you still want to know why *what you want*
always gets fucked by what you need—: this is the window

that opens after something's been killed, the space
between *dead enough to eat* and *dead enough to bury*,
something you learned the night two bucks beat
one another to death outside your bedroom window.

In the dark, the burning music of their bones
smashing. You swear, in the dark,
you could see sparks. And by morning,

their bodies abandoned like those of lovers: each
hollowed by and spent on the other, wrung of soul,
both shrouded by and fed to the light that touched them.

IV.
BENEDICTION

ALTERA VITA ELEGY

*You, in another life, had your heart crushed thirty times,
a stranger says to me one day on the metro platform.*

*And I laugh. I'm always laughing. At close range, I add,
point-blank, in fact, with a stone the same shape and weight*

*as my heart —and it wouldn't stop, this stone, I tell him.
And it was me who held it, brought it down and down again,*

and it wasn't my fault—

Above the metro train, then through the window of the metro train, I watch tree after tree
throw itself into a burning sky, and I think how this was my case, this other life,

it has to be— something to do, maybe, with the part of a myth we don't see
when we say it, or say at all: Orpheus, then—

the part well before he crosses the Averno lake,
the once-mouth of a volcano, now flooded

from a cracked water table and filled with birds
dead from inhaling residual igneous exhaust.

I'm talking about before he climbs into a side-cavern
and into hell, the part when he knows Eurydice is dead

before he even finds her, when he's searching the meadow,
his arms stretched out in front of him, his hands combing

through the grasses before stumbling over her, still warm:
I mean the part exactly when, thousands of years

before its inception, Orpheus performs CPR on his wife
by singing into her mouth and beating her chest—

which means:

*I opened your mouth and sang into you, filled you to breaking
with sound, pumped, kept pumping, kept pounding*

*your chest, holding your nose, and pouring music into your lungs,
purpling your jaw and cracking your sternum—*

which means:

*nothing was working, and I couldn't stop and didn't
and grew louder—*

which means, also, with every train stop, with every opening of its automatic doors:

I wanted a man's mouth to mean something
other than *here*— wanted *wound*, wanted *doorway*

*that wants standing in more than it needs closing off,
wanted I can bite, devour you if I want to, but I won't—*

If there are more elegant ways of translating the kind of loss that requires no grief other than silence, none of them work as they need to, when they need to:

*you get up in the morning, you go to work, you come home
at night, you try to imagine how whatever destroys you*

*must feel as it destroys you, so you practice taking aim
and shooting yourself in the head in your bedroom mirror,*

*your mouth making the sound birds make
when colliding with a train moving over 70 mph—*

even though, every time, it feels as though I've failed every love that did not come back or wake up, all over again:

so convinced is Orpheus that he's failed Eurydice
in that moment that he doesn't even notice all of the animals

gathered around him, their bodies charmed and enchanted,
lifting off the ground and filling the air; he doesn't notice

the stones and fallen leaves rising, eddying in the light,
the natural world carried up and out of its order

with the sound of his song, everything rearranged with grief
until all that he is inside is suspended above him as *elegos*—

Now, music, now, light, now, through the window, every tree chanting in the wind,
their branches like ancient bone hammers smashing the sky, every starling now

frozen in flight, every murmuration, a constellation of black stars I trace over the glass,
each dark point, a broken compass needle, spinning where fixed, before finally letting go.

