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Sacraments of Desire

Simona Chitescu Weik

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SACRAMENTS OF DESIRE

by

SIMONA CHITESCU WEIK

Under the Direction of Beth Gylys

ABSTRACT

Sacraments of Desire is a collection of poems that explores the immigrant experience, dislocation, language, exile, third world identity, as well as elements of the Roma and Jewish persecution during the WWII period particularly its aftermath -- the fall of the Iron Curtain and the rise/fall of Communism. This is done through the lens of first-person accounts, personal histories, Lacan's theories of psychosexual development and *jouissance*, in addition to exploration and reinvention of myths from both ancient Greek culture and the Christian tradition.

INDEX WORDS: Poetry, Greek Myths, Romania, WWII, Roma, Jewish, Communism, immigration, Lacan, self, body, mythologies, personal histories.

SACRAMENTS OF DESIRE

by

SIMONA CHITESCU WEIK

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

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Electronic Version Approved

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May 2019

DEDICATION

This collection is dedicated to my grandmother “Mamalalantu” Filoftia Pantiru, and my most precious gifts, Darren & Genevieve.

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Much gratitude for my professors and mentors who have walked this poetic landscape with me sometimes coaching step by step, Beth Gylys, Leon Stokesbury, Josh Russel, and David Bottoms. Deep thanks to others who have provided guidance, inspiration, and most of all the generosity of their knowledge and presence, Melissa McLeod, Lynee Gaillet, Angela Christie, and Kristen Ruccio. To my wonderful peers who have seen many of these poems in earlier iterations, and who have provided a generous and incisive gaze toward my work, and whose poetry and other writings have brought my joy and new avenues of learning for me.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of this manuscript is predicated on this notion of the significance of self-discovery, the cultivation of self-awareness, and the interrogation of how identity is formed as necessary to the fabric of our humanness. It is why the notion of sacrament is important to the arc of the book – not only because there are ordinary and extraordinary rituals embedded in the trajectory of the human life, but also because poetry as a gesture is a sacrament – a way of interpreting the experiential realities of the quotidian through a lens of meaning. This does not imply that the most pedestrian of human acts is not already meaningful, but that much like the *midrash* tradition of interacting with the Hebrew Scriptures by “discern[ing] value in texts, words, and letters, as potential revelatory spaces,” art in a broad sense, but here specifically, poetics does the same with experience (Gafney). Perhaps the project of the manuscript as a whole (and these things are usually revealed even to the writer over a period of time and interaction with the work as it goes through multiple iterations) is an *Ars Poetica*, where (in the case of this manuscript) the immigrant experience and identity formation as linguistic performance is itself a text to read and be read by.

Ultimately, anything that investigates/reflects upon the systematics of language, whether *langue* or *parole* as Saussure and Barthes named the distinction of the universal system versus particularity of expression, is in some sense an *Ars Poetica*. Unlike other forms of art that use tactile mediums and speak a “language” of color or shape or texture, the written arts are the cusp of left and right brain impulses, constantly struggling against humanity’s meaning-making instincts to simultaneously get at the meaning beyond systematicity, contextual immediacy, use, or cliché. I think this happens for every poet, whether they are working in their mother tongue or

not, but it's especially emphasized for the one who does not work in their native linguistic system, because the other systems serve as counterpoint of sound, texture, and particularly the creation of sense through syntax. At least, this has been my experience. My mother tongue is Romanian, which is the foremost romance language, and my second language is French, part of the same language group. So, when I arrived at English, I was keenly aware of the way that it moved and constructed meaning quite differently from my other languages. It confused and delighted me. I learned English from re-reading the classics. So again, it was through the *written* word that I learned syntax. And something deeper began whispering to me – this entity, which I call the spirit of a language, which is perhaps the spirit that moves in all art forms, all beauty, but I shall speak of how I find that it operates in/through language.

My experience with poetry has shown me that the act of writing largely arises from an unconscious place. That although something conscious may stir us, the unfurling of the poem's body through the medium of words happens from a deeper place, the place where metaphor and symbol live not as conceptual entities, but as movements of Spirit as it engages our spirit. It's often why I think I am writing a poem about something, but as I come back to it again and again, the language, its repetitions and movements at the level of sound, image, and metaphor has particular textures that often operate fugue-like with the subject matter adding multidimensionality, even changing the meaning of the poem and leading me in new directions.

The collection at every level explores this notion and seeks to enact it in various ways, one being through the subject matter of the immigrant experience – the entrance not only into language as *langue*, but into cultural language, navigating some of the many forms of othering that have occurred in human history and still occur today. Also, through forms that are not within the tradition of poetry (some of which are not present in the manuscript) from crossword puzzles,

to mad libs, to grammar tables, and apartment plans. As these were some of the ways that I learned English, they become interesting ways of thinking about poetry as a form of expression divorced from some of the traditional conventions and aesthetics. It is again, a way to pay attention to language that when de-contextualized may gain new dimensions and perspectives.

Currently, the manuscript is comprised of four sections, each title borrowed from Lacan's theory of psychosexual development, although the ways in which these categories are used here is not in an exact sense of Lacan's work, but more of an applicative one. The Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic serve as stages in the development of the self, where the Imaginary is the encounter with the self through the image in a mirror, and refers to the initial split of an integrated, unaware self, to the first awareness and hence the development of ego – a perceived, self-aware layer of self. The second rupture occurs when the self enters language and begins identifying as an "I". This second fragmentation is called the Symbolic and it is more severe, because as the Imaginary self presents an idealized, on the surface integrated manifestation, the symbolic self is far more fragmented, divorced from the real, and problematic. The Real, to quote Lacan, "is what resists symbolization absolutely." It is the existence of a self before it perceives or identifies itself as a separate self. It is the nascent human identification with the caregiver.

The Lacanian significance of these terms resonated with the fact that much of this project explores identity, especially from the perspective of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic constructs that fall apart for the speaker of the "I" of the manuscript, as well as for many of the characters whose stories are told. The immigrant experience so often untethers us from the anchoring points of their identity – the uniquely cultural or ethnic performance of class, gender, intellectual expression, and many other constructs that typically confer value. One must find the essential

self at the core of all the other performative selves in order to survive. Ultimately, this is what the Real became for me – and it is often found in embodied experience, in relationship. It is my acquiescence to feminist critique that pursues this notion of power and selfhood not as autonomous in that isolated masculine hegemonic manner that has long shaped Western (particularly American) understanding, but one where power and self-governance is not separate from the well-being and empowerment of all humans.

To this end, most of the poems in *Verum* have a child(hood) element and focus on experiences in the body. A quick note on the Latin section titles: I had to choose Latin because Romanian is the romance language closest to Latin, because Latin texts have shaped my imagination and sense of being in the world, and lastly because it is one of the root languages of the world, and of course, a type of mother tongue for me. In the case of the corresponding term for The Real, I spent quite a bit of time sorting through all the other terms available, like *solidus*: solid, firm, substantial, sound, stable, real; or *germanus*: genuine, sincere, brotherly, TRUE, real, having the same parents; or, *praesentarius*: TRUE, being present, available, on hand, real, Right. There were so many others to choose from, and yet something about *verum*, which also means true, proper, genuine, actual, veracious really interested me, because we cannot speak about subjective experience as a type of his(her)story, without asking the question *what is truth*, and considering how many kinds and expressions of truth there are – poetry perhaps being one of the most complicated. The presence of children and the allusions to and stories of childhood present what I consider a purer way of experiencing the world. By purer, I mean, truer form of themselves before culture via media sinks its teeth into them. From observing my daughter's way of being she does not (yet) have constructs against which she compares herself or identifies herself. She simply is. She needs, she asks, she tantrums, she cries, she verbalizes with almost no

self-awareness. It has also been fascinating to observe how her exposure to technology in a way that I did not experience as a child has shaped her understanding of herself. If she sees a photograph or a video she mostly talks about herself in it in the third person, using her full name Geneviève versus Gigi which is the one she uses when refers to herself in an experiential context. It seems that technology may introduce the mirror phase a bit earlier than in previous generations; however even with that level of exposure to an image of self separate in the world, I notice how she continues *being* with a primitive voracity and confidence, and virtually no insecurity or negative self-awareness. The awareness she does have is primarily in her body and is of pain or pleasure, hence ending on Jouissance.

