

Black Laurel

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Black Laurel* is a book-length manuscript which has at its center poems that reveal and explore issues related to Michele Poulos's identity as a Greek-American writer, discovering the connections that link the past and present of both Greece and America. These poems often work as a quest to recover identity. They explore the idea that it is her own privileged perspective as an educated Greek-American woman that both allows and in some ways prevents her seeing herself in the Greeks who today are struggling economically, emotionally, and psychologically. Many of the poems work to achieve a complex understanding of both an individual as well as a broader cultural history. These poems sometimes take on the personas of striking figures from other times and other landscapes, while others draw on materials which are somewhat more autobiographical. In one poem titled "Before My Mother Set Herself on Fire," the speaker is an imagined daughter in a modern-day Greek family. The poem, inspired by a news story about an elderly man who shot himself in the head in front of Syntagma Square in Athens to protest the austerity measures imposed on the Greek population, explores the various ways in which a national crisis may affect an individual family. Alternatively, Poulos delves into her personal family history in "When the Wind Falls," a poem about the Nazi invasions of northern Greece. At the same time, this focus on past and present Greece is only one strand in a wide-ranging manuscript woven of materials which also include a variety of subjects related to science, history, eroticism, mysticism, and much more.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*Copper Nickel*: “Dyeing the Dummy’s Hair”

*The Hollins Critic*: “The Angel of Broken Instruments”

*MiPOesias*: “Rilke’s Eighth Letter”

*Miracle Monocle*: “Devotion”

*Smartish Pace*: “Letter to Gregory with Haymow’s Gold”

*The Southern Review*: “The Golden Age of Herbalists”

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*Sycamore Review*: “Ausschusskinder: the garbage children”

*Waccamaw*: “End of Blood Orange Blossoms”

“Thursdays in the Faubourg Marigny” was included in *Best New Poets 2012*, and “Lure” was included in *The Southern Poetry Anthology, Vol. IV: Louisiana*.

“Letter to Gregory with Haymow’s Gold” was a finalist for the 2012 Beullah Rose Poetry Prize by *Smartish Pace*.

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. . . As we grow older  
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated  
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment  
Isolated, with no before and after,  
But a lifetime burning in every moment  
And not the lifetime of one man only  
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.

—T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

Someone, I tell you, in another time,  
remembers us.

—Sappho, *Fragment 147*

# **Black Laurel**



## Augury of Innocence

Because bones are stamped with hours, sky.

Because bones are ice, wing, pearl.

Because we are tethered to the ground.

Because our daughters are harbingers of dusk.

Because the spine is chambered and ancestral.

Because bones weather and migrate to surface.

Because bones are mineral within the catacombs,  
there is wind inside the bone.

I

Letter to Titos Patrikios

*And the echo that was sent out of the past  
all of us heard and knew*

—*Odysseus Elytis*

If, standing before a band of soldiers, the open  
mouths of their guns infinite as night, you saw  
the Gate of Athena Archegetis surrender its marble  
to the sky, who would blame you for believing?

At sixteen, you understand that beauty is the ruin  
a city no longer witnesses, or the heat the bodies  
in your home accumulate. Once,

your mother's blouse, dusted with cinnamon  
and clove, burned against your skin  
red with fever. Cities are like this: they offer  
us the world before they finally let go.

The fog in the harbor knows this, perhaps  
has known it all along, yet returns—as if not  
returning would mean there could be nothing  
left to see. Here you are, trembling  
at the western gate of the agora, a soldier's  
cough haunting your ears. You won't cry.

To cry is to erase a fallen whitewashed  
stair. If you must gaze unflinchingly  
down the well of a gun, you'll do it.

We hear the shot ring out, if only  
in your dreams. Titos, let me tell you a secret.  
The dead don't care if the wind is absent  
from the mountain or if the sea holds another  
bronze head. The world is softly breaking.  
We know your story of how a girl rode up  
on a bicycle, stopped the bullets in their casings.  
You came to believe then in the wonder  
of a peach dress, which is the same belief  
that now keeps your feet dipping in the surf.  
A boy will do everything he can for his country.  
The whole place every day gasping when it can.

*Ausschusskinder*: the garbage children

*I gave the Berlin bear a solemn crown, but when your mother town  
is estranged from you, death can't be far away.*

—Bruno S.

Your accordion transmits *orphanage*, the song  
a field for the white horse

you dreamed as a child brutalized by Nazis.  
In the video, bells with their brass patina

yoke together with string and pitch, your hand  
a hummingbird over each

as you sing and squeeze  
the wheezy box. Yet what of the song's

translation: *Mamatschi, give me a little horse.*  
*A little horse would be my paradise.*

How the boy of the song becomes a man  
when the horse that he prayed for

arrives years later pulling the hearse that bears  
his dead mother. And what of the city

that swallowed its own? Discarded prayers  
in mint-green walls of the psychiatric ward

where you cling to the others in a circle, trembling.  
Years later, still trembling,

you watch the Berlin wall fold into itself  
under the uncountable stars.

## The Golden Age of Herbalists

When he throws a fist of parsley into the pond,  
the man believes the ailing fish will heal. In 1540,

William Turner studied plants for the resolve  
within each one: wolfberry for scars;  
lye from gentian roots to clean cloth;  
cardamom to soothe snake venom.

As a boy, he had found his mother on the kitchen floor,  
body bent in half, coughing, eyes watering

and locked on a distant plane. He fed her evening  
primrose oil and the immense choke loosened;  
she breathed once again.

They were more than simples to heal bones  
and cure diseases—he studied their moods, their networks of  
*be seed, be influence. You, who are always trying.*

When he finally took to the countryside, he carried  
a sack and a knife, dusk settling

on leaf-points as if in the summer months  
their passions were precisely edged.  
Standing alone in the meadow, he knew everything

he caught sight of was in the dying  
and would die before he would, yet he held

in his hands a garden, an herbal  
he would pen against sickness, soreness, wounds,

the formulas behind the labyrinth of green  
unfolding before him.

## Sirocco

The vineyard pitches over its cliff  
toward the shale-gray sea. Sprayed  
with ash and rust, each pumice hollow  
turns in on itself like the spent caldera  
at Santorini's core, yet the vines grow,  
irrepressible as the vintner's daughter.

Every injury's a black fruit that turns,  
like devotion, toward the sea. Long ago  
he bathed her in a bucket of rainwater,  
each drop wrung from cloth into her mouth  
light as the beats beneath her skin, clear  
as the hours of mineral dusk spent grafting  
new branches to climbers 3000 years old.