***NOX ACCIDERERE: AUBADE FOUND ALONGSIDE MARIAN DREW'S
PELICAN WITH TURNIPS***

*Felled by a power line / and dead of a broken / neck, an Australian / pelican
becomes an / unlikely still life in / Brisbane. Once, sometime before morning, I
woke without you and touched / my way to your kitchen. In the dark, your form, a
reminder / of what wind does to mountains; from the sink, my hair held back / from
my face tilted sideways beneath the faucet to rinse out my mouth, from there: yours,
the animal / body frozen-bloody always in the road at first / light, the one you don't
recognize / until it's too late to swerve, until you crush / the head, until after / you
don't stop. Wouldn't it be / hilarious, I thought, if I arranged fake fruit around you
while you slept, set a decanter / of pinot noir beside you, your father's hunting knife
under your palm, if I staged / the streetlight around you inside crystal figurines and
filled the floor at your feet / with broken glass? It would be / marvelous, wouldn't
it, I thought, if I could make you— you / pearled into a storm of sheets and fogged
with fever, you blind / with dream and shivering against the mattress, your jaw
snapped over the bed's ledge— and make you last longer / than you. *To turn trag-
edy into tableau, the / photographer made / this image using a / flashlight and a
long / exposure—then buried / the bird in her garden.**

PETITE MORT: CHOREOGRAPHY

Jiří Kylián, 1996

What you remember is dusk like a black burial shroud

bleeding light from a flashlight at its center,

what you remember falls in and out of focus, filters in

as patches of color and sound from the ballet video

left on in the living room while you were cooking,

standing in your kitchen, driving a chef's knife with one hand

and holding down with the other, a head of cabbage:

what you remember is how he held you • You remember

how he pulled your hips to his when he kissed you

against the sink, reached his arms around you to shore

your torso against his and, later, how he touched

his forehead to your neck while you were washing

dishes, balanced you into dancing, until you both grew

light-headed and realized you'd left a burner on:

what you remember has wet hands, hard mouths, tastes

like rosemary and sea salt at the center, lemon rind

at the edges • And this is all you remember thinking:
someone in your dreams kept saying *Kill him*

and, in your dreams, you killed, not knowing it was him
until, because the right side of the back reflects

the left side of the chest when the torso is turned,
you'd missed his heart • *The heart,*

someone else kept saying • *You missed*, which means
when you ran the sword in your hand

through his other side, the steel blade drove, surfaced
through your chest: run through • In this dream,

someone kept saying *Run* • And when you didn't,
you sank • Waking later beside him in the dark,

you remember imagining a sword turning between your ribs:
you swore you could see blood poppying

from his left side— • *A body gives and gives way the same way,*
if you think about it, you think now as you drive the same

chef's knife down, this time, through an onion bulb,
and think later as you leave the same ballet video on

while you sleep, your arms vised around your ribs:
your way of telling the body you remember

and the arms that held it, *I'm sorry it has to be a body*
I live in, bone ruin for which failure haunts sacrifice

the way the half-headed atonement animal

haunts the ritual knife, says *you missed* • *On the stage,*

nearly naked dancers like a pair of wind-bleached hands

folding, releasing, relapsing into a prayer of flesh: he lifts,

drops her on her knees • *He wraps his arms around her ribs, hurls her*

against the light, and catches her spine, bending her back,

back and again, nailing her to the air, before pinning her

into an olive knot on the floor • *He lifts her up into darkness*

and holds her there, watching, waiting, it seems, for her to

turn to smoke or burst into light, until the music dies □ *If*

there is such a thing as a love greater than the terror

of knowing your love, so great it can be neither

matched nor returned when given, will kill you,

it has abandoned you, forsaken you unbearably.

FORGIVE ME LESS THAN HOW YOU FOUND ME

When I telephone my friend who speaks to God by singing to the dirt in her yard hand-over-fist as she plants for autumn, the friend with a flaming cross tattoo across the top of her right foot as a reminder that, with every step, she walks in Truth, and tell her how I abandoned my faith, she says *you left a church, but not a God*. I want to ask her and don't— *which one? You tell me:*

