

Outside The Tunnel Snow Is Melting

Thank you, Mom, I found just
enough tablets to relieve
the worst symptoms.
Empty radiance or radiant emptiness—
why grouse about what's perfect?
This peacoat's already original sin.

Now it's just up these last steps
but after I unlock the door you better
go first. We have to make our way
through these stacks of boxes that came
down from the attic a few days ago.
Watch your knee on the newel post.

Born into the old blues, can't you
see what they've been doing
to me? with spiritualist church services
and one-liners written in hotel rooms.
How deceiving, the darkness.
The subtle capitulate, the young refuse.

I would have been a missing manual, blank
on the dusty flattened glove
you just picked from the parking lot
or the fluorescent lights
above the day-old bread
or the winter night itself.

You might have been duped by
serving evil or living for thrills
on the chance of one vulnerable moment.
Careful, that cup's chipped.
Here's a lace doily. No, password
has another meaning.

Can you preserve
the years in forty folders
fast and careless
as a transalpine express?
or coat the lawn with
genetic code or tragedy?

All these years you've been gathering
fruit at the end of a branch
I've spent time with the monks

incarnated this once as woman.
Do you know their cry
while flying? like ducks
with head colds.

See those ravens at eye level there?
and on the ground blacked-in
outlines cruise. We didn't
warm any else of it up.
Watch what happens
when what's happening
wants to stop.

Hotel Amerika 15 (2017)

Fresh Coffee After You Are Gone

There's studied madness in opening bills after breakfast,
signing bank transfers. I clear my mind enough to know

a fallen stick of incense won't burn the house,
to figure out the cassette's lack of sound, the rasp

of its rotation, is my error not the answering machine's;
side A not B is the voice, still there, metallic

in the renovated room without its furniture:
I'll be he-e-re—the abecedarian of 4 AM—

*I know: Dinner time's the best time. Talk to
you later*—the manic laugh, disintegration after

successful surgery inside the frontal lobe.
Pick up. Pick it up! I am healed. Oligodendro-

glioma spreads its treeroots in the brain. If I
could have work to do, take aspirin and move on

instead of staring at the sad museum pieces
that pondering sculpts from love, as though understanding

were a place to live. If I could simply talk about
the damp closet upstairs, the milky trail of mildew

on black velvet, the yellowed dry cleaning tags.
Is the number on the scrap of paper 6 or 9?

As though knowing would be alchemy? Square one:
hot bitter brew, then the nothing that has to be done.

For an agitated hour I bundle one towel about
another in a ball, sort the light fabrics from dark.

Offering the Body: The Tibetan Practice of Chöd

The eagle does its day job
feasting on what's left by crow and vulture.
Anything I'd planned to do is over.

As my head nods its usual consent
to imaginary promises and dreams
my corpse appears before me.

Time's come to set my mind
to ribbon flesh, chop small, pile it in a dish
made from the cranial bones.

I scout the stinking ground for anything
to start the fire, use my own desire.
The skull cup, on its tripod, enlarges as it heats.

Half-moon on a finger
pokes from the pile of blood and bones
simmering to stew, to nectar.

All who are wise, the ordinary, furred,
obstructors, germs of sickness—
may their bodies, minds, be sated.

From every distance and dimension, beings
afraid, unsatisfied, or blessed, feast to satisfaction—
devils, angels, animals, everyone I owe.

I see no stopping to the world
but there is respite from the demons
that arise daily in the head.

That this ritual could do the same thing twice
—my awareness cuts that thought. O, I cherished
this poor body. I quake. Invite.

Now, knife the ritual words *in vast space*
reduced to dust *mounded like clouds*
clinging *dearly held* to let in silence.

For all that is perceived, flesh or consciousness,
appears then disappears, image in a mirror—
red drop, a fingernail, a ball of hair.

Loggerheads

Muck mostly decomposed
beneath the fissured shell
the top barnacled

On the great back that had been their earth
flat miniature yurts ride
white, some with a smoke hole:

Not to be handbag leather, our world, nor cosmetic oil,

Clutch laid, her flippers had troweled
the sand smooth and then stranded
on ruts left by surf fishers' trucks

turtle soup, eyeglass frames, jewelry, shrimp boat clutter

Hatchlings born for the guidance
of moonbeams reflected off waves sometimes
crawl toward lights streaming the road

but a simple sacrifice, to headlights and round rubber

Stand 14, 4 (212) (2016)

Motherwort

As forest green leaves reverse in wind
dusty silver undersides' veins bulge.

Embryonic rings of spurred seeds
halt hand's slide at intervals
along the tall four-sided stalk.

Leonurus cardiaca has a robin
sherwood shine, a slightly darker slightly
darker nature than its fellow weeds.

Minute orchids top the taloned
seedcrowns—frillpink visors.

Whence the fomentative power
—plucked, bruised, steeped—
to break fever, lift childbirth cramp.

Occupied

Bruised ribs, raked shins
in the search for a sweet grape
among dry vines

Endlessly back and forth
reading maps, reading the legends:
'city of peace' 'gate of the gods'

Standing knee deep in the mud
of an untilled field
a rogue bull amid the red dirge

Hub of bricks on the flood plain
submerged save for its fame
Re-upped, streets radial from the gardens

Called again to prayer:
land of marshes and sand
looted and forced, and forced once more

Bone chips rattling
arms gone to a roadside bomb
Meat cold in the bowl

Ember Days

The almanac's laconic whistle
passes a millennium at last grown
nonfungible. Day breaks up the where-were-

you party. Feet wander concrete platforms
lit with radiance weak and discomfited
from two bare bulbs, stilled double-naughts.

Mobiles dry-rattle beneath posters for stewpots
and holiday sales, the forecast troubled music:
history, or at least cold wind of a startling event.

A cricket's chirrup slows to intermittent pipe.
Hooves break the dried railside bramble. Auburn
summer coats thickened gray, the fawns cluck.

Notre Dame Review 41 (2016)

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.

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.