Many of these poems are ones of visceral human experiences – ones that may put us back in touch with our more “primitive” /embodied selves: hunger, fear, prayer, remembrance, belonging, violence, dislocation. Ultimately, the manuscript suggests that the body may be the only possible locus of true belonging, and yet complicates it by exploring various histories of violence done to the body. I am also very interested in these notions that arose from Teilhard de Chardin’s work where matter is an extension of spirit. I use this quote as an epigraph to set off the section, “Matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen,” a notion that upsets the Cartesian (also stemming from ancient Greek philosophy) division of body and soul, and privileges the mind -- the perception of a disembodied, rational self-- over an embodied, intuitive, instinctive, emotional, and yes, also deeply interconnected with our rational capabilities. After all, science speaks of a triune brain, where the prefrontal cortex does not function separately from the limbic system or the reptilian brain. The very organ that holds intellect, emotions, awareness etc. is in fact unified. Therefore, a dualistic view of the world albeit so fundamental to our categorization of reality, the development of our language systems, our social and gender structures etc., falls

apart in the experiential realm. Where we perceive and encounter materiality in all of its forms and are shaped by that interaction, the binary ceases to exist. We may later create narratives of false binaries, but they are simply that-- false. The poems in this section seek to not only articulate something about the embodied experience (such irony, as language often contributes to an experience of disembodiment and can move us into a realm of pure intellect; although, hopefully the experience of reading poetry invites the audience into a more visceral and holistic experience), but to enact through form, sound, and even the aesthetics of the poem's body as it exists on the page and stimulates the eye.

As I write this introduction, the need for a variety of forms that have an aesthetic component and/or that stimulate other parts of the brain and body becomes even more necessary, since this book dares to name a section the Real, based on a theory that the real (in some sense) disappears when we speak of it. It is also why the last three poems of the section (this may not be the case in your version, but in the most recent one; I moved "Secrets" after "Hunger") "Twins," "Letter," and "Lullaby for the Old Country" are about the slow erasure of bodies, and even countries – a way to perform(through poem order) the notion that the real can disappear by our hands, and our words.

The second section of the book entitled "Imaginarium" (Latin for the Imaginary) continues with Lacan's mirror phase -- the encounter of the self as a cohesive, idealized image. It is a phase that he often defines as *"before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" (Lacan 2)*. *This phase is interesting for a couple of reasons, one because it provides the child with a cohesive holistic image of herself, yet in the encounter there is an immediate kind of othering, at least as an othering from the caregiver. This notion of the cohesive, idealized I is something that*

carries well into adulthood, yet finds its new locus of meaning in other images that the cultural environment touts as ideals. The idealized I is later replaced with, for example, James Bond as a paragon of masculinity. These icons or images that we aspire to (especially as we realize ourselves as defective or incomplete) replace this first recognition of the idealized ego, yet are not less potent perhaps even more so, than that first encounter with the self as a projection. This led me to two places of imagery that were part of shaping my moral sensibility, and I believe that of many other people: the first one being the broader category of saints, the second one, cities. I pepper the saint poems with other types of “saints,” the iconic Jackie O., my friend, Jess, Chagall’s horsewoman in red, who for me embodies something of the plight of the Romani people during Hitler’s regime. I also liked that the form of ekphrasis harmonizes with some of the other saint poems, since their representations are primarily found in church-patroned high art. Also, since this section relies on the visual as a concept, it made sense to me that it would have the performative elements of the ekphrastic form, and also references to the “tableaux vivante of hunting rites” (Story in the Late Style of a City), or “statues with pigeons on their shoulders (Iași, 1942), or the painting of St. Andrew with wolves to his right and left.

The specific mentions of art and representation also connect with icons/constructs of femininity, like Jackie O. who is primarily remembered as a fashion symbol or an excellent decorator of the White House. (Every feminist bone in my body cringes) You can also find a slight reference to Rapunzel in a poem about hair (To Agnes), and how many dominant cultural narratives surround the “femininity” and desirability of long hair on females. Our obsession with hair (which has definitely imprinted on males as well) has engendered a billion-dollar industry in the U.S., and our cultural attachments to hair have been (rightly so) politicized and criticized, as they can often contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal and racist narratives. This section

invites the reader to experience the world inside primarily female-driven iconography and representation interwoven with the embodied experience of femaleness. It is also perhaps an iconoclastic section, the saints specifically are not praised for the elements that made them transcend their humanness, but *for* their humanness. Again, where our post-modern, iconoclastic paradigms teach us to distrust and interrogate, as well as to release cherished beliefs and institutions, the dislocation caused by the unraveling of certain narratives may yet again drive us to the recognition and appreciation of our bodies as potential homes.

In addition to the continually broadening saint category, the city as an entity and as an icon becomes the location of historical violence, erasure, as well as beauty. It is also a depiction of a collective consciousness, the physical representation of our values, our fears, our (lack of) humanity. Cities, in general, are scapes of progress and history, invention and tradition, community and anonymity. This may sound bizarre, but to me a city has a soul, a personality, an energy. Cities in the manuscript are characters – they are more than setting; they are interwoven with the internal landscapes of people, and, in some sense, they are representational. They are both entity and representation. The truth is that I struggled with where to place these poems, because they fit in all of the three categories of Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic. I do think that “Story in the Late Style of a City” does set up the city as a repository of our visual symbols, from the “eclairs and profiteroles, in rows as precise/as a Securitate platoon” or the city identified with the inhabitants “Today *we* are a still-life of silver-winged fish dressed with persimmons, / watermelon. Tomorrow a tableau vivante of hunting rites.” I felt the same way about “Iași, 1942,” which is a postcard poem depicting in a slant way a pogrom that was kept out of our history books for decades. The river, Bahlui, is as emblematic of Iași as the Seine is of Paris. The

catacombs beneath the river, the apricot and cherry trees, the statues, the picturesque above, the dark below become a representation of our history.

In terms of order for this second section, my intention was to begin with this idealized image of a city that breaks down as joyful childhood memories are replaced by darker, more mature ones, and to end with an iconoclastic saint -- a dark skinned woman (a black Madonna emblem) who finds freedom in choosing her end, while offering herself the sacraments she was denied. Within the trajectory of the immigrant experience, many of these poems highlight a spectrum of othering, as well as a reinvention of the self against the backdrop of large, sometimes cruel, shaping forces.

Symbolicus, the third section, connects each poem through the exploration of language as both system and unique utterance (*langue* and *parole*); it depicts entrance into language, and engages other types of symbols that create other kinds of languages, for example, mathematics. This is a section of many types of erasures, of losing mother language and native self, and simultaneously of reinvention. The section begins with the loss of identity as it was once known and experienced through the metaphor of an erased city (and a dead horse) “There is no return, there is no such city” (“Between”) and ends with “Now, let this language enter your dreams” (“Guide”).

Language functions in many ways here: as prison, as harbinger of reality, as construct, as mother, as a body, as icon. It is so interesting to me that we speak of a mother tongue. That in some sense, language has birthed us, and according to Lacan’s theory, it has. That the psyche’s ingress into the symbolic can be simultaneously described as fragmentation and also as an enlarging of identity. To be able to utter “I” as a gesture of empowerment, or to use metaphors in order to understand and speak of the self is an expansion, particularly where the metaphors are

not oppressive or cliched. “Ars Poetica” tackles this through the ever-evolving understanding of the Sumerian tablets and the development of that ancient language from pictograms of goats and silver pieces so clearly linked to their referent, to the representation of an arrow evolving into symbolizing *life* (so many rich implications here!). Language gives us the capacity to re-invent ourselves entirely, but more interestingly to expand the contours of understanding and experience, therefore of expression. When the poet says, “I am water in your hands, merging, slipping, retreating,” there is such wealth of meaning linked to the metaphor of water inside cupped hands, and the volumes that speaks of the nature of the “I” as well as of the relationship.

Another way the symbolic operates in this section is as a subtle examination of the structures that underlie our understanding of the world. Put another way, the symbolic is more than a symbol, a letter or an idiom, it is also the manifestation of narratives that justify our separating the world in categories of good and evil, pure and impure, sacred and profane. etc. These structures are more insidious because they undergird our images (the imaginary level of consciousness) and operate like a grammar that permeates everything. I am reminded of David Foster Wallace essentially asking “how do you tell fish that they’re in water?” All the subtle and not so subtle forms of othering that emerge in this section are part of this symbolic layer. It’s logical how – beginning with the initial experience of articulated “I” – self would become separate from “other.” The very act of naming begins the act of separation. And yet, this is so beautifully paradoxical that we can simultaneously unite ourselves onto others through articulation of shared or similar experiences of our humanity, just as we can create fissures. Poetry particularly holds this very sacred balance, which is why this section is as much about poetry as it is about language systems and symbols. One cannot speak of one without the other.

