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ACCORDION MUSIC

The homestead was the whole of their wealth,
and it was much mud, and it was
cement crack and stump, stink of tar and bee-stung
pump, and it was

handed down like a seed pouch
or lye-combed baby clothes or this
warmed-up hearse
through whose bellows I levitated

in its *Please* and jolly heave,
an anvil strapped to Baby King,
in his eighties, who lived the breadth of his life
there, runt of six living brothers

and one sister of granite, Aunt Urša who kept house
for a family and got to visit the cape once
a year to mind the children,
a silence who swept the glass when I

went flying and wore an apron of cabbage
roses and closed her eyes to the whine
of the porch glider and rested.
White hair and baldness, they were Queen

Anne's lace, sprung everywhere,
leaning in, unknowable. Sure, I was eternal.
I was barely on Earth.
If they had emotions or motives

or tonics for the limp
or black lung or heart condition,
I didn't know them. By tipsy polka, I floated
as the rhubarb's grit on my tin held steady

beside kielbasa and pierogi.
We were ignorant
as sunshine, illiterate
King strapped to his box and my doomed

daddy in clover, in blown beer foam
like dandelions in July. Motes
now, my people, but a melody guided us
as it once brightened the edge of a Slovenian lake

where a girl held her hem
and waded in, our lives
inside of her and inside of him, the one
who held out his hand, the husband.

CRADLE LANGUAGE

Frill of cloud, a *Her* in the blue endless. Uneven hammering,
tantrum, panting, axe overhead in weightless indecision. Grimness
rushing from a well, numb feet and hands (*gone*),
milky mouth sour, a ropewalking spider
touching dolly's raggedy head, skull plates fusing. First snow:
paint shook from sill with each blow. Tip-to-tail jolt of cuckoo.

ESCAPE TO FIJI

Swimming in a mirage, past the bull shark, sicklefin
lemon, buoyed by a personalized ocean, psychosis floating
me when I wearied, rescued thus by blue saturation,
perfumed and pumicing element, living
as on that Styx song in adolescence, trance overtaking fear
on the papasan chair,
the same biblical sentence cycling
until it engraved on my brain God's authority. I turned
the watery page. I went to the sun unashamed, submitting to new
species: boggling palms, animals like drawings.

Say *toxin* again. Under a dome of *aura*, swirl over me
noni soap. Oils of frangipani,
verbena, gifted by the last true friend, color me in.
Flowers, include me ecstatic in your orgasm.
Opening spheres of vistas, let me buckle with, at ease
as clownfish or mollusk. Erase me
lotioning little sister's behind-the-ears, years of weeping
scales, skin like vellum, her head on my lap, our systems changing
permanently, in stress. Benumbed, watching beauty queens
departing an airplane, sisterly in leis and sashes.

THE LAMBS ARE NOT FOR SALE

Despite the mildness of sea-glass eyes,
clear brows, their bodies entire, flocked with white-
tongued clover, in clover, panting after
mothers, arched under the creamy ceilings of
clouds-in-frescoes bellies,

the lambs are not for sale.
When sleepy, they curl into the porcelain figures
your grandmother kept on her dresser.
Entranced by placid poses, how long you looked
at her collection, at the separate world.

Long ago, you studied the milk-carton
children, their crooked haircuts
and freckles, the optimism of their last
school picture, that they were and were not you,
and now the lambs stir that feeling

of rescue, but they are not for sale. You survived,
those children froze as milk did
on winter's doorstep. Your mother
gave you the rich cork if you shared with
the baby, who now lives apart.

How strong the cues to reassemble
all of you in that house, each set like a doll

with a small wooden spoon. The lambs do this,
make you sidle up and remember.

You named one Precious and one Nostalgia,

but they're not for sale. The urge to ribbon
them with blues and pinks,
delicate as the ones threaded through Marie
Antoinette's underthings, collides with reminders
to read more, and in French,

but you're so weary in the evenings
all you can do is watch television. If it comforts,
she made a similar wonderland
in Petit Trianon, nursery of girlhood innocence,
and her children were still killed.

That's why the lambs aren't for sale.
Hold fast to the fantasy: their inviolate curls
the foam of seashore summers, wished-on fluff of dying
dandelions, the eyelet of a christening gown
pulled over your infant eyes.

AMONG BARMAIDS

There was a metal door that took both hands
of a strong man to open,

but we did it daily. Inside were our charges, sealed in
submarine darkness. We swam

through their booze, past the pool
table's alien island, darts that *thwacked* the pricked wall

like failure itself, spinning like downed ducks
to the filthy tile. Like good dogs, we fetched them.

In a windowless silence, we watched our drunks
bend like sycamores in an all-day snowstorm.

When they slept, we let them, then shook them
with the tenderness of mothers.

They woke and smoked, still dreaming, wore their trade
on their fingers—coal or dirt or grease.