Each grain of sand is another prayer.  
What remains will be a long afternoon—  
he prunes a vine into the shape  
of a basket, a haven for clutches of grapes,  
convinced he can train longing  
like any tendril—take an aimless blank jumble  
and alter it. Resisting his thirst as long  
as possible, he will not stop until  
every sugared globe is safe. Even here

love tenses against disappointment.  
When he's finished, the sky folds  
into its silk. The donkey sleeps  
against the shed. The daughter slips off  
in a newly laundered blue dress.

## Utterance

Still bound to dream, my lover's breath  
is a highballing train the bridge can hardly  
hold, quick as his brother's slip  
from a church roof, the three-story fall  
to white earth, ten years coupled  
to a wheelchair until he shot the hole  
through his head.

Think of my lover mopping up  
bloodied linoleum, splintered bone.  
A family lapsed into freighted absence.  
In the dream, he makes love to a woman.  
He means to say, *You are the temple-eye  
of my passage*, says *We too are untongued  
in the star-field of smoke*.



Letter to the Egyptian Fishmonger

—*Rafina, Greece*

Tables are tossed, mackerel scatter  
like rats across the market floor. Stacked  
ice melts around the wasp-black boots  
of Greece's Golden Dawn cadre  
as lyrics from Pogrom, the party's favored  
band, drive them on: *Rock*  
*for the Fatherland, no parasites,*  
*no foreigners in our land!*  
They've come in crash helmets  
waving flags painted with golden  
meanders drawn like swastikas  
to scrape the country clean.  
Tonight, I'm writing to you,  
fishmonger, because in the video  
they slap your face with chains.  
My mother would have called them  
*goons* back when witness was genteel,  
when polite society didn't speak  
of such things—a willful silence,  
the same awkward quiet Yeats met  
when he spoke of belonging  
to his own Golden Dawn  
in the 19th century, their aim  
to cleanse the soul through alchemy  
and spirit travel. While I won't claim  
a rinsed soul, I know that pain  
is a mind that refuses a new face.  
Tonight, there is no wind, no cloud—  
only a presidential debate pirating  
the airwaves. Now, in your hospital  
room, bandaged with strips  
of gauze, the woman at your side  
may whisper of a red moon,  
tin-hearted stars. Maybe she too  
no longer believes there's a country  
mindful enough to hold you.  
It hurts to hear of it, the night's tongue  
wrapping around you.

Herzog Screened at the Rave

*Spellcaster Lodge, New Orleans*

Nothing better than dropping two tabs of acid  
painted with the purple face of Jesus  
with my lover, a long-haired Mississippi boy  
who never wears underwear or shoes.  
His overalled saunter through  
the Ninth Ward, whiff of old Storyville  
on the wind, our kick at the prospect  
of *Fata Morgana* again, the film's *superior mirage*:  
cloaked and restless figures small as teeth  
emerge ghostly from the dunes.

When I look around,  
the crowds spin like glowing necklaces.  
A girl in a patent leather bodysuit with the ass  
cut out shimmies against another girl  
with stuffed animals sewn to the hem of her skirt  
while boys nod in black-framed glasses.  
Who knows how far they've come,  
and for what. For the filmmakers, it was Sahara,

a ribbed and golden sand they would cross  
in search of water, well after well empty  
as animal skin, flat hides preserved  
in the drought—tufts of red hair, tips of black tails  
rising out of dust like flames belching from  
oil refineries. With thirst, they film the blur  
of a school bus they believe carries ice cubes  
for waiting children. A disturbance in the air  
they will never reach. Aren't we all guilty  
of dreaming another world?

Last week, news of the baby  
my younger brother has named Alexander.  
The Macedonian king's mother, Olympias,  
on the eve of her marriage, imagined her womb  
struck by lightning. Later, her husband saw himself  
in a dream, sealing her womb with wax  
upon which he engraved a lion. The mystery,  
ancient as an alkaline red lake, breeds  
a blush of flamingos, a vast sweep of color  
in a desert we would seek yet never comprehend.

When the drug kicks in, Miss Pussycat  
stumbles to the makeshift stage  
in her glacier blue dress, a sock puppet  
on each hand: an alligator with thick  
eyelashes on one, a rat on the other. My lover  
licks ice shavings from a chocolate Sno Ball,  
stares at the creatures rising from the tinfoil swamp.

Soon others emerge:  
a talking trumpet, a black sun, and Mr. Happy Tree,  
an oak made from burlap and ripped stockings,  
blinking in the fog machine lake,  
all trying to make sense of their fallen  
world, like Herzog in his devastation,  
whose eye captures monitor lizards,  
huts assembled from old machine parts,  
a man squatting in a limestone quarry,  
arms and face covered with white powder  
as if the earth had earned its clearing.

Times like this, out with my lover,  
and we get separated—when I see him next,  
it's like seeing him for the first time,  
and for a moment I hold a sufficient peace  
within my body. A woodland animal  
points a cardboard camera at us.  
The swamp has given way to a burnt field.

It's the movie's closing scene: the madam  
at the brothel banging out a tango, that song  
lost in an ancient upright piano, that longing.

## The Angel of Broken Instruments

These wings are not muslin,  
ermine-colored, or petal-light,  
but stitched with red and black felt  
and pulled tight across the bones  
of tubas and trombones; they coil  
over my thin shoulders.

I might appear anywhere. Called  
to the side of a man chain-smoking  
on his way home after an argument  
with his son, we are stopped short  
on the corner of Third and Main  
by a piano fallen from the sky.

He has mistaken the heap for an old love  
as he kneels beside the splintered maple  
to gather the steel wires  
into a nest he carries in his arms  
to the river, where he sets it afloat  
on the stream. We are always more  
than what we believe.

As a bad child

I was banished to the basement,  
where for hours I'd spin myself  
on a stool with clawed feet clutching  
three amber glass spheres, the harp tinkling  
each time a moth grazed its strings.  
Though I couldn't play, I imagined  
a song so electric that the air  
parted for its passage,  
where notes multiplied and divided,  
and once it finished, the wind  
was no longer disordered.

When I found the wrecked piano  
in the field, I curled up inside it  
while the bearded wheat grew tall and noiseless.

Letter to Gregory with Haymow's Gold

A sycamore climbs through the silo  
like a spine, twin-hearted seeds whistling  
to the ground as the barn squats beside it

in its injured neglect. The tree won't remember  
any of this,

not the curved wall pressing it into shape,  
nor the bees carrying white millet  
through the wind,

lulling the meadow  
into a completion  
that drifts back to your childhood,

the driveway edged with walnut trees,  
the farmhouse not yet undressed  
of its linen. Your grandfather

in his dusty hat swinging a bucket  
of milk by his side.