Lastly, *Jouissance*. Everything about this term brings to mind English counterparts like enjoyment, delight, pleasure, ecstasy. I wanted a section like this to lift the audience (and myself) a bit from the absolute pain of the histories of the preceding sections, the dislocation, loss, pain, death, and yes, beauty, but the kind that mostly incites heartbreaking nostalgia. The previous sections (especially *Imaginarium* and *Symbolicus*) also operate as cultural, historical, maybe even linguistic critiques, therefore to create a kind of ouroboros shape to the manuscript (the ouroboros being a symbol of infinity, wholeness and renewal, while in ancient traditions the presence of the serpent denoted feminine energies and wisdom) I wanted to return to the simplicity and the miraculous ordinariness of the body, of love, of birthing a child. Nearly every poem in this section is one of transcendence through embodied presence, or one of empowerment and freedom.

Freedom, in fact, comes through the grieving and transformation of a previous identity through the encounter with the essential oceanic self -- the ground of being, cosmic god incarnate in the human body. Perhaps this sounds too esoteric, but I am reminded of Paul Tillich who described the encounter with the divine as occurring through loving ourselves, and then, committing our lives to a practice of acceptance and love of all living things. Becoming oneself is inextricably connected to giving oneself, and giving of oneself happens only when one has fully become her or himself. Another paradox. This section speaks for/to me about how the only way to become whole again after the interruption of displacement, loss, and othering is through fully coming home to one's body and one's humanity without shame. It is transcending imaginary and symbolic structures to fully give oneself to embodied experience. To love and be loved. Of course, this does not happen to the exclusion or consideration of these other levels of

consciousness. In his introduction to Susan Miller's book *Communion of Saints*, Mark Doty speaks of his friend's office the walls of which are adorned with images of deities,

some are radiant, some tender, some poised in a cool regard for nothing we can see. The fierce ones can be unnerving, with their necklaces of skulls and their teeth dripping blood. I began to feel more friendly toward these when Anne described the images as visual representations of states of consciousness, pictures one might contemplate to access a quality of mind and heart in oneself. Just as we to find our steadfastness sometimes, or to more fully inhabit our kindness, so we may suffer without our ferocity, without embodying that which cuts loose, or dissolves old associations, and goes striding fearlessly into the future (Miller xi).

I find a kinship between this statement and the first poem of this collection (as well as other poems that explore our shadow self), the lioness - that picks up her young by the scruff of their necks, teeth nipping at that delicate skin, --inhabits each of us. The shadow, which Jung describes as the expression of pain and isolation, can be greeted, grieved, and invited to the table. (this is why the epilogue explores the grieving of the past – there is *jouissance* in the pain and the excess). Where there is recognition, there can be healing and integration. This is one of the things I'd love for this manuscript to communicate – that we can reckon with our darkness, release our shame, reclaim the goodness and lessons of our past, and allow our constantly expanding love for others and ourselves to baptize us and birth us again and again and again.

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For “Mamalalantu” Filoftia Pantiru
who taught me all I know about love

“Matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen.”
— Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

*“But when we sit together, close,’ said Bernard, ‘we melt
into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist.
We make an unsubstantial territory.”*
— Virginia Woolf

Where I Am From

after an exercise of George Ella Lyon

I am from *Little Dew Drop* and fairy tales of virgin daughters turned to stone,
from daybeds, worn flannel sheets & pajamas too large for my body

from the conquering and the conquered, Latin texts to replace
Dachian dialects, illumined letters burning our vowel sounds to ashbodies

I am from food lines of the weather-worn, the soul-weary, the devil-pacted,
electricity and water turned off at a whim, in the stinking darkness, body presses body,

from a two-room apartment where we sleep in the living room, while my young mother
studies for engineering exams, her head haloed, on the walls her light-stamped body.

I am from faded Scriptures, old translations and words I know longer know
Elvis's *Little sister, don't you do what your big sister does* with her body

I am from big sister, mother, father, grandparents under one roof,
in the wildness of cousin romps, tantis and unchius, who can notice my little nobody?

I am from garlic and onion simmering with chicken livers in a skillet,
from marrow thoroughly sucked from the bone, nothing left of this animal's body.

I come from watermelon juice sticky in mouth corners, between fingers,
and long brown legs covered in welts, uncertain if the earth's body

or another's drew those on me, uncertain about the way the planet tilts
when little girls are crushed in an extravagant parental embrace, bodies

so small they turn to birds, skirts swoosh to feathers, bright cries in the morning's
brightness, flocks of them over man-drawn borders, hear the sea moan *ahhh!* in response.

I. VERUM

Radiance

Begin with the center of all things, a seed of light
and work your way outward. Vitruvian Man splayed,
each limb meant to point toward the four corners
of the earth -- a map to the material. *Cosmografia
del minor mondo*, the micro & macro universe, a mirror.
Look at the rays that emanate. Bodies made of earth,
or words, or seasalt, capable of such radiance.
This was what the ancients saw, the connection
of all living and nonliving substances: the fabric
of woman once the fabric of ash, of moon,
of stone. All people begun with one, all bodies
having germinated in one.

Today, sunlight slants geometrically over cobblestone
streets, over cathedral steeples; trams rush by like liquid
silver, while a man sits on park bench pressing a scarf
against his wet eyes. Above, dogwoods shake their blooms.
Stop here and see how your life has begun
with a stone and rippled outward, widening its reach,
Look for what is gone, what has persisted.
Today, the priest who throws holy water even on pigeons
sits next to the man on the bench, murmurs a prayer,
falls asleep, his two hands in a triangle over his heart.
To a person in a speeding tram they are one,
peace and wailing inseparable from each other.

This Earth Crammed with Heaven

The past is a map, colors and lines. The only way to see is with closed eyes. When my family left the old country behind, we navigated an invisible wall of dreams. A sea of sunlight. Green colored clouds. Our only link was the sky and its absence from maps. The way we drew it ourselves like a cloth draped over the globe, and the dots connecting us to ether were stars, or maybe birds. I don't know. The sky can leave no scars.

The electricity is out, the city swallowed by the throat of a ghost. No candles in the house and the gypsies are rumored to be back in town. My sister and I wrap our yellow hair in dark scarves and plan our escape in case we are kidnapped. In the next room, my parents fling stars onto our ceiling.

My father fills my mother with expensive orchids.

There is a room in our house where sadness cannot enter. Where everyone we love is present. My mother feeds the homeless peppers stuffed with rice and lamb, golden omelets like clouds and black bread. My father rests his head on the world's oldest book, reads the stars. My grandmother, brilliant queen, beautiful in her wrinkles and gray hair writes a memoir. My uncle drinks cup after cup of coffee, brown and rich and frothy, stacks them on every surface. Miriam and I on the floor, move our heads from lap to lap. Sit like pups to be touched. If we blink, they all disappear, my father, my uncle, my grandmother who have sailed on clouds to America. They have stuffed our dreams in their pockets.

Things burst when my mother walks by. Last week the milk bubbled out of the pan and swallowed the stove. Yesterday a whole shelf of china sailed past the countertop, carved a mosaic on the kitchen floor. When the refrigerator breaks, my mother sets all we have on the living room floor, and we picnic like royalty. When I play the piano, the keys fall out like teeth; I am my mother's daughter, after all. Even after thirteen years of leaving her house, I still dream of that night in the blizzard, when our breaks gave out and we careened backward down the iced hill, our car gravity unlocked, heaven bound, my mother, the ice queen presiding over the wheel.

The old country is a string of light bulbs, burning out one by one.

What They Smuggled across the Border –

Sewn into their coats, their shirts, underneath skirts,
folded between plentiful breasts, or beneath hats,
under arms, on the underside of the small bowl of the knee,
or some women, who braided whatever was deemed
salvageable into their hair, woven into coils, pinned
tightly against the skull. Spoons, pearl earrings,
Charmeuse silk slips and jade bracelets. One even tried
to bring thirteen porcelain figurines, a nativity scene,
later shattered by patrolmen underfoot. Photographs
in varying tones of gray, a birth certificate, though very few
brought those, hopeful for new names to blot out the horrors
of their pasts. And pistols, snug against calves, no holsters,
cold steel to keep warm flesh company. Most brought
words like *piine*, *pamint*, *libertate* –words to kiss
their mouths and roll on their tongues one last time,
because so many carried a pact to forget, begin again,
but not you, father, you, mother, you, uncle,
who still wear a necklace, like a tattoo on your chest,
one dangling bullet humming quietly over your heart.

Hunger

for Miriam

In Iași, people argue in long queues,
today the milk supply is low,
tomorrow will be the meat, or the bread.
My grandfather says we have learned
to live on dreams, and air,
and pitchers of water.