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Lover, the latter of which is the one, according to some, who once commanded a prophet to marry a whore to make a point each time that prophet walked through every city in the northern kingdom of Israel, searching brothel after brothel, looking for his wife— of course, you can see where this is going: he's given her

a name he only calls her when he's dragging her home through the streets by her hair, a name he's using as he drops her in their dead yard in front of their swollen children, whom he's named *mistake* and *mistake* and *mistake*, a name he's still calling her as she tells him, *I am a good woman*. She tells him, picking dirt from her teeth and dried blood

from her elbows, *you weren't the one I was leaving, you never are— maybe it's not so hard to be a good woman*, I say to myself, turning away from the receiver and pressing my palm to its voice, maybe it's not so hard to have the kind of faith that lives and dies like the part of dawn when you can't see where the light is coming from, only that

everything it touches, it torches and abandons: it's supposed to be beautiful
how he props her up in the sun, pours wine into her wounds, and sets
the bones he's broken in her collar and wrists— it's supposed to make
so much sense, this metaphor for absolute love, supposed to be so infinite,
you could set fire to a house made out of it and know it would never burn down.

BENEDICTION

Blessed be the girl now out watching her father at work in the yard, blessed be that girl, now throwing leaves into the fire that her father has started to clear the brush from their yard, blessed be that fire and how the girl believes that, with every handful added, she is making enough stained glass to fill a cathedral, blessed be the dogs running through the woods behind her house at dusk, blessed be their bodies running as they chase what's left of the light past the cemetery beside the abandoned church on the edge of the county road and up the road past the yard fenced in for horses where there will never be horses. Blessed be those horses: blessed be those bodies that will never feel the smoke crowding their lungs as it does now in hers standing before that fire, its flares now turning out of glass and into a lake of light behind her house, blessed be that smoke, blessed be that smoke and how the girl believes in a God who may not hear prayers, but who cannot miss smoke, so she sings to it, this smoke, corralled into a column in the sky, lashed and lassoed with ash and debris, with loblolly and white oak, the flames coyote-yellow and white as the animal bones littered over the fence that divides her family's yard from their neighbors. Blessed be that fence and how the hands, her father's, that built it did so to shut things in as much as to keep things out. Blessed be those hands for the graves they dug bare to bury dog after dog found along the county road each the morning, body after matted body drowned into dirt behind their house. Blessed be those bodies: blessed be the time the girl tried to dig up a freshly killed labrador because she thought, if she could recover unbroken remains, she could prove to her nightmares how death is just another translation of sleep—blessed, blessed be how she dropped the dirt in her fists and stopped digging when she struck clay the color of bone and stone the color of tongue.

MIRABILIA

Rinsing sleep from your mouth over the sink, you ask the water in the basin for a miracle: not for wine or dry land or even a child where you will never have one, but for a sign affirming grief as the body's way of knowing nothing is sacred • It's like this: yesterday, the dream in which you bury your friend again and yourself in the earth with him that November • Yesterday, your arms, the noose in which you woke hanging • This morning, August— closing again, but blacker, sharper this time—making every maple begin to bleed at the lip • You want to forget how long you've been like this and here or how • You kiss the insides of your arms, you touch yourself: so this one is the world that will kill you— the one like the sea that, if it does so, crushes you only to be closer to you • Still under from another surgery to mend his knees, broken from a life on them in work and prayer, your father spoke *California* to you, told you how long it takes to drill a well through bedrock, reach the water table beneath Lake Shasta • *Two days*, he said, then told you how, after drinking the water from that well for two days, all water you'd ever drink after would turn to chlorine in your mouth • *And I can still taste it*, he said, *that water* • Here, this is the truth: sometimes, when you're alone, you place aquarium stones under your tongue as a reminder that your God didn't come from the dust • Sometimes, you imagine him as the smooth bowl at the base of a man's neck where a woman rests her head when she's lost a child or her balance or when she tires from riding that man's body for too long— a God as useful as rain to a swimming pool or rope thrown down to the body at the bottom of that pool • This morning, you got out of bed to teach the telephone answering machine in the kitchen to parrot a love song to every voice on the line • *Hello, I'm not here I'm sorry, sorry, Hello, that you're there or there or anywhere* —music you won't claim, but, as you wipe water from your face with your fist, makes you wonder how long it takes to convince a life to be yours, reminds you how once, when you were very young, you trapped an animal you

couldn't name behind the woodpile under your house and called it by your own
until it came out of the dark, met your eyes, and drained away into night.