What you knew of the soul was the watery stillness  
of a calf's eye whose center drew you  
into your own deepening.

Nights you would tuck yourself into the haymow's gold,  
believing in the divinity of open land,

how each blade of grass shrugged off the dew  
to become wholly itself again, & give yourself fully

to the only god that would ever have you.

Now, there comes a point  
when a man strains to remember  
what he used to believe:

the motes, flickering,  
held up to the light through a barn door.

Before his cousins inherited the land  
& argued about the walnut tree's worth,

before cattle sold to the highest bidder.

The question persists:

will the field remember the trees it once held

& the animals whose silhouettes at dusk  
underscored the night's vastness?

Nothing stands  
between us and the summer,

having grown quiet,  
having given over.

When the Wind Falls

*Mouriki, Greece*

1.

Moments after the exposed film begins  
its long fade, the boy runs away  
to carve the date with a stick  
in the dirt, April 6, 1941, while his sister  
lays out the walls of a bedroom  
in crocus blossoms curling in the sun.  
At home, in the summer kitchen's cool,  
their mother pounds dough into bread.  
Deep in her own dream, the girl presses  
two cornhusk dolls together shy of a kiss  
in the seconds before she hears,  
  at first, a distant  
roar, perhaps a neighbor's tractor  
ploughing or a growl hidden in the woods.  
Soon it grows thin as a falcon's call  
sailing its broad-winged shadow across the field  
and she is amused.

  It must be her brother,  
she thinks, eyes shifting toward the boy.  
Earlier, he had lifted a kite made of silk  
into the air, the tail curling between limbs  
tracing sky. His hand pauses now  
in midair, as though pointing toward a star.  
He laughs, uncertain why the wind  
  roils at his back.

2.

Seventy years on, that same wind kicks  
up the dust in Syntagma Square to blind  
the demonstrators and photographers who will  
terrorize the world with the idea that all of Greece  
is burning. And if I refuse to point a finger,  
it is that such fears are useless  
as a cracked baseball bat  
  kept under a bed  
or shutters fastened against the night's slow shuffle.  
*Neighbors* here are feared.

First the Turks, then the Germans,  
now Albanians. Though the Nazis  
have disappeared, brothers and sisters are still locked  
in rivalry over homes once occupied.  
Rooms that were once fragrant with the scent  
of rose liquor and golden plums, *tiropita* baking  
in the oven,

are now mute  
as the spooked black-and-white photos  
trapped behind glass at the heads of graves—  
there the relatives lay, one body piled  
on top of another, to be dug up seven years on,  
bones washed, spread in the field to burn dry  
before being squeezed into a warehoused shoebox.

But the dead have a knack  
for returning.

In the potter's field  
of New Orleans, restless resting place  
for the unknown and the poor,  
storm waters churned up the bones  
and clothes of the dead, pantyhose  
clinging to a mangled stick. The flesh  
had evaporated. Angry caretakers  
shot at wild dogs as they slunk away,  
knuckles tucked in the hollows of their mouths.

3.

But if I'm feeling sad here now, it's because  
the church with the turquoise dome overlooking  
the meadow where the children played  
has sealed itself, the incense burner gone cool  
as the plaster wall where Saint Demetrius hangs,  
the blade of his spear buried inside his foe's chest.

One day a stranger will come to the village  
dressed as a nun,  
stuff his pockets with change  
from the poor box, then leave  
his costume draped over a low-hanging  
olive branch, frightening a group  
of children on their way home from school.  
Their screams will fade into fields  
and dust, quick as my aunt's scream,  
that girl of 1941,  
terrified by the round belly of the plane, the spray



of bullets that shattered the spell around her.  
And if I'm bewildered, it's because nothing  
will ever be as sure as the thick black cross  
under each wing shrouding her  
like night's ragged shawl.

## Thursdays in the Faubourg Marigny

Would slink out of the house at midnight  
done for Vaughan's Lounge,  
that piece of down-home-dirty,  
swagger through New Orleans avenues  
thick with Mississippi steam,  
black slip dress slit up the side, black  
tights battered with snags, powdered,  
baked, glittered, the night  
holding its soft wrists open.  
Easy as the club's silver notes that slid  
across the sidewalk and through barbeque  
smoke, meat cooked out of the back  
of a pickup truck, tin foil glinting  
like the teeth of that man in the alley.  
I fed him his hot sauce, thumbprint of red  
whorled on each nipple, hips peaked  
like bald cypress knees, his mouth  
pulling at my breast as though refusing  
isolation, as if I could lay bare  
each burrowed place inside him, the sucking  
at first hard, then pleading and reckless  
as the staggered walk back to his place,  
where for hours we fucked in full dark  
penetrated by the cheap blue neon  
wailing across the street, a sign whose light  
scattered across the skeleton mask  
he'd slipped on: bulbous forehead,  
grid of teeth, eyes hollow as a gouge  
of earth, nose an upside-down heart.  
It was death come knocking,  
night-winged and thieving, and all I gave  
was stars kindled, body flown.

The Ruins at Missolonghi

—after *Eugene Delacroix*

In her pointed red shoes, she stands atop  
a pile of stones, one leg bent at the knee  
where she leans against a slab of rock

that has crushed a soldier, perhaps her brother  
or father, the man's limp hand exposed

beneath the rubble and stilled under the fallen city.  
It is noon, though smoke tightens the sky.  
Chestnuts and barley still dust her tongue.

The ruffled neckline of her long white gown  
dips so low the shadow of her breasts darkens

her torso. Edges of her floor-length blue  
jacket are scalloped with sheaves of gold thread  
that burn in the light. Arms outstretched,

fingers spread as if understanding nothing,  
she opens her palms to the massacre before her.

The bodies, she thinks, are a field of poppies  
the wind no longer shudders against,  
the sky a pouch of gunpowder cinched shut.

On the rise beyond her, a man in a turban  
with ruddy brown skin plants a flag in the earth.

We can't yet see what she sees, but we follow  
her gaze to a point higher than the hill  
on which she stands, to the uppermost ledge,

where a Turk lays out a row of severed heads.  
Her eyes settle on the boy whose black ringlets

are tendrils of smoke from the feast day bonfire  
where he once warmed her hands by squeezing them

between his thighs while the old women flung  
garlic bulbs into flames. There, under poles  
of painted swallows, in desire's brisk lagoon,

*(stanza break)*

she placed a wreath on his head,  
her breath catching as he leapt through the fire,

cradling the icon of Saint Helena  
among the yellow licks.

Now her headscarf sighs in the breeze  
like the last of all swallow songs.