To count the moments when we sit
on a stack of newspapers, in queues
snaking past schools and government buildings,
past the broken machinery of playgrounds,
and wait patiently for luxuries:
soft yellow butter, Brazilian coffee,
or ripe bananas. Everything
becomes a game to distract us
from the dull ache of the belly,
from the dreams of fat oranges
sprouting under our beds,
from the incessant counting
zero to one hundred and back again,
because that's how long it takes
a magician to search in his hat
and *Behold!* He brings forth a fish
instead of a dove, parsley sprigs
and lemons instead of scarves,
and things get even wilder,
a pork chop cooked in honey,
rice feathery as goose down,
jars and jars of rose hip jelly,

smuggled out of grandmother's kitchen,
while she's dozing off in a corner,
on her chair of sunlight, also dreaming
that the tomatoes in her garden
have grown like pumpkins,
that she can feed us all on the last two
hens, with plenty to spare, that the path
between desire and satisfaction
is shorter than the act of swallowing,
shorter than the sunflower seed
traveling the throat of the pigeon,
shorter even than the moment it takes
to come awake.

Secrets

Our days are filled with the aroma of peaches,
at the dinner table my mother peels the skin,
removes the hard shell of the seed, drops the amber
globes into a blue bowl. The flesh of her fingers glistens.
It is winter here in Oregon, rain frozen to the window
and my father in the other room is practicing Latin
instead of English. *To return*, the simplicity of its nuances,
a hard sound, a bark, my father says, by comparison
to *conversio*, a periodical return, or *receptus*,
drawing back, recanting; and I think of the verbs
he doesn't mention, say *postliminium*, the right to return
home, and I remember our friends fleeing Romania
encased in Italy-bound clothing trucks,
or swimming the Danube corridor at nightfall.
I know my father is also thinking of them,
the secrets they kept, the way they scattered
from our country like seeds,
our living room map still marked with their locations.
We are all ants under the interminable blue sky,
our world. My father conjugates
to the indifferent moon. In the kitchen peaches sigh,
come apart in the heat, and my mother sings
in unison. She pours glasses of cold milk.
In the absence of words, she brings music
and silence as complicated as the geography
of our past, she brings her hands smooth as olives,
the scent of orchards where we played
as children, the longing to make our new place
familiar, to move inside its boundaries
blindfolded, touching the walls, the furniture
like old friends. But our fingers and palms
have betrayed us, the only recognition
in the sweetness of peaches simmering
with sugar and cinnamon and that secret
ingredient my mother won't give away,
which now I know to be hunger itself.

When Our Father Lost It,

for my sister

we'd scatter from the house
 like particles of light colliding
 with solid matter. He, a crystalline
 structure, molecular agitation
 his neck a medusa of nerves
 and tendons, his voice coiled,
 poised to strike us wherever
 we'd run. We would travel
 through walls, through bolted
 doors, sometimes ascend
 the rafters to the world above.
 The way light waves erupt
 from their source, traverse solids,
 we'd swim the landscaped yards
 of neighbors, the only safe place
 the benches of the tennis courts,
 shielded by overgrown camellias.

On those metallic benches, you'd tangle
 your legs with mine, pick at my scabs,
 so satisfying for hardened skin to rupture,
 then seal again, so miraculous the body's
 almost mechanic mend from injury.
 Our birdlike bones too, designed to heal
 much faster than our nerve cell memory,
 that electricity that hums and zips
 when a hand strikes a cheek,
 the voltage of the voice that blows
 a fuse inside my head,
 so that when you raise your hand
 to sweep away a strand of hair, I flinch.
 We are a rare species you and I.
 Our grief circuits through bone, nestles
 in places too holy for human hands.
 But, we laid our unholy parts on hard
 asphalt, while the undersides of our eyelids
 change from blue to violet to silver.

There, our mom found us and walked us
 back to the house, dark but for a square
 of gray that pools on the breakfast table,
 where she'd laid out a feast for us,
eggs en cocotte, rolls that steam

[no stanza break]

when we break them open,
chocolate chaude that scalds the tongue
and throat, a spark of pain so close
to happiness, it's indistinguishable.

Crumbs from your hands, Lord –

The tense of clouds is evening. We speed in a train
toward nowhere, the world snowing quietly around us.

This is our history: family in the river's dark corridor,
friends turned to birds, exiled to borderless countries.

One time we were all Jews, homo sapiens, anthropos wound
on helixes of shared grief. A Russian magistrate once said,

in response to the *Jewish problem*, as he called it,
“Let us try to forbid

snow or frost!” delighted that you just can't take
the jewishness out of the Jew. My people were no more

forgiving. Lord, we marked our doors with crosses to make him
pass, our own dark angel, to say that we are not, do not, cannot

stand with the stranger at our gates. How short the path from kindness
to hate. How quick the face goes blank, the person slips inside

the skin, the bones betray. We made them dig their own
graves, methodically, guarded by men with lives.

Men who at night lay their body against another soft, breathing body,
men with souls. You have scattered us from your hand like crumbs

for the birds. We ate and were eaten, till the earth had no more
to give. We embraced on the precipice of time, held on to a relic

a people with a history that erases itself with every step forward
we take. A people of winters that echo in our aching souls. In the end,

survival had one name. My father spoke of his friend, one cold
morning in a hospital waiting room, of how he had endured the train

rides in summer's heat, killing men like kingdoms of insects.
How they climbed on top of the dead to fight for the last mouthful

air coming through small cracks, men reduced to flesh, pushing flesh
out of their way to ascend away from the igneous metal floor, cattle

trains, carrying them away toward a dark story, the summer heat so strong

it struggled with itself. The children went first, and the ones who lived lost themselves, their body a back door they slipped through. My father cannot stop this resurrection story with an ending stitched with grief.

He tells me what his friend said when asked how he could face this world,
“I cannot leave a room for hate.”

Berlin Wall I

The story goes like this, we woke to wire,
coils and slabs, beams and concrete, a hundred miles
of silver plaited river. Some tunneled through the mire
beneath. They used their hands, their pocketknives,
to no avail. Inside the wall's ribcage, shoes, cigarettes,
opera stubs, detritus of a nation on the stage.
No place left for a body to wedge, or hedge its bets,
no room for cries, for haggling, for regrets.
Even the birds mysteriously gone in shocks of feathers,
only a red finch's caught inside the thorny filament
he warbles on, while everyone scuttles by, even the peddlers
cannot see the frantic flame, its dimming imminent.
Our prayers now end in a question mark.
We've watched a city slip into the dark.

Twins

after the testimony of Theresia Seible

They took us to the clinics in silver SS cars,
my sister and me, identical girls, born

on three three nineteen forty-three.
How we loved the symmetry

of our birthdays. At first, it was merely height,
weight, the expected kind of measurements,

questions like *who was born first, who ate more.*
Or did arithmetic faster, or got sick. But then, came

the blood-letting, more and more
each visit, the stern voices of nurses,

Bleib gelegt, and statue-like we stayed,
holding the hand of the one chosen

for study that day. We stayed like cells
pinned onto a slide, casually slipped

under a microscope. We watched ourselves
grow larger than life, our hemoglobin

magnified a thousand, ten thousand times.
The head-scratching of doctors, the sighs

of nurses, who sometimes snuck hard candies,
lime or grape, into our hands or pockets,

or took extra time to tend to thighs and hollows
of our mid-arm, blood maps the scientists

thought would lead them to some magical answer,
the cause of dark blood & race, the efflorescence

of melanin beneath our thin casing of skin. Under
that light we flared even darker, like twin bruises,

colonized by the element they feared the most –
strong brown genes; they scraped and scrubbed

and combed our body into submission, while we braided
our fingers into each other's and whispered of things

that made the world flush colorful again, like Chichen Itza,
or Machu Picchu, places where the gods took what they wanted,

starved for bodies, places where now a human might walk
bold in step, shake her fists and curse the deities,

things as girls we practiced with the other as a mirror. Things
we couldn't say to these gods who held us.

Letter

in the voice of Theresia Seible, Gypsy mother of twins on whom the SS experimented

My daughters, be earth. Be dark, rich, verdant. Be that from which life springs. Be colony. Amongst yourselves the only love you need. Hold the hands of your sister when they take you. When they run tests in places too holy to touch, be rock. Hard and still, immovable. Be voice. Cry out for the other when she is muted. Be the No! they will never forget, the night that will haunt them with its thick darkness. Be sky. Grow wide and cobalt in front of them, when they've splayed you out like parchment, be interminable. Be siren song like your gypsy mother, and your grandmother, your tetas and cousins, the thread of music that lingers even after you leave the room. Be the body of each woman before you, of all that gave life. Be salt on the tongue, salt in the air. When they separate you be breath inside the other's lungs, travel the corridors together, and when they show us one of you in a tub crumpled like butterfly wings from a cocoon split too early, be your sister. Be resurrection. Be the wail that rises from the ghettos, the camps. Oh, daughter be bird. Beat your wings hard. Ascend.