On the jukebox, five songs repeated, each a lament
about cheating women. We hummed along,

bore the plodding joke, slurred compliment,
nodded at creased photographs of estranged children.

The beer rose in gushes. Our forearms bulged.
One girl, what she wanted before she died

was to see the ocean. Froth pillowed up
from underground barrels, by pipes and pulleys.

We wore out our pity, watching men stroke the bar
like the hardened brushed hair of a daughter.

We wore ours in scarves. Our hoop earrings swayed
on the downbeat. We held rags

or tucked them in jeans, tattooed the names
of ex-husbands, first lovers, into our skin

in script so thick and Bible-elaborate as to be illegible.
One wore her drugged-out son's childhood face

on her wrist, his doomed grin following us.
Men brought their kids when the wives needed peace.

We gave them Cokes and bowls of cherries,
let them draw on napkins and pinned up the drawings.

Sometimes, we spun them on the make-believe dance
floor, trying to turn despair into a party.

STUDY OF BEET AND EARRING

Vegetable fuchsia but faded, gilt
gone bad from its season in Hell. Plucked up
with dirt on its cheek, petrified
as a rose shut in a box and dull as a brain
left too long in one place.
Sedate glamour on the counter, the brass in me
unhinged from my skin: golden
chime, little tower. Truth is, I've been
walking, figuring the ladder of how each year
held together. The boy I slept with
in a single bed, a single embrace, was one:
sexless, lust-filled, lonely as the taproot
on the table, weird as the earring
found in a thrift store, gold plate already flaking,
atoms of it anointing the straw chair
and spider plant, its babies beginning to crawl.
I went crazy, sought out the lunatics,
drove to the bar and pried open the door,
the men inside gesturing *Come in*,
wanting a woman. Passed the pit bull
tied to the porch of my neighbor who's faking
paralysis for insurance, photographers creeping
in the weeds to catch him walking.
His gram smoked her pipe and swung
on a swing where his dog now barks
ruthlessly. She grew me beets and other gifts,
then the world ordered *Weep*, and I wept.

BLACK CAT

Hit, besieged by miniscule
and spirited soldiers pillaging blood
for heat and nutrients,
the pillow of it rising, volatile
in sun, then sinking moodily into tar and the tar
it's becoming, though its four identical
brothers and sisters still stalk the corn
as always, or perch spookily in the neighbor's tree, or sleep
in the salvage, beneath a trailer
shuttered against the ongoing progression
of animus to compost
to cosmos, though the human
must feel it, driving over what was once his
toward the junkyard's offer
of day labor: pulling rust from rust,
delivering unto his own mailbox
the township's advisories and legal arguments
on traces of lethal compounds
while the animal's engrossed in its own
slow going. No dreamy eye to recognize, no ear
to hear its kin fight awfully, same as ever, over the cars'
midnight whispers of *passion, passion*.
Impossible to imagine less. Impossible
to rest with the agony of its siblings caught
in a death grip, bawling like babies.

THE ARBOR

In August, didn't I twist
inside the crib of its shade, maternal curls
and woody veins, *gone away*
beneath filigree grave-
big, to compete with crow
and beetle—nameless, at ease
in the callous nothing from which the grapes
emerged and multiplied?
I suckled dusty otherness,
nuzzled against skins and found
each body a font.
Souls hardened in them, filthy
and untended. They lived, they shivered
in sun as I did, at the whim
of feral people
agog at mewling daughters.
How we swam in the humid
flex and murk.
We swooned and shook.
Our hearts, O our hearts beneath the Xs
that held up vines like a fainting child
were anguished, the quiet after
anguish, also. Quaking
fists, the warning, rising scream,
telephone ringing.
Kin to the stunned doe, she

folded into limbs. He
was the snake's retreat, brooding
in loamy rooms. Hypnotized
by heat that could not
break, we succumbed. Jug and jelly
wasted, un-tongued,
on the table. No voices shaping love words,
no song the dappled doorway
of arbor restored.

I LOVE THE WHOLE WORLD

After Agnes Martin

Gasp in the mothering quiet. In light, in softness,
a spider breathed at my breast.

Who will mother me? When?

How it lounged on the cream of my blouse.
I undid my barrette then.

Empathetic, abstract, near, how inside the colors went.

How I wept.

When prettiness left, there was only voice,
vaporous above ocean at daybreak.

Beach sleep, cloud sling, cashmere feeling.

Blush, sand, apricot, lemon,
but lighter, rinsed of those associations.

I sat on a bench, in a daze. In that place, it was ocean
all around. Shipwrecked, bone-buttoned, bedded.

Where the pretties released, pearl and peach,
blue-white, salt-rinsed. I was softly awake, soft as *love*

leaving a mouth. And meant.