The Memory of Houses

Statues at night remember

the pale winter,

whisper scenes of my first house—

the one that burned

when I was seven. Sometimes they speak

of flames high as pines

or needles scattered across the patio,

turnips blackened in a crate—

*other times*, it is my mother's hands

folding with the tassels of the sun.

Every room the soldiers burned

that year was a way of saying

*we moved from town to town.*

Though I don't know much about houses,

I remember their daydreams and phantoms

sometimes, when I stand still;

*At times—*

near the water, in rooms stripped bare  
of linen, rotted pears in a bowl,

waves subtracting the shore  
as if no future clemency were possible—

I remember and I cannot sleep.

History is a blue pomegranate

split in the open grass filling you with stars

or cold rot.

Though I couldn't say now  
if the shutters were yellow or white,

the hills kept on emptying,  
giving themselves over.

Don't talk to me about the warbler,

or the tawny-colored lark.

Their souls too are restless,  
shifting from window to window—

a whole lifetime mistaking a flash  
in the harbor for what could not fly away.

Don't talk about the little wagtail  
tracing figures with his tail on the light.

Which is to say:  
there is no warm quay  
that would draw me.

Some nights become  
a statue's cool finger on my throat—

the moon's white rag  
dissolves into the wretched  
awareness of a child—

though sometimes a breeze carries  
the scent of a young face from the village,

a baker or dressmaker  
with lips pink as a sheep's tongue.

If only houses could remember skies  
that astonished and the children

beneath them whose delicate fingers counted,  
on each hand, the dead

before finally turning over,  
quietly beneath a blanket,

changeless

as the marble stair.

## The White Rabbit

beside the house with emerald trim  
is large and heavy as a sack of flour,  
ears rimmed with dark brown fur.

It sits so terribly still  
the possibility presents itself  
the animal is stuffed.

I search its face for the slightest motion,  
search its body for injury.  
When I draw within arm's reach,

I bend to meet it, eye-level,  
where its whiskers shake  
in the acacia-scented breeze.

Its eyes lock on my own, and for a moment  
I see its histories  
in the dark bands there: the birth

beneath the sweet olive,  
the child carrying it home in her arms  
where she offers it milk,  
the makeshift cage in the garage,  
the day it escapes, the long nights after,

and now this: a blank plea  
that the uncertainty of its life be finished.

Wouldn't I have come sooner to keep you  
from harm?

Let me take you back through the fields,

you who never turned from me,  
who held violets in your mouth.

II



## Mill Town Genesis

*If ever we do achieve freedom from most of today's diseases . . . we will perhaps terminate by drying out and blowing away on a light breeze . . .*

—Lewis Thomas

The mill stands silenced now on the banks  
of the Willimantic where my great grandmother  
worked her hands raw at American Thread  
beside the waters that still run as swift  
through the town as Colonel Dyer shouting  
for his ragtag regiment to *come fight*  
the French and Indians. Screams poured  
out of the night, otherworldly and strange—Indians  
making ready for the melee. Women left  
behind clutched muskets and knives,  
pulled their children close, waiting.  
Some fired blindly into the night;  
others hid under beds, tables; everyone prayed.  
At dawn, the source was revealed: hundreds of dead bullfrogs  
at the bottom of the dried-up millpond two miles east,  
their cry for water evaporated over the cracked mud.

Her daughter, my grandmother, like the women before her,  
collected decorative frogs in honor of the “battle.”  
The last time I saw her alive, I stood in the heat  
pulsing from the asphalt of the convalescent home parking lot  
and heard my name called, the voice like a faint reed  
instrument being played from beyond a hill.  
She could barely stand, yet she had pulled herself up  
to the window, hands grasping the ledge,  
nightgown fluttering against what was left  
of her body, and she waved. It is easier  
to think of her this way: pollen strewn from flower  
to flower, a flake of ash rising from a campfire into the night.

When I was twelve, she had taken me again to her husband's grave,  
a plot near the highway's edge, shadowed  
by the yellow arches of a McDonald's sign.  
The gravestone's face wore his name carved on one side,  
hers waiting beside it on the other. As ever,  
she found a smooth rock, rubbed away the dirt,  
kissed it three times before placing it atop  
the dimpled gravestone where it wobbled a moment

before settling into a groove as if something divine,  
out of balance for an instant, was being set right  
again and again. Standing, unblinking,  
sweat creeping down my spine, I knew the dust  
entering our lungs was not the same dust,  
but held all of a child's endless summer,  
suspended in the shorn and blasted grass.

## Sweat

Pumped and steaming, the Warriors  
tore down the field in cleats and pads  
that swelled the bulk of their muscle  
skidding over the high school gridiron.  
My father sat me with a Coke  
and cheese sandwich in the bleachers  
to watch him whip the team  
to fury, thin strands of saliva  
drifting from his beard,  
shouting orders I didn't understand.  
His cap's bill dipped at each missed ball.  
I felt their bodies crouch, lean forward,  
swift feet bright as Solid Gold dancers,  
shoulders hefting the sky.  
In the cold, their breaths shot  
from helmets like smoke snorted  
through the nostrils of draft horses.

Back then I got nosebleeds.  
My mother dragged me by the arm  
to the doctor's, sometimes once a week,  
to be sent home with the same wad of gauze.  
In the bathroom I'd tug out  
the hardened clot of blood.  
Once, it happened during practice.  
My father threw me a boy's towel,  
heavy with sweat: soft, off-white,  
the smell of cloves and grass  
or a newly torn branch pressed  
against my face under endless sky.  
The deep foyers of my body  
swelled with understanding,  
though I could hardly have imagined  
myself a torn field coiling  
until the boy looked up  
from his sidelines and waved.

Aubade with Blank Field

*A cluster bomb spreads submunitions like seeds*  
the artist explains as a crowd fills the bar.

*Otherwise known as a grenade, bomblet, or as I like to call it,*  
*the gift that keeps on giving.*

The voice drones on. The man next to me feeds his date  
stuffed olives. This, after the marriage ceremony I attended alone

in northern Virginia where the priest pulled songs from the sky  
& the chorus of *two are better than one! & if two lie down together,*  
*they will keep warm!* became an embolism in my ear.