Lullaby for the Old Country

“*Country, my country, I change my blood in your direction*”

-Neruda

To go to Iasi. To go to that house where my grandparents set the table out under the cherry trees. My grandmother slicing onions, tomatoes so ripe they coated our fingers. In that space, we were held by poems or Scriptures, sermons quoted conversationally. This was the world we were losing and gaining. Tanks raising dust in the streets, a gaping hole in the flag, the hammer and sickle torn from everything, but our consciousness. *Regime, revolution, Securitate* swirled in our imagination, took on the shape of fairy tale monsters. At night, I would turn the words over to see the underside: *Securitate* red, *regime* violet, *revolution* white. If I closed my eyes, they would hum and whir, clocks set in motion by my parents’ voice, as they conversed quietly in the other room, the walls thin enough for words to bleed through. In the cities, some went without food to give their children. Many didn’t live. It was a time of plenty, of nothing. I knew hunger waited at our door, came in a few times. Our telephone was tapped, our mail opened. We were used to it. Ceaușescu built himself a palace *braced by the austerity of his people’s table*, my parents said. We were used to it. *Is life not more than food?* they asked, *The body more than clothes?* We called ourselves civilized or dissidents with Scriptures and Plato tucked between mattress and frame. Only the soul’s rusted light remained. Six months after the revolution, children ran down alleyways in victory cries, our torn flag - a cape to wrap their bodies, their small heads emerging from what looked like a broken yolk.

II. IMAGINARIUM

Story in the Late Style of a City

after Larry Levis

There are elusive signs in everything. Lilac trees
spring up like giants, color and scent, a language
of survival in the absence of fruit. The streets grow quiet
for a few hours, before the bustle of women bargaining
prices for mackerel, rainbow trout, lemons, olives,
before bakers snap their fingers, fill the window
displays with éclairs and profiteroles, in rows as precise
as a Securitate platoon. Stillness is substance in this cathedral
of symbols: in the winter, a frozen river, in the summer,
clusters of wine-red cherries weighing down branches.
Such deceptive plenty everywhere. We didn't need meat, or sugar,
or an appetite. Come summer, the markets brimmed, come winter,
we ice skated through blizzards, through snowflakes delicate
as goose feathers. Our skin peeled, we had frost bite, we knew
that kind of happiness. Armies marched and civilians marched.
Tanks came through the city in silent convoys. The roads were covered
in snow, in trash, in petals, in grief. In times of misfortune the soul
makes tenderness of its wounds. Chooses its analogies.
Today we are a still-life of silver winged fish, dressed with persimmons,
watermelon. Tomorrow, a tableaux vivante of hunting rites.
The city belongs to no one in this crescendo light of day.
Today we wake up children, tomorrow we are the state official
who once invited a beggar in his loge to listen to *Carmen*,
and the beggar wept, saying he had never rested on such soft seats.

Iași, 1942

In this city of pigeons and imaginations, people plant apricot trees to cover the smell of death. The apricots hang in ripe, heavy clusters, miniature moons against the dark.

In this city of seven hills, there is a river that carries all manner of treasure away: animal refuse, dandelions, chemical waste. Fish die, but other creatures live. Jewish immigrants feed on apricots for weeks. Their skin whispers of river and fruit when they are taken away one by one through the ruins. Only one hundred barefoot remain underground. Above them twilight begins its subtle transformation.

Some men turn to statues with pigeons on their shoulders, others into fleshy tyrants. Wake up from this dream! Inside the philosopher's skull, there is just emptiness.

In 1942, there was a massive undertaking to exile all Jewish people from the city of Iasi, Romania and load them into trains headed for Dachau. One hundred remained and hid in the catacombs that ran alongside the river Bahlui.

For the Unnamed City

its streets licked
with darkness we step into
a late night café and talk
of revolution of the world
spinning on an axis of desire
this is what moves people
to close the space
between their bodies
the way even soldiers sleep
uncomfortable fit
of body to body
not for warmth but hunger
to touch ordinary things
like an ear or an elbow
to feel the pulse of vessels
right under the thin sheath of the skin
to know the body is still good
even when it's broken
to know even after everything
hardens something within
remains a color
that can't be touched
by anything except perhaps
your open palm an orchid
covering my mouth when I can't stop
saying what is wrong with this world
and what is right only in leaving.

The Patron Saint of Wolves, My Countrymen

There was a boy who lived in the apartment downstairs and he was blind. We could hear him counting the steps past our apartment, walking as if he was holding on to invisible ropes. He never fell or missed a step, so precise in his humming and counting. Some people talked about raising money and sending him to a specialist, but it was the kind of talk that made them feel in charge of their destiny, though their dwindling rations of sugar and oil said otherwise. When I was in the elevator for those few minutes with the man who told me unspeakable things he wanted to do to me, I heard his humming. I counted the floors with him, up to seven where the man got off, back down to third, where I burst out of the elevator and yelled "Dimitri, can I take the stairs with you?" He didn't answer, because according to the neighbors he had been raised by wolves. But I knew better, I knew men raised by wolves were brave men, men who snuck a warm loaf of bread into your school bag, waving you away saying "There are more of you than there are of me." People say St. Andrew is the patron saint of wolves because he protected his fellow men from them, but in a library book with a broken spine, I once saw an icon of him with a wolf on his right and one on his left, his hands resting benevolently on their head. I think he knew that wolves were more humane than other species, that they retract their teeth when they corral their young.

My Father as a Series of Biblical Characters

I. Goliath

You walk into conversations armored,
seven feet tall, the bulk of your mind
intimidates. We sway like branches in the current

of your words, the dark night of your mouth.

The past your arrow, our sins, swans overtaken
by the quiet violence. I have always loved you, the painfully

sharp chin hairs, your rough cheek against my head,
the way you held me evenings and read me Proust,
Plato, Christ. I learned French conjugations from you, learned

men were not to be trusted. Your voice follows me wading
through the shallows, the river cold and brackish
You threaten to fill your pocket with stones, tell me to do the same.

I cannot walk with you into the dark waters. In the end,
it is a stone that kills you.

II. Judas

You only betray yourself, you words hang from trees
with starlight combing through leaves. *I'm always so misunderstood,*
you say across the space, and I know that you won't be there,
my birthday as deflated as a balloon. I turned thirty, so it really

shouldn't matter. I am no longer your *dew drop*, but the raging storm.
I danced that night with my sister, my mother, my husband. With so much
family around, your absence like a purse of coins jingles every time I turn.
I empty myself of you more every day. No longer can you buy back in.

III. Prophet

You threaten to leave for what feels like the hundredth time.

My sister and I throw ourselves to the floor, a practiced
tableau vivante. Our mother is quiet, your words have hollowed her.

What you leave behind, the coldness of a room, clean emptiness. My mother
makes dark chocolate, pours it into cups, we play board games into the night.

When you return, you say how beautiful we have become,
*Don't cut your hair, you say. Tattoos and piercings
are forbidden.* I don't defy you for years, my hair a horse's tail, my body

untouched. You find fault with all my desire. You worry I might not believe.

I pierced my ears twice, once at nineteen, once at twenty-six. My sister
contemplates a flock of birds traveling her wrist to shoulder.

I bear my scars with ease. They are my Ebenezer, pile of stones.

But don't you know? Even when you are not in the room, I summon you
to speak my future.

IV. Lazarus

It was Christmas, snow and dark slush, I brought my boyfriend
home to meet you. How well you were the first few days, jokes
by the fireside, hot cider spiked with rum. No photograph as beautiful as this.

I don't remember what set you off, you spent three days locked
in your room, the rest of us downstairs in private mourning,
exchanging gifts, the hollowness of laughter

Three days gone! We grieved you and then moved on to the unfolding
of our holidays. Ice skating downtown, charades, movies.
There comes a time when it's easy to forget, to fill the space you left

Your laughter tangles into every line
of prose. How well you weave the story, hem us in.

To Mary, Mother of Christ

If today it were my turn to open and look into the tomb, to examine the strips of cloth that swaddled him, I would think of his mother, the other Mary who loved him. The one whose visitation started an uprising. The one who rides with angels on the backs of donkeys. The savior of Christ. The bearer of Christ. Who stitched into her body the helix of his face, his arms, his legs. Who held his face to her breast and coaxed milk into his mouth. Mary, you said *let it be done unto me*. You didn't know that you were asking for more than labor pains, for more than body striped by blood. For more than silver scarring on the back or belly. This body you held, his, yours – you grew as tall as a mountain. You grew solid, petrified, even the points of your breasts piercing your robe. And when he said *Put your finger in my side, right here between the ribs*, you touched the walls of his room that place between the slats where he had carved *mother*, a name you would forego, now that he arose like dandelion sepals dancing on air, blown by that same breath that gave him to you.