AFTERGLOW

Ache of un-stabled horses at sundown, winter-
berry turned up to ten. Escaping the tent's nylon into
the frost's first breath, I thought,
It's the wanderings between stars, those leaps
that mean everything. Marzipan
skin of Melissa in her red gingham bikini, afloat in the black
zero. Me: febrile, sunburnt, eyes
like wheels in the motel mirror. Our hair
whipping the currents alongside her white 'vette, salt-
pricked, Mariah's whistle notes levitating us
above hot tar. Shirtless carpenters on their summer jobs,
on scaffolding, flexing (*slowness*), oiled as horses.

PILLOW TALK

Snowflakes become cutlasses, the *thousand cuts* death.
Dose of Valium, again: double negative, beveled ambiance.
Harlequin-faced deer, say *cerulean*
before ambushing the field, startling the horses
carousing in jackets. Sensations,
shimmy through an hourglass. Transform night's abstract ice
into the surrealist's melt. Quiet the motor
of the getaway car. Hack the forest
to reach the morels' kaleidoscope. Nibble moss on all fours.
This is a thought. Think that in distress. Dupe the dreadful
otherwise. Be not the breakable fawn,
motherless and quaking. Remember the balm
of penmanship lessons, content above a sea of cursives.
Sleep inside the inky light-
house of *I*. Imagine the throat-high grasses
of vetiver, oil skimmed from water,
bottled to calm the boat-body. Ride off
on the promised pony, your essence on the reins.
Lay down the knuckled keys. No harm came
then, though you were dreamy, disturbed, ill-prepared, scared
at all the wrong moments: parties, Christmas mornings.
Quaint, quaint goes the weather against the window.
Succumb to its undertow as the soprano
pipistrelles awake from hibernation to gorge on moths, filling

the dark with their decibels. Remember Ebba,
her apple tart with cream made for your hospital homecoming,
humming moon of her face, who painted your bedroom
doorknob the merciless sun of her childhood village.

JANUARIES

A cold most lethal, the pine
if looked at long enough. My ice vision,
crown of deer inside, beheld, coats smoldering,
and one valiant cardinal above
stringing invisibles. When it becomes
unbearable, I'll describe this in the colors of
a children's book. Winters with Annie
playing orphans in the woods: foraging, peeling
hours in all those blades beneath a bitter
lemon sun, made sweet by not being alone.
Enter, snow. One dissociation sifts over
another, with decades between, hooves retreating
into the past, whatever that is, the cold
accumulating all its meanings.

GLASS OF MILK

Was a swell commandment: drink up, sleep. She'd relinquished the vampy black and absconded to her toddler color (*muddy sunset*) as we, one from each grief stage, commissioned to flock her, petal'd her pale strapless, pressed the appliqué along her spine with dancer's glue, all funds sunk into that silk, hence the wan hors d'oeuvres, sheepish flasks, *White Album* on a loop. Eventual brood snug in her ova, she straightened, candle-brave before that noonday deadline. Startled nipples got plastered. A dose of almonds so no swooning during *forevers*. Preview of losing it, Skyping with her guru to parse the voice of God, thunderstruck into the nib of a midcentury housewife. Waking rapturous, un-entombed, to commune with birdsong and him in the mystical five am. An Oona holding hydrangeas, she was. Soon to vanish into a strobing, off-kilter rainstorm, the frothy whitecaps of a harbor's embrace and resistance. There stands her hometown man. A future of borax-bleached nappies, the Paxil. She turned us a keen look sailing down satin. Absolute abandonment, *can't come with*, the fox's grin plunging unabashed into snowdrift.

EELISH

Stricken, seen, satellite at the edge of a party,
being fifteen, with the black bulbs someone's planted
in the mother's lamps to give glow-in-the-dark
ambiance to hideous kisses, and the ruffles
are all wrong on the saved-for shirt, and the curtains,
suave in the murk, seem to laugh. The liquidy
fin of feeling is destination-less, twisting
like paper wrapped 'round a pinkie
in blind date anticipation. Toy for
the psyche, phrase to swim through the mind
like an offense, at three am.
Half-helix, as if waiting for, *Oh God, don't
say it*, a soul mate. What sheathes the stealth
bomber has something of its skin. Pastiche of pluck
and terror, nerve faltering halfway. Opposite
of starlight, stagnant brook that drowned Ophelia, jpeg
from a former colleague on holiday, landed in spam,
looking older and captioned, *Well, here I am*.

THE EGG OF ANYTHING

is holy, molten in its calcium
cup, sun and moon mixed, hot
in its prison, cells'
incentive to fuse firing, no
second to loiter, calling
now to a predator's jaw. How
the genetic vow is kept.
Jellied not-yet,
hard as thought becoming
belief, little o
in *hope* or *love*, un-
umbilical one, cast into air,
mother gone, father
long gone, *uh-huh* goes your
heart, that dummy *yes* said from
a soul agog at such splendor.