In Vietnam, the artist says, teachers fashion hand puppets with bamboo  
& pink lotus leaves & warn of the “little bombs” still buried

in forests & fields, unexploded. Boys mistake them  
for soccer balls, batteries, toys; girls: apples & oranges. Children

may go in search of them, a belief in being witness to fire & noise,  
a gift to carry home on their backs as if to say

*The earth has learned again how to give.*

~

When the towers fall, I’m seated in a nursery school, arms  
around a girl with special needs. The teacher in the middle

of circle time looks down into the children’s book spread open

on her lap. I grasp the child’s hands, pull her fingers from  
closed fists, & clap her damp palms together,

while between pages, the teacher’s voice, low,  
so as not to frighten the children, says

“And every day the boy would come,”  
*Did you hear what happened?*

“And he would gather her leaves,”  
*A plane hit one of the Twin Towers.*

“And make them into crowns,”  
*There's smoke all over the place.*

“And play king of the forest.”

~

That night, my drive home is long, headlights searching through  
the graveyard near my cabin, bouquets of flowers rising from fresh dirt

I have looked away from all week. A family of deer leap across  
the road, one after the other, the flash

of white-tipped tails in the fog like the mineral gray  
eyes of an old love, or the look on the face of the Vietnamese boy

who searches the smoke above a blank field where moments before,  
a water buffalo grazed among the rusting canisters.

Stereoradiographs of Albert G. Richards

Light foglight stepping  
into the skeleton of flowers.

Their petals, fractal  
white fangs, dipping, swaying—

Gregorian chants trembling  
the dark museum room.

Little beasts,

no surprise we've come this far  
for them. Within the song beating

its wings under soft light  
tumbling out

of the ink-black space, I can see  
the laboratory and the idea

seizing your torn collar  
after years of examining dead teeth,

your stark need to see something

new, something else that might shake  
the dying  
out of you,

machines too familiar  
and sunk in the mundane,

the ordinary click and shoot,  
the snap and the moment

after, bristling in the hair on the nape  
of your neck, the looking out

into the field

bright with colossal stars  
sudden as a roar bursting

from a tunnel.

To imagine those phantoms

bathed in their diaphanous gowns  
of gauze and breeze,

petals faint as the song  
you heard on your way home

spilling from the upstairs window  
of the woman you would never hold,

and weren't they  
for her, really? Love letters

dressed in organza, fluid as paper  
spun and woven into sheathes of light,

the petals growing into something

more than what they had been,  
more even than their best selves.

Under the bulb's  
searching glare,

a symphonic collapse into spirit,

the ghost of a lily  
spiraling up

into its own paradise.

End of Blood Orange Blossoms

She throws white sheets like sails  
over fruit trees, those pale  
phantoms of the field.  
The wide arc of her arm gestures  
toward the entire lost fleet, sweeping

the March air, brittle  
as bark. The season's frost  
reaches the shore as branches

bend under her hand, their bright  
wing-flutter of fabric  
in this orchard by the sea. Ten years

since her son's body knocked  
against the wide sandy belt.  
His eyes were groundfall  
fruit, overripe, his toes raised  
their blue scalloped edge.

Her song: *Tomorrow they may keep.*  
She blankets another tree, her fingers  
dark as the marmalade she'll cook  
tomorrow morning, syrupy

as a baby's tongue. Her arms  
roll like waves, a bright flame of cloth catches

the moon. With every snap  
of sheet, she feels  
his fingers curled like thorny  
leaves catching at her skirt,

then slipping from her hip  
to settle like childhood over the coast.



Pause

December: even the fowls out back

    curse its arrival, everything branch-fractured  
in hardened light, the pond's face  
    gone matte with algae, a brisk wintriness  
on each surface, lavender shadows,  
    a square of distorted window glass between you  
and what is no longer possible.

    This is the moment you couldn't have foreseen  
when four years ago your only child

    died, hours turned to nights, turning seasons  
and if it was last week it was two months

    since fall dropped her sherbet-colored skirts,  
the lapse is a pause on the stair

    where you've forgotten from which direction  
you've come. The needle and spool

    of thread in your hand says *how soon will this*  
*be over*, though her yellow room

    calls you back, its familiar surfaces, clothes hung  
neatly in the closet, the growth chart that stays

    penciled on the doorframe and ends with *June*.

Shadow and Act

—after *Eugenio Montale*

The plume's ocher tip invents  
your face, as the sun's blade plays  
hide-and-seek through stained glass  
and returns it from a child's mirror.  
Along the stone walls, a brown fog  
pockets the poplars' church,  
while below on the street  
the butcher's parrot rearranges its feathers.  
Then the sultry, lonesome night over a square,  
over steps; and always the tired grind  
of going down to come up again—  
in a moment, a century—nightmares  
that keep me from finding your eye's lit match  
in a cave. Still the same howls,  
the same weeping on the veranda.  
If a shot fires—reddens your throat,  
snaps your wings, O perilous messenger  
of dawn—then its echoes sound reveille  
waking cloisters and hospitals  
to the shrieking of trumpets . . .

St. Maximos in the Blue Margin

Barefoot again            on the stony footpath  
and muttering            below his breath.

I would give him a loaf for supper.

What lonesome            burning madness.

His walking stick won't order the dusk  
or the apparitions            that must gather

on the rim            of sight.

I imagine angels             
   with black tongues

spinning round his head.

Little hut burner, fire            in the ear.

Knife in the ear.  
   And for what?

Every blue flame            a contemplation  
deepening            its own suffering.

Little nest killer,            little here-we-go-again.

There is nothing I can do to save you.

No radiance of the heart            big enough  
to keep sorrow            from catching

or your tongue            from being plucked out.

The hours            building crude huts  
of brush and branches.            Each, in time,

he'll coax into a bud            of fire.

## Devotion

I imagine my child alone in a room of slaughtered goats. I must think of her this way, worshipped as a *kumari*. The Buddhist priest peers inside her mouth, admires thirty-two perfect attributes, her scarless birth chart, legs of a banyan tree—a body to be inhabited by the spirit of Taleju. The hands that have pinched the hair on the back of my neck, offered the rouged meat of persimmon, are now painted amaranth. If she withstands the trials, she will be the next living goddess of Nepal.

But first, she must walk the raw fields of buffalo heads, eye sockets lit with candles. Sip from a horse's skull. All this she must do without fear, her calm mistaken in the red, slow-pouring shade.

Rilke's Eighth Letter

i.

Creped by touch, dog-eared  
& stained, yellowed  
in the flimsy light, the words

of this letter may both hold you  
in place & carry you  
from *all that is*

to *all that might be*. They say  
*relax in suffering & exhale*.  
Liddy, your one bright comet,

your child, her last fatigued breath  
spent, as depleted soil might feed  
a crop, and another, and

on until the constellation  
of sorrow that follows,  
fathomless, surprising

the ways it opens out  
year after year.

ii.