Before the Wedding
for J.

A cardinal flies straight into my window, stuns himself,
the sound of his body ripples against glass even after
he falls confounded and quiet in the bushes below.
By the time I rush out on the porch, his body is aloft,
dazed the way you stumbled out of that bar the night
before your wedding, all flurry of white
from your chiffon dress and that ridiculous veil
we made you wear. You were at four martinis
too many, so you bent and whispered against my temple
*I don't really want to marry him, I just want to marry someone
kind.* Then you laughed and planted a reassuring kiss
on my temple: we were thirty with college debt,
corporate jobs, and bank accounts that made us want
to croon the blues, *so naturally*, you said, *this is next.*
I wanted then to say *you don't have to marry him,
or anybody else.* That you could take that trip to Majorca,
watch cicadas swarm the air and land in glasses of champagne
the pavement later strewn with their husks. I wish
I had whispered *leave him* and that we'd taken off
giggling, two swans, trailing our milky dresses
through puddles, our heels sticking in the cracks
of cobblestone streets. We would have driven all night
away from the fuss of chair covers and seven-tiered
cakes, to the days of rooftop merengue in Seville,
our awkward shuffling as if we'd just discovered
our bodies, back to Luis and Juan Carlos who kissed us
under the wisteria, though neither of us could tell
which was which—a phantom life, streaking past us
in phosphorescent plumage and brown limbs.
Instead, we walked back to the hotel arm in arm,
words hanging ripe and heavy between us. Within minutes
you fell asleep, and all I could do was pull off your peacock
blue shoes, weary with vodka stains, and with a washcloth
try to wipe your waterproof lipstick from my temple,
that glittering red streak, a buoy, its silhouette still bobbing
whenever I shut my eyes.

To Agnes, the Patron Saint of Women's Hair

When the Securitate would enter our house, my sister and I
would hide in the bathroom, the one where the tile and commode
and even the porcelain tub was pink, and tell each other stories.

There was the story of the gypsies who kidnapped
fair-headed children like ourselves, cut off a hand
or foot, then forced them to beg by the cinemas or bars.

We agreed to wrap our hair in dark scarves to not
be captured. A year later, we didn't need to worry.
We were both so infested with lice that our Rapunzel hair

had to be shaved off. Now I tell her different stories,
of my friend, Jo, whose chemo treatments left her
almost bald, how her husband touches her head

reverently during the night when he thinks she's asleep
and prays for her hair to grow back. *That's what hurts the most,*
she says. *To him, I am not whole.* Neither of us believe in saints,

but I tell her of Agnes, whose naked body was paraded around town
by the man whom she refused to marry, how her hair grew
long and lush like a mantle to cover her from prying eyes.

But Jo leans against me and whispers, *he hasn't touched me*
since the cancer, not like that. And I don't know how to make things
right, how to hold her body with kindness. I tell her of the radiance

that emanates from her fingers when she sweeps them in arcs
over her head. *It's like you're haloed.* The laughter that this wrings
from her brings us both to our knees and then laying on the floor,

our hands arched over our bellies. *I would choose death now*
if I could; so I tell her the story of the whale calf who traveled
thousands of miles, following the ship of sailors that slaughtered

his mother. What I don't tell her is that the wild will reclaim
its own. Instead, I offer a platitude *You must tune your ears to now,*
afraid of her diminishing choices, afraid of her soft incantations:

How lovely these ruins. How lovely to no longer inhabit them.

Pink Matter: Jackie Speaks

I think I might have been a shop girl if I hadn't seen
the writing on the wall, a simple girl with a fine arts
degree and an eye for pretty things. *A pretty head, too*

the press said, although I knew their implication, not much
inside that well-shaped skull. But I was out to prove them
wrong. I built, as if with my own two hands, a place we

might let down our woes, our hair, our bodies, a kitchen
for pastries steaming in precise rows, a table where
our children might sneak sips of your rich black coffee,

where you might kiss me through that haze of happiness,
created by such simple things. But these don't move me
like a brushstroke of light on the copper fur of the hunted

fox, one lone creature in a pack of healthy, overzealous
dogs. Or that arch in Lincoln's brow, before the country
wore him down, hollowed his cheeks, his eyes. I still dream

his face hangs over mine. He's telling me something
about survival. About the things my hands would one day
hold. Dear Jack, I used to cradle your head in my lap,

remember? But it was not to be, my darling, our life
of champagne dusks, kissing one more time
for the cameras, and me whispering "I do love

a good crowd." Remember how we climbed
in our motorcar and I held yellow roses, your hand
clasped in mine, my gloves stained with sweat, I held

your head again in my lap, pressing those gloves, my hand
oh, Jack, I held your memories in, not one of them lost,
darling. I didn't let them take even one, as they took

your body, your dignity, for you, I lunged after that one
delicate shard on the hood of the car, so pink it startled me.
I had read of grey matter, or white matter, but when they came

to take you all I could offer was pink blooms on my once-white glove.

To Mary of Magdala, the Patron Saint of Habitation

There isn't a patron saint of women's bodies – I've searched. There is no name to invoke when walking the streets and men call *Hey baby, the things I'd like to do to you*. My friend says, *I wish men looked at me like that*, but I am just searching for that stone in my pocket, the one I've rubbed smooth between my thumb and index. I touch it as one might touch a rosary. Which prayer would I circle in and to whom? And how can I cover this body without erasing its geographies, these breasts and thighs that map the mysterious ways it unfurled against my will? Mary of Magdala, is there a stone heavier than a body, a tomb larger than a self, a garden more verdant than flesh? And when you wrapped your arms around his knees, what did you feel? They say his resurrected form was like water, or like a gold-skeined swarm of bees. Did he slip from your hands, and spill onto your legs, your feet? Was that a kind of resurrection? Mary, I dreamt of getting to a nunnery, those generous folds of cloth in black and white safer than any shape. I wore my father's t-shirts, extra larges, to hide what inhabited me. But even in those days of saggy clothes, my face, my hair gave me away. *Little woman*, the men called, *I know what you're hiding*. Mary, the sacred texts say your own body was a dwelling for demons, that Christ but looked into your eyes and they left you. Were they the ghosts of old lovers? Or soldiers who took what you refused to give? Were they the names you murmured in the dark, those names of sorrow we give ourselves when the body becomes a burden too heavy to lug?

The Carnival Girl's Manifesto

after Chagga's "Horsewoman on Red Horse"

I've made it another night, the shadow of his face
 holding me suspended over this large heaving body
 of hooves and sinew and breath I trust.

Every night he comes to see me falter, flail, fall,
 pleasure I know rising within him when he spits back
 coins and the phrase that tethers me to sky and air,

my bones lighter than feathers, "one mistake, tsiganka,
 just one," that threat hanging heavy like a fist
 to the mouth, a boot to the ribs, but what does my body know

of such things when I am flying? When Pegasus, my dark companion
 hurtles over concentric rings of fire, when every night my hair,
 his mane, singed and smoky, zig-zag like comets?

There is nothing safer than letting your frame drop to slumber
 next to an animal, the one who's trained you to know
 gravity's defeat, to splay your vagabond arms like dark angel

wings and let them fill a tent larger than a city, to the gasps
 and cheers of children, waving spun sugar on a stick,
 saluting you, dark buoy against the blue light of settling dusk.

For what else is a Gypsy girl, more alone than John the Baptist,
 nerve and bone of electricity, good for?
 He found me eating trash in that make-shift tent of coats I'd stolen

from the train station's waiting room, my family fed
 to the Zigeunerlager camp weeks earlier, disgraced survivor
 of my village turned carnival freak until he decides I'm one more life

to be extinguished. But tonight is on my terms. I've dreamt of vermilion
 horses licked by blue flames, my onyx skin blossomed to white
 as I lift from the saddle, sparks from my sandals, flares at my ankles.

I'll braid white roses in my hair, for the baptism
 I never had (turned away by the priest in disgust), for the wedding
 I'll never have, and I'll fly once more, not for the crowd, nor the soldiers,

but for that life that will meet me once I've flung myself across the border
 of this one. I'll fly too close to the inferno above, and the invisible threads
 that keep us earth's children, watch closely, they'll snap, one by one.

The body, a grenade. I'll rain on you like milkpetals.

III. SYMBOLICUS

Between

after Ilya Kaminsky

I come from a city where languages meet,
and now I am caught between them –

the empty space white and vaulted,
my tongue licks the roof

in search of things to set free.

