

Addiction

In the slack apron pocket it's a long search
to find the utility knife. The cans to be
stacked have red and green labels
with fruit at the center, sprouting
yellow heraldic motifs. As the
stockboy wheels his dolly of
cartons to the next aisle
of shelves, I glance
each way. I steer
slowly and sound-
lessly into his vacated spot.
When my hand tweaks the base of the pyramid
I learn to breathe through the mummified
arc of its toppling, through the oversized
eight year old at the checkout scratching
shoulder and neck as he chooses one
candy, through the two-hour sling of the snarled
expressway, the baseball-capped mowers who lazily care
for the grass, the dead in their tombs' cool interiors
through the evening report of the perilous stall
in the allied position, the friend's call about
the job held by a woman who decided not
to terminate her pregnancy who
doesn't know she is being
terminated
through the lack
of alarm with which I'll
greet tomorrow, a seamless
gauze wrapping me in perpetuity
ribs stacking one on
the next.

beguile — flatter

sapient — wise

—spitting backward the scallop moves forward—
a barnacle anchors the back of its neck
loses most of its head spends life kicking
food into its mouth—

She drifts off mid-page.
The horizon is mute carbon paper,
what's left of the night.

Has she stolen the shore?

The sack on her shoulder
holds place-cards from presidents' luncheons,
bills for books and activities
with their blank checks, their smiles, her bows,
the way she can please them.

How many words a day?

porous as pumice her memory grows
neophyte — novice pariah — outcast
—yet tomorrow brings more of that rhythmic beating—

Cain

Angst has never been other than sweet
atop tumuli worn with eons of rains'
gravity bundling the hours.

How birds homed in that first time
from every direction. An unhurried mist
cracked the tumult of branch.

The taste has not changed. I leave him
unburied wherever he lists. Lance this
stripling wind. Unsheathe the blast.

Stand 198: 11, 2 (2012)

Can You

_____ ranks
_____ even

_____ a twenty at the office a fiddle at the fire silence at the sea

It's life: the story -----s
the glass globe as it snows
the surface as it sticks

_____ the news: It's death
(in the desert) a leg, camp, cover
down, in, off, up (in the garden)

caps of patriots in the land of milk and honey
in the cradle of civilization the cradle
(Behind the door a voice -----ing with emotion)

We'll take a commercial -----
(ninety seconds of paradise: slim hints of
orange distance
ghost sunset
lapping water:
a four-color flyer in junk mail)

The law of the sword The cycle of plague and revenge Fire----- at the border
(a circuit breaker!)

Risen bread A sunny yolk
(tines drag oily yellow membrane)

Records breaking at the post office as the weather breaks
In the chapel, fish breaking water break under questioning daybreak

_____ the chain of command
XXXXX into tears

XXXXX the news
XXXXX the news

Break your heart
Break for lunch

Migration

Geese knock dry cold in the stubble, clap upward.
Eve's foot pierces the edge of the garden.

Light is what she needs, not this
journey through temporal gloam
on a horse in the dark without reins.

That heady feeling:
Come along, come be born—

Someone's dreaming her now, a whir
like a buzz saw against time's grain.
The geese cry out, announce themselves

—cleave the Making.

Hotel Amerika 13 (2015)

Nemesis

The burdock no one dug for spring tempura
or a boast of victory over taproot
leafs out vast and ribbed. Its stalk
crests the human head, blossoming magenta.

During August the young burr scratches
shoulders, teases clothes. Mercy will vanish
as it dries and the winds whisper
a pox on the horse's tail, the neat edge of a lawn.

Persistent as shark or cockroach
burdock remembers ferns high as trees,
brontosaurus necks lengthening until their pea-heads
could chew enormous fiddleheads, sharp cold

or claws sudden in the belly bringing them to earth.
In daylight and darkness throughout nature's
mammal dreams, burdock heard first the apes
who walked, sure they would wear the crown.

Stand 204: 12, 4 (2014)

Rosslyn Chapel's Artisans

1. The Master

Let there be an upright. Let corbels keep
the upright wedged, stone perpendiculars
against its stone, pure shaft and bar, that and
this: a man is angled, faced; his soul
form without error, lacking cycle, circlic
closure. To found a town he plants a cross
over a mouthless spring, then has a girl
entice a dragon there: wrathful fire tamed
heralds agriculture—charms the plants to stay.

Across our landscape appear faces: gods
that Nature keeps unseen. Just so, the work
of masons is the absence of our shape.
One reaches only once within life's time;
see that you reach far. Pin the dragon
on the path. Carve a roof—a vaulted
groin, with roses, leaves and stars.

For the greater glory of our God, let
your pillar uptake dragons and spew vines.
Inset between squared corners, from capital
to base as though a cloth had unrolled of
itself, a diptych of this pattern:
Meld cockleshell with fleur-de-lis, and crush.
Knot round and round a space where they are not.

Let the pillar support child and lovers,
marksman, builder, planter, pruner. Carve next
to each the costume that casts out the soul:
the fleshless bones. Top the whole with angel
holding spread book, empty page. Your work scribes
within the stone what appears not there—names
that keep men going, bring them back. Resist
the blasted barren mind's soliloquy:
No one can be saved. No one can be kept.