The way it is always:  
1996 in my hometown

on the coast of Connecticut,  
the silvered & damp cold

burrowing its head beneath  
every lining. I'm at a bar

with Charles, elbowing  
the after-work crowd,

buzzed with forgetting,  
crushed peanut shells

beneath our feet,

the thread of the horizon  
shimmering beyond  
a red neon sign.  
What were our hopes  
that night he tickled  
my palm with a halved nut  
below the table?  
Each day they diminish,  
those spectral currents,  
dissolved in the woods  
now as ghostly as his car,  
or that following night,  
its slide across black ice,  
its nose accordioned  
on the oak's splintered bone,  
the vast quiet holding in its arms  
the one sound—Led Zeppelin,  
“Ramble On,” playing  
through the car's mangled  
dash, insisting on its own arrival  
in that abiding stillness.

iii.

You ask if I'm forgetting,  
or want to, if,  
among the blurred city  
lights, what opens  
isn't so much acres  
of night, but a small grace  
placed in every room,  
as your hand moves  
in orbit over each page,  
the way you circle  
the house, stars filling

the empty windows.

Rental

*Irrigation Night, Phoenix*

When the promised water comes creeping,  
the chickens seek refuge in the oleander.

Its white starred blossoms scattering  
the air. Stepping-stones

in the garden form continents in the dark.  
Beyond the windowsill, a cereus, an arm

of cactus, the old night-blooming terror.  
Now we must enter again the whiteness

of snow, the photo of me at five  
in a puffy suit, perched atop the drift,

arms sprung like a scarecrow.  
My mother would have licked her fingers

for glue, pushed my hair into my cap,  
pulled mittens through those arms,

tucked my hands into its hollows.  
What broke in her as the camera's eye

clicked open? Sorrow she folded into napkins  
or pried from crumpled stones of dollar bills

left deep in the pocket of her husband's jeans.  
Her own childhood covered in birds.

Perhaps she wondered what could ever go  
wrong with a daughter born with a mountain

and geese flying inside her.  
Now it's the radio: Pakistan, whole families

asleep beside their livestock, the slant of each  
spine known as well as a child's.

Tonight the Indus River floods. The announcer  
brings me to a family that's lost

*(stanza break)*

their brindled cow, their wealth,  
last seen on a levee with water pooling

around its legs, flies gathering like a necklace  
down its spine. Perhaps it will make higher ground,

driven by hunger and fear as the expanse  
of land becomes a muddy basin while the smallest

girl counts again their dented tin plates.  
That we ever start anew is myth,

the way philosophers have argued  
for the mind's blank slate,

born empty and innocent as this place  
I will become. Tonight, if I listen

hard enough, I hear all that is swimming  
and all that sank before.



Among the Maniots

For every cliff there's a caique,  
unmoored, refusing the shore's

prim neckline. If I could write a letter  
to every girl not born

in the Peloponnese in 1808,  
I would tell how my brother

was made to sleep in the shed  
with the lambs, a ruse to throw Charon

off the scent, and of pirated cowry shells,  
those little wombs I stitched beneath

my bed so that I might not be taken.  
Where a feud for arms and the fuel needed

for burning lime are nearer  
than dreams, where here, in the Mani,

honey cakes are bitter, poppies spell suffering,  
an egg mutters *vendettas are brewing*.

There are no dowries,  
only boys, known as *guns*—

*another gun for the family!*  
Girls are dirge-singers,

gun-breeders.  
We are partial to the carved sun

at the head of a boy's cradle, the moon,  
that pale palsied wrist, for the daughter

whose birth is a hardening  
silhouette against the mountain.

Every wilderness of ache, every impulse  
to sea arrives through the threadbare hours.

When the mirror was held above

my limp body, my immobile face,

no breath clouded the glass,  
only a black sun of starlings

shone in the silver medallion tied  
around my throat, the sky tender, kempt.

Clematis

It slips into the night sky  
behind her as the evening  
slides into a black dress.

Her first dance:  
her date will pick her up

at the family orchard where her mother,  
unable to walk, peers  
from the upstairs window, the sill thick

with piles of dead flies. Once,  
she looked just like her—

the dress widening at the knees  
as though emptied  
of all thought, a single dented pearl

pulsing at her throat. The quiet held  
in the tank house webs spreads over

the valley glistening under the moon's  
snow-blue blades. If the girl  
was surprised by his spent silhouette,

the blood-lacquered back seat,  
it was the acreage of stillness,

the day continuing its drift  
like the others with no memory  
of its former self. The pinwheel

petals won't keep the world from graying,  
plump with hate, on the vine.

III

Little Death

With the hooked curve  
of a clavicle  
stolen from the museum,  
the end turned up just so,

small bones of her hand  
working, her purpose was

to die by orgasm—bone-wing  
of orchid, death  
star shower, mulberry  
drumfire—to make her own

kicker stop. She made me  
promise to have her ashes  
heated and pressed  
into a diamond,

cut and polished for the stud  
I'd pierce through my clit.

Go on and say it, Hellbender.

I'll be your shock wave  
of oxygen, your Andromeda.

Beehive and buttercup.

When my blood pills on the lip,  
I'll withdraw the ache.

On Desire

Both nineteen, we motor a green jeep;  
our destination the city of angels.  
We map our route by way of thrift stores  
dotted throughout the south. What we find:  
owl-shaped oven mitt, typewriter,  
lamp with plastic leg base. That night,  
in a motel in the foothills of the Smokies,  
air-damp with the fog's slow curl, you lie  
on your back, still as a fist. A chute of red  
neon splashes over your chest as it rises  
in the room's black & you in your reverence  
& blank need, me in the halls of fervor that open  
with knowing. You inch your finger between  
my underwear's elastic & hip,  
the delicate hook of flesh soft  
against my skin. It's enough for it  
to stay lifeless, silent the way  
we grow after we give ourselves.  
An article I read today said there are three components  
of desire—*lover, beloved, & that which comes  
between them*. What if what comes between  
is simply the distance itself? This morning,  
I awake thinking of my friend's poem,  
how someone called it *dirty* because the speaker  
*put her finger inside his mouth,*  
*&, later, put her finger inside herself.*  
The night before, his band played  
in an old time country store,  
he entered the azure light from the side  
of the stage, the music's slow drone,  
his hands unharmed, his breath fluttering  
into his harmonica's burnished chambers,  
translated into blue notes, as they would translate me,

*(stanza break)*

as if no further grief or injury  
were possible, or is that something else I tell  
myself on a stroll by the river after a midnight

showing of Jarmusch's *Dead Man*  
where the dancehall girl of the story, sexed  
& sexed again, throws paper flowers in the mud.