Once a skinny horse wandered in the road,

aimless, and we never stopped. Later, the carcass
became an immigrant's clumsy prayer toward the invisible.

I was seeking a form, an epic to reinvent the world,
that is all. But everything, I have learned,

begins with a small death. This is a story
where things come back to life,

though the horse never did, but the city,
my origin buckling under the weight of its many

metaphors stood. On that precipice, to the dark notes
of a Gregorian chant, letters reassembled

into strange sounds, started a revolution
in my mouth. How they demanded!

We traveled from place to place together
a troupe of troubadours, this language – our life

our music. But the city calls with the black sounds
of trains smoking as if through pages of night.

There is no return, there is no such city.

An Immigrant's Prayer

We are blind discoverers, wayfarers of sound
palming our way through unfamiliar rooms
of longing. This new language holds us
in its wet marsupial pouch and there is thickness
on the tongue, this viscous substance we move
through to parcel out names to shape this new
world. Often the emptiness stays heavy in the mouth
and the muteness becomes a navigating of uncharted
oceans without stars. Where is the word for
the condensation that appears around a glass
that sits on a table for a long time? Like that day
we laughed our way through a four-hour meal on a piazza
in Florence, my heels sticking into cobblestone cracks,
three carafes of wine in, and your tongue was in
my mouth so suddenly, I could sing in a thousand
languages. It was *koi no yokan*, the inevitability
of falling in love that turned into *saudade*, Portuguese
for melancholic longing or nostalgia for a person
gone. Or was it *forelsket*, the act of falling that I remember?
The abyss inviting me with a conspiratorial wink, promising
the day of reckoning is coming -- tests to pass,
jobs to get, there will be *pena ajena* aplenty from waiters,
police officers, school bullies who will latch
onto my accent and name me *mute*, name me *ugly*,
and *go back to your country, you Russian bitch*,
while I mutter *learn your geography, you ignorant*,
but I can't say it, though it itches, so instead I conjugate
under my breath all the ways a verb and a noun strung
together can make the world three dimensional,
can change me from a chess piece on an invisible board
of delineated spaces, to a person; how one day
the tongue that's betrayed me again and again
finds its groove, holds a word like a treble,
trembles to a different key and I'm no longer bound.

Shame

To feel guilt or disgrace, to lose esteem
or reputation, or be the unfortunate

recipient of circumstances; to be bashful,
to cover oneself; an attempt at modesty;

or surprisingly, synonymous with private parts.
It began this way: Eden, awkening to nakedness

yields the first blush, the quick assembling of leaves
a grown man and a grown woman, birds

of paradise, trepidating to re-assemble
their plucked feathers, but not in the same

configuration, for what human can remember
the garments of innocence? From there, it changed

to ignominy, humiliation, or some who coined
such a shame i.e. pity or misfortune. Though, after

the fig leaves dried and the animal skins tattered,
after the trek east and the settling, the coupling

and multiplying, the uncovering and covering,
it began to abate. New words re-formed

all things from galaxy dust to human skin,
and lovers began whispering to each other

fernsterln, German for entering through a window
and making love to your sweetheart, while her family

in the other room doesn't know. Or *silm*,
the Anglo-Saxon word for the dampness between

a woman's thighs, the same as for the shimmer
of moonlight on water.

ID

It is not so different now -- humans ided by a series of numbers more precise than the combination of vowels and consonants, that resonant music that danced on a mother's lips -- names. Then, I wrote *Maria* over and over again, her finger in the dust, a stone in the mud, tracing its lettering on her sister's arm as she held her sobbing body on the train. I was afraid I might forget, become 7 8 4 2 3 0 1. I beat my fists against my belly *I am Maria Sava*. Oh, to become the unrecognized, to have you, my childhood friend, Romanian Judas, hang a plaque from my neck, this chain of symbols. Do you know my birth date, your wedding date is there? Do you know that if you read the digits backward you'll find my sister's height from just a week ago, the jumps she can do between two coils of rope while holding her breath? It's all quantified there, the times my husband has whispered against my hip, *you're safe*, and I didn't believe him. Now worn upon my chest, later on my skin. Did we not laugh together as children before there were Roma & Romanian neighborhoods, before you were a one on the pigment scale and I a seven, *dark & good for work*, said my mother, who is lighter than me in every way, while my sister, a four, *good for marriage*. But when you hauled us on the trains, men here, women there, one hole in the floor to do the intimate business of our humanity when you left us on the fields of Transnistria, uncultivated, empty land, starved for all the body might give (my sister's remnants), I swore by all that remained holy that I would come back when you might not recognize me but for the glint in my eye, I would hold your broken body and with the knife you gave me long ago (we were just children!) carve our names into it.

Ancient Stories

in memory of the boys who died in the Belzec concentration camp

Henoch, you were one when the Germans invaded your town, and all the vigorous horses were no match for their tanks, their bayonets. You saw the streets covered in the bodies of horses; it looked as if manes were sprouting from the pavement, and some took to heaving those steaming bodies into their homes to assuage hunger and the guilt over such waste. *Why*, you asked *why is everything red? Even the sky, mama?* And what else could your Jewish mother summon but the story of the Egyptians watching their water turn to blood, their sky flower vermillion, watch their firstborns give up their ghosts and ascend, delicate threads of blood issuing from their throats where their voices used to be? She had nothing to offer you except a carmine story, except really it was darker, thicker than night, so she held you close and promised the angel of God would appear brandishing a sword, and the locusts in brown shirts covering your town would flee as if blown by breath. What you didn't say is *what good is a sword in the face of a gun? And what about the God who let his people die eaten by flies in the desert?* Henoch, before they took you to Belzec, before gas stole into your lungs quietly and kissed the breath from your body, you carved yourself a gun from a branch, you pointed it at your friends, your parents, and in commander Hafenbier fashion, you yelled "If you're a German, you're dead!" You held that stick as Moses might have held his staff, pointed toward the Egyptian priests who watched it slither into a snake three times the size of the ones they had summoned, watched that large blind body move toward them and their magical offspring, only to swallow each whole, making nothing of their power.

Seduced

Every night, father long after you quoted lines from Socrates
 your version of a bedtime story "one thing I know,
 and that is that I know nothing" I would lie quiet & awake
 waiting for your footsteps to fade my whole life I've waited
 for your shadow over me to diminish out came
 the flashlight & my book of legends not a *once upon a time* story
 but something entirely other this maiden Dorna refused
 to be wed to Trajan new emperor of my country before
 it was my country she refused to be assimilated
 into a state of longing to lose her language her tribe
 she ran for weeks across hills and mountains swam rivers
 her virgin attendants abandoned her and Trajan chased knowing
 she couldn't outrun manifest destiny much longer she ran
 to the top of our highest peak pursued by dogs men one woman
 lone the object of desire property of the new state
veni vidi vici femina she could not abandon what sputtered in her throat
 had grown strong wild what was tender shoot before
 now fully formed when she opened her strong mouth
 teeth glinting eyes lifted above that precipice of cliff and crag
 "God, do not take me from this land!" a flash & what was bone
 traveling pulse blood tide & breath suddenly mute
 Trajan embraced granite drank one trickling tear her gaze fixed
 her arms splayed out as though she held the land inside
 the dizzying sweep of prayer the stricken emperor & soldiers
 wailing "But who could ever teach a stone to speak?"

Ars Poetica

I dream of language like mathematics, precise, unchanging. For the static
cuneiform, not the branches of night and psalms sung under them,

just the function of the most exact sense, not the silence of violent
fires, not that sky of a road, nor aesthetics of sound.

I could then be practical. I could then speak of the past calmly,
“I never met my great-uncle, ill and spent in the Danube prison,”

or matter-of-factly “they tortured him by releasing starving dogs
from wire cages. They bit him again and again, his body littered

with scars.” I could tell this story like the ancient Sumerians,
with linearity and purpose, the words of my daily existence,

bread, bird, barley, water, the hand to catch the bird, to hold
the bread, to tip the water into an open mouth. Those words,

the boundary line of my thinking, uncomplicated
realities, but language now speaks the ruined *bread*

of my past, of memory like a diseased *bird*, my very name threshed
barley through the sieve of generational forgetfulness until there is no one

left to sing. Until those dead remain dead, become legend,
become blankness. Or worse, a combination of digits in a census

file, their identity on faded paper now dissolving from consciousness.
Against the current of their numbers, language grows stealthily like a green,

untamed thing: *a paradise bird unfolds its wings inside me, I tuck my skirt
between my thighs, I am water in your hands, merging, retreating, slipping.*

Time turned the pictogram *arrow* into the word *life*. We must sing
them without ceasing. We must cup our hands over our mouths

and shout their names. We must let the tattooed numbers on their wrists,
their palms, their chests turn to words. To names. To music.