LAMENTATION ONCE AGAIN

Though I began as shudder through the father,
uncurling terror, growing toward light, finally sleepwalking
as shock-riddled bafflement, leaning against
a vacancy. Though I was silence and rise
and deliverance through icy rinse to arrive and be stood still as the dead
in the blizzard's deeps, Frostian echoes
and presence of wedding bullets sent up in spring
fallen back as wintry confetti,

birch-fog and memory: a hand eternal (*patient, veined*)
guiding me toward the awful,

and then the moment's over.

I came with a gun, my bleak inheritance, to shoot
above juncos unbridled from pines. *I just can't leave*
his bones behind. What I said
to the years-gone-by beloved. And didn't,
circling decades around them,

embracing disintegration: greenish
stubble, collapsed wool suit, helpless mind long leaked out of ears,
all he was dust or mist. Jesus,

I was afraid as a jay against glass, ashamed to have
a body at all. It is the doe

(always, always) I come back to. Her guileless,
maternal face, her breast a candle
against the shroud and christening dress
of vapor. Absurdly alive we were,
ceding the field, its hymnal-thin pages, to a hypnotic gentleness.
Thoroughly in the world,

curious of the world,

the *why* dooming us gently, hope and pain in every utterance of that
hurt, over and over unanswered, flowering
like snowdrops underneath the snow.

OUROBOROS

Frigid in vibrating daylight, with no distinction
between indoors and out, Ailene on the gurney
asked her children, *Am I dying?* and received
a coward's answer. How she eyed the ward, panicked,
more alive than ever. Once a lounging

teenager, biting the brush end of her braid,
the lattice more alive than ever with carnations.
Braised rabbit hunted that morning, not sleeping, no
indeed, beneath silver. Relieved of instinct.
Retold in a tempo to correct the grievous echo.

FRUITLESS

A grief of salt over a deer's last leap, collapse of
that crystal palace over the fatal synaptic blink, risen
into a fifth day of indignity. Absolved,
she softens. The township's embossed her
with acid. Unhinged, she is: pelt split, within visible, sting
dissolving acts: nosing apples, lying with sisters.
Fractals disguise the isolate body.
Why me? is a fruitless question, and dangerous.
Snowflakes touch her unseeing eye, the feminine tense,
It had been before it never was and never will be again.

EVERYTHING

When the shiver's erased from winter, sci-fi algae
seize on weakness, pop-and-locking unstoppable cover
over the hemlock's shading branches,
smothering in situ sap, leaf, the once robust
becoming skeletal, and what remains offers its frailty
over the withering river, wavelet
a wavering domino
as trout in full sun gasp, gills twitching
in heat, dim oxygen to feed
their flourish and flimsy. Spring trembles
like a bomb packed with snowmelt, its all-at-once
shaking trout eggs from mud, spun
like rice on the floor, that human error. The famous
butterfly poised on a twig, she lifts and leaves, dressed
in gold and jet—chic—changing everything.

AT THIRTY

At thirty, I fled from my life
in a hailstorm and firestorm, into what
I termed *the big rest*,

unpacked at my mother's house,
slept in my sister's bed,
signed up to swim at the Y, swam twice

daily, in the mornings
with patients doing recovery exercises
in the shallow end,

afternoons hung the damp suit,
black flag, on the line,
microwaved a meal, then napped,

the sleep my calamine, chlorine
my medicine, my weakness everywhere,
I could barely stand,

I swam the evenings, before closing,
reciting poems silently
from the mind's anthology,

I was alone, backstroking
through that humid chamber, beneath
frescoes of dolphins and nymphs,

I floated, a baby in her crib,
mesmerized by those gentle images—
for a long time it was like this.

TESTIMONY

The cardinal and jay appeared at the crisis—

totems speaking in low human voices, daggers dressed in winter's rich coats, snow-trimmed, looking coldly at me.

To be a child in the eye of a blizzard, there is no center.

My friends were the only clear things—
classic and gemlike, immune to self-hatred or the wormy sickness
accomplishment brings.

One angel, one demon,
they each took a shoulder, arguing my worth.

I sat down in the ice and divested myself of questions. Did I fear
for my life in those earliest years? *Every day*,
a voice answered, *in every aspect*.

BLUE MORPHO

Adrift in an azure trance, affixed by invisible
star-points of pins to the sumptuous nothing of black
velvet, it's as immense as the word *once*
uttered once, buffeted by silence, to float or sink.
Gazing into the pool-like body, how slowly it becomes
the confined loved one—exotic, exhausted, ex-
everything. Small as Earth on television, then realer:
the otherworldly waters of Iceland flown over
once, the shifting blues frightening in their nearness,
the glorious black shore. You, afraid until the sensation
of a longed-for presence hit, better than morphine.
You clapped with the rest—reborn, exhilarated.