

Floats To The Sky

Initially I did not plan
 a painting of a ladder
 faithful to phantom
 noises before sleep
wearing a clean chemise
 beneath dirty shorts
 under a worn abaya
 in my pink slippers
with my red cheeks in the shop
 for spots of vitiligo
 and smoothing of their
 plump ragged history.

The canvas came bare
 as a bell before it's struck
 by brisk forced air
 on open waters
or the blue wasp
 that loved me
 when I was a child
 with a sting to the pineal
scattering bars through light
 all the way to dark
 faster than brush
 leaks down my hand.

Vallum 15, 2 (2018)

AUDIO online Poem Of The Week 25 March 2019

Baghdad

He keeps on touching her against the wall
beneath crucifix and candle, as blue silk
of the shade catches wick flaring white.

The red stub gutters. He's a waxy paraphrase.
At the edge of himself what he meets
is uncannily familiar, his plausible fiction.

The fire's light astride them—about, above, around—
he shifts her leg, her foot, off the ground.
The farther back she moves the further he swings.

Matter 22 (2018)

For When Nothing Is Remembered

On the eighth day we looked on and realized
it wasn't good anymore. Where did they go,
the shared rituals? We buy greeting cards
that could be sent to anyone, nineteenth
century fixtures shine without a lamplighter
and the city spent millions wiring
the whatnot.

Coffee in a paper cup, a painted wood duck,
little darlings on the back stairs fed
morning and night--no one born yesterday
will ever see contraptions that we use to
communicate. What of the game under
the tree root left behind the hill?
Step up.

And leave the affirmations by the wayside.
Inveigling all the separate types who
might begin to dance is no path of light.
Your hygienist can look for other work.
You might as well slink off to your room
without lipstick or a gold dress, seeds
in your hair.

Earthly Mishaps

Faint, humming, inexorable in the damp
below the ruined walled castle garden
Mare's Tail tunnels an eight-foot root.

Sly-boots, I've spaded the circle, reached to my elbow.
Still the plant breaks. As Eve brought a man
his labor, it will multiply tenfold.

I shop for survival: a sprayer to level pride, melancholy
and unwanted shoots. The canister is lowered from
its shelf, bagged in plastic. The till rings.

Keys in hand, I see the carpark as a horsetracked swale
where Cadfael leads his roan, saddlebagged
with an apothecary box. Medieval herbicide?

As he stumps through mud, the monk's brass scale tips:
one pan sways with the bitterness of interrupted life,
the other, Eve's radical helplessness.

TAB: A Journal of Poetry and Poetics 2018

AUDIO also available on the site

Guest in the Neighborhood

I was on chicken surveillance that night:
fowl to be roasted whole or split and fried,
delivered to the busy suburb.
My mind ran to last week's manifest destiny
wanting to return to the meadow
thrust into the newly green, sun humming
off the pond. Working the line—a private
lake—would have to fill in that longing.
Then the night shift rooted its wishbone in my chest.

I passed the guard, crawled the sidewalk. But
a frenzy of messy barks—the beagle next door—
had me turn. Each tray of hens was carried from
the walk-in cooler, each carcass bathed,
patted dry, set on the appropriate counter
with a little clearing around it.
That odd feeling of walking in place
closed my throat, the inexorable remains
of feeding on wages, hungry for wings.

Compared to What Was Is Is Beautiful

the bread eaten, the westerlies
intuitively understood

lattice-blinds hanging askew

meander *deserter* *maneuver*
marching on but not over the tongue

the orchid's pouch gradually enlarging

bunchgrass stippled, light flexing
on rags hung to dry

Hotel Amerika 16 (2018)

Perhaps I Left the Car at Big Lots

My yard is limbo, rampaging beds
of succulents and stalks, a place for
the innocent, a palace of nonresolution,
its conundrum cross or crucifix—
the clean whistle of perpendicular boards
or the gallery of whispers
around the writhing figure,
the little piece of culinary art.

I have my own sadnesses, having reached
the end of my smoke rope and all my
excuses for lighting up—that it keep me pagan,
transcendental, strong and young, lit from within.
The telephone rings, mail arrives,
there are meetings to attend
and the list divides, clones, unfolds mercilessly
until, looking for the rake among leaves against

the slatted fence, I am convinced
that it was stolen by the cook
next door, traded for crack. Where is calm, peace,
absence of war? It's all bits, parts, fragments,
divisions, subdivisions—the brilliant
jay, the desperate squirrel, my neighbor in his
old Yankee cap sobbing by the garage
wall—I've found the keys. But I can't leave.

Slipping An Opinion Out Of Them Is Easy

They've seen it all, been round the bend
and back. Is it my job to ensure answers
I record reflect their actual beliefs?
One guy claiming to be 'not denominational'
scored the perfect mean for liberal media reader.
I sense an emptiness in such respondents
although they maintain the mask of good
manners they bring to the landline.

Once there was a voice I could completely
give a body to, she was so well oiled, most
of her time probably spent at the marina
sailing her yacht into the fiercest wind in search
of a lungful with that old-time feel of
shock and grit. When I asked how she thought
she might survive the Rapture without smoking
she growled 'Can I swim in your pond?!'

Hotel Amerika 16 (2018)

lucky number

7 8 9 1 2 3
lasso of infinity

spring stalled, the buds like eardrums
waiting for the work to work in me

you have a headache, you cannot sleep
you want the sun out and gone

a yellowed yellow pad
the loose unpretty heart

The Old Man Brought Home

My father once wore one shoe and one slipper
pressing star moss and vole tracks
walking steep land

A stubbled saint fizzling in a twentieth century
incarnation, afraid to use
the cellar stair

Or to digest the darkness that had been
his middle age. He broke off
old branches.

As his hand brushed their papergreen lichens
brittleness pleased a slender novelist
tossed inside

Who spoke to a cobbler bent over
blue suede or white leather
at his bench.

Is a transcendently beautiful place not to be ours?

The sea bangs about and sweeps out half the earth
of Isle Dernière, with half its 1856 summer residents.

Chance combinations of genes or plans based on
the weather consign personal fate to probability.

How many can rise to the side of the saints
and float among the rocks in a white dress?

Shifting winds sweep Emma Mille back in. Little bags
for keeping miracles streak her cheeks, lumps of fool's gold.

On the last barrier island, entranced, shivering
beneath the doctor's stethoscope, Emma fever dreams:

The great clod across the marsh channels
erodes with each storm strike. In the century

after steam, then the century after flight
mortals will rebuild, sight rocks to float among.

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.

Notre Dame Review 43 (2017)

AUDIO also available on the site

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)

AUDIO also available on site

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 smooths 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.