## Dyeing the Dummy's Hair

*for Elizabeth Tashjian, 1913–2007*

In her robe of red Armenian silk she darkens  
the mannequin's hair—  
her double—Nut Visionary, Nut Culturist,

or, as the locals call her, The Nut Lady.  
She intends to shoo the squirrels that raid  
the rarest of her collection at night—the ones labeled  
*thorned beechnuts,*  
*green-husked pecans, Carpathian walnuts.* Also

*mangosteens, seeds*  
*of the calabash*—the squirrels enter her house and slide

down the sycamore that grows  
through a corner of roof. In the claw-foot bathtub,

the plastic legs knock porcelain  
as she pours dye over the dummy's head. Once,

in the Seychelles, islanders cast loose  
nutshells on the sea—  
a gesture for her lover, who drowned  
searching for the bloated lobed fruit

of the *coco de mer*, those shapes sailors often mistake  
for a woman's buttocks. She keeps

the photo taken on a walk through mangroves—her lover,  
wearing a crown of palm leaves and beans, had whispered  
*I'm happy with your callipyge*—the name

for the sea coconut that means *beautiful rump*.  
Her own hair fanned the reefed waters  
of Curieuse, her lover's soft pruned fingertips.

Now the double in a ruffled blouse peers  
from the widow's walk, her gaze fixed as though she waits  
for a body to bruise the shore.



Lure

At midnight we canoe the bayou  
in a yellow shell, a daffodil petal

curling into dark. Only now  
I begin to know this man,

his beard and nails' blunt  
manicure. He tells me the red

eyes of alligators sweep cypress  
knees bald, how the animal

leaps vertically if provoked.  
He asks for his harmonica. I lean

over, steady myself on the frame.  
His notes lap the hyacinth,

burrow in the brown mud.  
He tells me the animals come

for marshmallows. *Why didn't I bring  
a bag? Why am I always forgetting?*

Months ago, he told a waitress  
to lower her voice—

its *timbre* hurt his ears. She laughed,  
thought it a joke. Now we knock

our wooden oars. Up front,  
under tupelo, he points

to scarlet breaks in the shadows,  
rips a mallow flower

from a bush, crepes it  
across the water's copper finish.

## Pink Scarf

She fingers the tags as she sails  
through the thrift store aisles, grease  
slashed across the back of the green  
leather jacket she's just purchased  
for the drive west to meet the man  
she's met online. How long a scarf?  
What color to bend him to blind need?  
Pink—pink as her hair she'll dye & tousle  
the night before with pencil & serum  
to keep the curls bright, stiff as ribs,  
thong set above the knuckles  
of her hips, caramel-colored boots  
cranked up to her thighs to match  
the thin dress, orange as a circus peanut.  
The scarf must stretch, has to give  
with his push & pull, she plots,  
strong enough to knot, yet slick enough  
to slip, though it can't look like a diaper.  
Has to fit comfortably into her folds,  
not leave red marks when yanked,  
and never look like she's spent these hours  
shopping.

Standing legs spread,  
a storm churning over South Mountain,  
she hatches her plan, exact. The scarf looped  
around her neck, she'll arrive drunk  
at his hotel room, then the slow shuffle  
to the window's classic: saguaros, desert  
light, stark & immobile, terraces  
of fair skin blazing through her gown, ice cube  
melting in the Riesling, her back  
toward him as he crawls, hands reaching  
under her dress to lift its gauze above  
her slapped cheeks, boots like two great  
slugs. Have him sling her clothes aside,  
wrap her scarf around her waist & through  
her legs, tie it behind. For a moment,  
she's sixteen again,

at her uncle's farm,  
he's galloping his buckskin, rope  
clenched between his teeth, chasing down

a calf to get it *wrapped & slapped*,  
the same loop he'll use to tie her hands  
behind her back while he licks  
her breasts & rubs a horseshoe  
between her legs until she's trembling,  
an animal clotheslined into sky.

In the hotel, she'll fall  
into the feathered warmth of the bed  
and a calm so deep it reaches  
into the oblivion of life,  
each injury & numbed joint, to sleep  
with the finger all night inside.

## Before My Mother Set Herself on Fire

The house was fragrant with shepherd's tea  
From the yellow fields of Greece  
The dog leaping for joy on its back legs  
Long hours in the kitchen my mother pulled  
The essence from rose petals the house  
The house becoming—what?

My father splintered as rain  
His frame top-heavy  
Hair still dark & full  
And shifting in the breeze  
Before his heart lost feeling & the cane  
Would trick him into old age

But it was my mother who after  
The money was gone would fall asleep  
Soap operas blazing on our black & white tv  
Poppies nodding in a jar  
On the stove the house taking on  
The stillness of snow the absence

Of snow while her gaze turned  
The gray of unseeing & on the other side  
Of the room my father growing  
Inward & suspicious of every last ship  
In the harbor whose lights burned  
Against the huge night cloud stifling  
As the ache of our lives

To Evil Give Chase

I walk into the dark. Molten skulls  
and red ice cubes fluoresce  
on their shelves. Some shapes glow  
like tropical fish, others are mushroom clouds  
blooming. I'm in the black tent

at the Tucson Mineral and Gem Show  
where rocks shine  
under long-wave ultraviolet light.  
The Neville Brothers seep from nearby  
ear buds: *Oh you must a put Voodoo*

*on me, Oh you must a cast a spell.*  
I have heard tell: you take a doll,  
stuff its mouth with red peppers,  
hold it beneath the claws  
of a hawk's foot—you will keep someone

from spreading lies about you.  
Last night, an ex-friend called  
to confront me with our past.  
To calm her nerves, she'd said,  
she made a puppet of me with a sock

and snapdragons, propped it  
against her antique vanity.  
The old silence sliced open with her  
crack about Plath. I'm no innocent, either.  
I still dodge the truth, though it wants nothing

more from me than to feel  
its weight in my hands.  
There was a time I believed  
in crystal healing. Would follow the Dead  
from state to state with a sack

of jewelry for sale. The rock  
wrapped around my neck  
gave me the spine to pull the orchid  
from the night. Back when the woods  
were content and love pulsed

from every yellow window.

They say forgiveness is a ghost  
with a honeycomb for a mouth,  
but why forgive when bees can do nothing  
but disappear, their flight

sweeping this bloated world  
into autumn.

## In the Sky the Day Was Stitched

She can still catch the stink  
of cigar all those miles away,  
see you slumped  
behind the parked car's wheel,  
phone in hand, the arm rest sagging  
under your belly's dome, doors  
wide open to the New England  
breeze, the foot burning  
orange every time you draw  
a breath. You're in between classes,  
taking quick stock of your life.