2. The Mother

Stop rattling my door. I've worked my dusty
shift within the shop of the divine,
trued the wheel and dressed the block until it

worked me doubletime. I haven't energy
to carve a roast. The kettle's on, fire
banked, my hammer's misplaced, apron gone.
Your brisk fist pounds the casing, then thumbs
worry the lock: my fingers agitate
with the wounds that tools heft from an untouched
surface. Upon the pillar's opaque
capital, you'll want hewn and bound a ram
and sacrificial boy, bearded father
with a knife. You'll want a Green Man close by,
his tongue a vine scrolling the chapel wall,
lithe serpents twined about the column's base,
ropes of foliage wound up the shaft.
Last time I fell in love it tore me so
I kept it to myself. Reach? Draft someone
else. I live with a silent chisel, rasp
and file laid side by side. Tether not this
dragon, unremarked, unseen——

——As I reach
the sided stone rounds, topped with openwork.

3. The Apprentice

No template carved this capital: angelic
implements unfix—scroll there, here bell
or shield. Or it withstands the angels:

ram, fruit, roses are its crown; the cockle
shell, the flux of stars patter in rounded rows,
pattern unset, the emblems variant.

One long neck with wings, eight dragons
set their tail in mouth, a base that firms
the pillar, a cross-stitch for a column

ribbed like a fall of frozen water,
an artery of ironed hair. But see
the four strands in relief that writhe it:

stranded curves of fruitless foliage,
double spirals, differing like the mismatch
in the germ on which matching depends.

On which the universe depends, the dance
that splices dancers. Why does one helix
fold another in its spin? Plasm, eyeless

gropes toward its new fate. The way a trampled dragon might meet a wounded saint.

Stand 198: 11, 2 (2012)

NOTE:

Rosslyn Chapel was built in Midlothian, Scotland in the latter part of the 15th century. Faces of the apprentice, his mother, and his master are carved in the ceiling. In esoteric masonry, three pillars toward the front of the chapel are known as Strength, Wisdom and Beauty. The first is attributed to a master mason, the third to his apprentice who (like Talos, the pupil of Daedalus whose work excelled his teacher's) was said to have been slain in a jealous rage. The middle pillar is unattributed. Questioned on site, the chapel staff responded, "The plain one? No one seems to mention that." Of the chapel's 16 pillars it is the only one not described in several centuries of detailed guidebooks.

Stirrings

She spends nights on her feet
tipping pills into throats of the aged,
swabbing their bedsores, chucking wet linen,
the rotator cuff hurling pain's metal
the length of her arm.
At midshift, at three, at the gooseneck lamp
lighting her station, she writes up the charts.

In the mornings, sleepheavy,
she wheedles her daughter's pressed thumbs
from the abdomen under the nightie,
guides them to the pitcher's handle,
slides the cereal under the milk
and with luck holds her tongue at bodily
nonsense, the girl nine years old.

She takes off her nurse's uniform
and slides into bed, the man turning his back,
hands balled in the clamp of his knees.

Stone Canoe 5 (2011)

Winter in the Garden

When I squat to the spade base, the handle does the lifting
so I see the yellowed body in cascades of loosened earth.

With the blind human movement toward the future
my pointer finger tucks the damp sack of her belly.

A webbed foot rests on clods of grubs
and buried eggs whose hatch will wake her.

With the half-mew of a cat moved from an easy chair
the toad rebukes me in her dreaming.

AGNI 69 (2009)

Your Mouth On Me

Six clean stitched blue molded inches cover pelvic bone to crotch. You drop by, see me dress, in shorts nearly fabricless—no cuffs or back pockets. Gypsy slips into the summer. In a handspan's denim, I walk along beside you down the trail to frame a neighbor's window.

We'll elude at parties the stunned mates that we arrive with, ditch bonfire for woods.... Vapor rises from my sturdy forearms to the mountain air; aureoles meander from soaked hair as I step from an outdoor sauna. If it were fired up there would be others there, communal Sundays. I am alone, sponge-rinsed and nearly dry when you come looking for an extra hand.

I am a woman who frames windows, hoists a maul, whose waist stays small. Your lathe smoothes the rings of crosscut antler when I marry. As your eight-year-old sits in the back, your palm slides from the stick shift to me. He's not to know about the moment you and I...the openwork of metal eyes clasps the denim's nickel-sized front buttons.

If I leave the shorts draped on the sauna rack, if I stay behind the door when you call Anybody here?...I don't. I step and stand there naked as a burnished violin. I slip the short shorts up my thighs. When the window's framed you slowly take apart the halter top, a backless slip of red that covers less of me than my long hair.

I pass along the shorts to my trim painter a month after you die though as I stuff them in her kit I do not know you have. She inherits twenty-something years of paint splats, wear marks, tears, hard gobs of roof cement, top button etched with Wrangler. She is rivetted, well toned, two months from her due date. Then they'll fit. When I give something away I see it.