You've called her for the customary  
*lock your door*,  
though you're happy to hear her  
voice at all, knowing  
you're no longer a burden  
to her as you feel her gaze  
soften toward a man  
selling tomatoes from the back  
of a truck. His hands  
she says are mercifully  
engraved by the earth

as though no other future  
for him were possible.  
You see her crossing the street,  
saffron dress swinging  
at her knees, eyes like winter.  
Because she's filled  
with understanding, you too  
are filled more & more,  
though you can't say when or why,  
or if the sky that day was churned  
by swallows or stitched

with airplanes, you know that nothing  
any longer stands between you  
and your world, those hard  
years falling like ripened stones  
in the neighboring orchard.  
The scent of rotted apples drifts  
across the lot braiding

in complete tranquillity  
a thin smoke. It is the easy  
understanding you once believed in,  
before cancer took your dog's leg

and your mother lost  
her memory to a white field.  
Isolation is a kind of belief,  
as is the noble truth  
of a wasp humming  
over black pavement.  
There is still time.  
Today, you are meant  
to pull the sky  
from the briefcase  
of this small and perfect life.



## Apology

Every day I am forgotten a little more,  
driving home beneath the cloak  
of a desert mountain when the heat

pauses like a stilled hand over the valley.  
I am reminded again how sadness accumulates

in the shuffle of red dust  
beading the summer, as if each thing  
were too intensely itself, needing to soften.

And when the earth is red, it seems  
it has always been this way, a loose powder  
dusted over surfaces, familiar as a stair

before the front door. Red in the attic, red clinging  
to toaster and air vents, red nesting  
in my lungs. There is a peacefulness

in its being everywhere, and I begin to forget  
how it was and fall into this new hushed  
swath of color that ends

as all things must  
beyond the sliver of sight.

I can see my friend's mother who died only yesterday,  
staring  
at what must have been flickering in the corner

until the dim bud in her eyes faded. A last breath,  
he'd said, so strong it could have sucked  
leaves from a gutter. And if you had a choice,

wouldn't you, too, want your last breath  
to drink the creosote from the night?

A woman once asked about my spiritual color. *Green*,  
I'd said, recalling my childhood room

where the walls were painted that secret  
of new grass, and in its brightness I was taught

how to be at home outdoors,  
    where I learned consistency from the timpani  
of rain and from the yellow heart

    of a willow, kindness. She had answered *red*,  
*because it is impenetrable.*

        And if you ask me right now,  
        I would say it's easy to mistake  
regret for the ash beneath this hard pan  
    that longs for a rain to release it.

        And what would the rain do anyway  
    except pound craters to craters in the dust.

Either way, it will come.  
    We'll take from it what we can.

Letter to Tryfon Tolides

—*Korifi Voiou, Greece*

You might wish a little to be carried off.

A silver cup in the cupboard

mirrors your mother's gray face, vacant

as the bombed field around a village.

If a shrine is what you need to bring her back

every day, who can blame you for trying?

If sleeping in her nightgown brings the scent

of custard into your dreams, and running

barefoot in the snow seizes your body

into memory, who among us can say

anything and not turn quietly away. Linens

just as she left them pressed and folded.

A needle upright in a drift of stiff lace.

What I know of your mother I know

of a bear, thieving and brown, we once searched

for in the hills behind your house, followed

the newly-ripped branch until the path

no longer parted and became even more itself.

Black laurel will do this under a lonesome moon.

Tonight there is frost on the ground—the earth

no longer able to muster the energy to care.

Winter intends to neglect you.

The room in which she washed her feet  
means to lock you outside its heavy door.

There's nothing wrong with slipping  
through the house at night with her ring  
tucked inside your mouth, the taste  
of metal the same copper as blood.

Even calling a stray dog *Filos* won't keep  
the black plums from rotting. It's easy to say  
all this to you after whiskey, a hard-slung year.

Easy to mistake the sound of an almond tossed  
into a well for what follows weeping.

Thread & Lament

i.

At dusk in the burn of rush-  
light  
on the hillside,

the dirge howls

in a woman's mouth,

old & deep  
as Andromache's.

It begins with a drone  
tunneling the body

with flame,  
bees stirring  
the chest. The fluid

drift of its thread

feathers

the interior.

The pitch breezes

the dead

through olive leaves,

rises the way  
all oblivious stars  
rise:

an infinitesimal scuttle  
whose sweep  
is changeless.

Each sigh disturbs

the air  
a little more

as if to say *what rupture,*  
*what sea returns*  
*its forever to a heart.*

ii.

Where a coin  
is held in the cold hand  
  
& a clutch of hair ripped  
  
from the skull  
is flung on the coffin,  
  
the expressions of grief  
give us Greece. *O cypress tree!*  
*O arch and pillar!*

When she fades,  
the next one  
  
embroiders the song  
  
with guests.

Even the tools  
of the dead one's  
profession

get worked in.

If he was a mason,  
his trowel weeps  
  
tears of lime & ash.

If a shepherd,  
  
the goats & ewes refuse  
the fields that hold them  
  
& march single file

into the sea.

iii.

When the earth is thrown  
over the coffin,

the mourner's voice soars  
the way wind

groans through sidings

until her hair uncoils  
& she slashes

her cheeks

with her nails.

The circle

of black-clad women  
surrounds her,

their hands knotted  
against the silences

that hurries their lives.

## Everything I Wanted

He begged me to twist his nipples  
into shocked scarlet berries,

keep the hazard of my mouth  
locked shut. If my jaw moaned  
open even once, he'd push it back

into place—silence vast  
as the hem of the low country.  
I'd do anything back then

for a line or vodka shot,  
demons climbing like egrets

out of the black water, men  
with their hearts grabbing,  
bodies pouring. The tenderness

of my breasts proof  
I'd done everything I wanted  
no real part of. The body at twenty

still new, dumb as the hitchhiker  
whose sign reads *Wherever*,

who leaves behind his carnival  
past and the one that came before.  
You'll forgive my undressing,

its indiscriminate urge—lips  
a kink, a refusal not to tell.



## New Husband

He has done  
all he can: emptied half  
the closet, moved his razor  
to another shelf.  
He's hidden the photos  
of the first wife in the attic  
beside the fishing rod  
and the box of lures  
in their lichen  
of seawater patina.  
He's done everything  
that he knows to do.

Still, he'll hear the hours  
through the floorboards,  
the ache that will marry  
and marry him  
to your old city: the diner  
with its brick walls, dog  
statue in the cemetery,  
the man who summoned you  
with his warm hand.  
At night the woods twill  
the clapboard siding.  
Such long winter months.  
All the owls starving.