My student writes a narrative of his life in Calcutta

He writes of reading Dickens. He writes
 desperate to be understood, his language, syntax,
 Victorian, stiff, and strangely beautiful.
My high school teacher thought me a simpleton. His words,
 tongueless sentinels in even rows.
 His palms held up in offering, answers spilling
 off his mind's shelves. When he says *wordage*,
 the others laugh. He reads my face, I keep it blank.

He's losing words with each new day, abandons them
 for grunts and shrugs. It's cooler that way.

And I am reminded of my father, man of letters,
 his arsenal of languages run dry before the Wal-Mart cashier,
 whose voice rose too many decibels explaining
 something about store policy. My father shrinking,
 holding onto his coupons, those life rafts of paper.

But all his negations, conjugations, explanations startled,
 scattered like starlings. To this day, I fantasize
 punching that pockmarked cashier, a teenager,
 our fistful of coins volleying like arrows
 towards his smug face, my tongue rousing
 into *vituperation, vehemence, vitriol*.

Instead, my words drifted (Judases!),
 untethered from their strings like kites. I watch
 their slow ascent and desperately I grab
 for what is left – two words,
 and while my father begs me to translate
 in that tirade of lights and people,
 all I can do is whisper, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*.

This Mystery

The father dreams of flying, though he's no angel.
An infinite loneliness, he tells his children
the necessary stories, glues wings together,
and reads the moon's face like a page,
promising when they are older they will do
the same for their children

A daughter is infinite togetherness,
uncracked glass, luminous like honey,
a migratory bird in perpetual return.

The father leaves messages for daughter
everywhere. *Dear Little Dew Drop*
on park benches and billboards,
in lunch boxes and check-out counters.
He counts the days between.
His hearts stops counting with him.

A daughter is a mystery and a shipwreck
to father. She has emptied and filled
his hands in succession. She has broken
the harness, grazed the amber light of morning.
She has dreamed of lustrous streams
returning to their source.

The father is a silent and eternal mountain. He has laughed
with his friends, half-drunk with wine and change.
He has felt the cage and beat his wings
just the same.

When he finds wild pears in the first snowfall, he pulls down branches
for his daughters to pick them. Perfect frozen globes.

See! Each one is an alphabet, a crater of longing, he says
holding out the one half-eaten by bees.

A Guide to Surviving Dislocation

Turn every bitter memory into a funny story. Begin with, *when I used to be an FOB ... (fill in the blank differently each time) I didn't own a blow drier. I didn't shave my legs. I thought Oprah was opera, and in an effort to connect talked nervously about Rigoletto for ten minutes.* Laugh along. Never mind the teasing, the glances sharp as lemon slices on the tongue, a prick that makes the eyes water. Blink it away. Never mind the waking nausea in the mornings of each first. Day of school, doctor's visit, mock congress debates, camp. Forget those very public slips into the registers of your mother language, where you become tongue-tangled, pitch-knotted, fuschia-faced. Because to you *live* will always come out as *leave*, the long vowel sounds that lilt from your tongue inserting themselves into English's plain speech. Don't let on that you think and rethink a simple sentence. You'll want your prepositions to stay and not fall out of your mouth, inserting themselves in the wrong grooves, denting your speech. When in doubt, add an *ly* to show you know the difference between adverb and adjective, because to add a syllable would be to learn that your life isn't just a series of subtractions, abstractions, disambiguations, that with each verb correctly described, your throat widens, your chest fills, the bones of your face rearrange themselves in an architecture you stop recognizing. How after you tame your hair, become fluent in *Oprah*, something more mysterious shifts, your grip on the intuitive knowledge of your birth language, the thin calligraphy of meaning that has crenelated your reality. It's a new self that balloons up from this stop bath of words, pure verb, or verve. Now, you've got to let this language into your dreams.

IV. JOUISSANCE

At the Tattoo Parlor

Some are inscribed like ancient maps of the world, *You Are Here*
 dots on the neck or thighs, representing homelands,
 while the forearm might be the location of strange, uncharted
 territories of magic and monsters. Some are virgin-skinned
 scared, flipping through books, plastic covers over photographs
 and sketches. Two girls chitter in a corner, one sighing
 "I'm a Cancer, I want to forget that, you know." The other nods
 heavily, pointing to what must be a Libra drawing, "Maybe this,
 to bring balance to the chakras." The conversation shifts to energies,
 and I stop listening, death on my mind.

Words like *metastasize*, *radiation therapy* sit heavy as fog
 on my eyelids. Through it, I look at my own sketch,
 the mythological bird or beast appears as if it is rising
 from the page, and I imagine the way it might flame
 right there on the vinyl turquoise couches of the waiting area
 startling the other customers, saving us all from our mundane
 lives. How it might flame from red to orange slowing to a simmering
 gold, to silver, to ash. And how long before it bursts again,
 color and wing and stern cry? How long before kingdom come,
 trumpet sound, bodies captured in beams of light transported upward
 by something like breath? Before the soul, all twenty-six grams of weary
 traveler, descends again into our material cell, reassembles dust
 into atomic swervings, mitosis, division and replication, into heat, energy,
 before blood travels the corridors of arteries and veins, flaring
 into a map for the body, feeding light into the cauliflower
 of the cerebrum, and what was husk is now pulsing. How long
 before our formless God grabs us (to spite gravity and death and the laws
 of thermodynamics) -- the way a lioness picks up her cub
 by the tensile skin of the neck -- and blows into our nostrils?

To Mary of Bethany, the Patron Saint of Single Women

“Everyone in me is a bird, I am beating all my wings” – Anne Sexton

We are a strange breed – birds without nests, without young to feed.
Starlings. Migratory creatures. We arc the sky in shapes of letters,

illuminate, rename this world with our strange cries, our elusive ways.
Mary, I’ve been accused of withholding my body, my soul, of sealing

myself like a tomb. I’ve been accused of wandering, of being lost.
When I turned twenty-nine, my mother asked my boyfriend *Is this it?*

Are you two settling down? I was at a different table, taking shots of Bailey’s,
the sweeter the better to drown out my father’s absence from yet another

birthday. I promised myself no one would have me, except a little here and there,
like that drop of sugar that rims the glass days after the drink is gone. I don’t see

your acts as extravagant, what they said about you as mystery, *she wastes away
for the prophet*. You poured spikenard over his hair, let it spill down his tunic,

you might have saved a few drops for his feet where you bent low and kissed
the dust, the blisters where the sandal leather rubbed them raw. This was

your only ecstasy. Why not give all that you have to the feathered one, the one
you know is leaving? Your sister might have chosen to marry, to cross the sea,

to fight winged dragons. After He ascended you wandered the desert land
of your country, fed the poor from your own hands, poring over his teachings,

waiting for His body, like your brother’s, to return in a flap of wings, a fountain
of feathers. To find you the way this hawk finds your shadow as you rest under

a jagged canopy of olive trees, as you trace in the sand an alphabet of longing,
or is it loneliness, or not that at all, but a life you chose. We both end our evenings

by a fire, you alone with the cry of jackals, me counting the seconds with precision
while my father screams on the line about how marriage is the loneliest of houses.

Teach me how to let my body sink into starlight, to feel my bones grow large,
my back crack open. To seize the sky the next morning, testing my thousand wings.

Galatea: An Awakening

Act I

It's like moonlight ransacked her skin,
 Pygmalion, feeling god-like removed
 the last marble splinters from the curve
 of her neck, beheld her in all her glory.
 She was at eye level, her gaze fixed
 him in place, and it was love at first
 sight. Pygmalion had never felt this,
 after all, *he* had made her according
 to his vision, his mind, the primitive
 longing turned virtuous by exercise
 in marble and marvel, and what the gods
 couldn't, he had done – dreamt the perfect
 woman. Friends told him there was
 no such thing. That his mind had gone
 haywire. When he began giving her gifts –
 amulet bracelets for her gracefully long
 arms reaching for him day and night,
 tunics woven with spun gold, dyed
 carmine, lapis lazuli to encrust
 her sandaled feet – they shook their heads.
 But when he began feeding her, grape
 juice staining her benignly upturned mouth,
 bread and choice meats set reverently
 in her hands, they began beseeching the gods
 on his behalf, and urged him to do the same.
 Aphrodite heard and was amused. After all,
 it was her birthday and she was the goddess
 of love and beauty, and could there be life
 without those? *and why not, why not grant
 life to a creature of stone?* and Aphrodite adorned
 herself in gossamer and jasmine, perfumed
 her neck and wrists with sea mist and went to see
 what all the fuss was about. She found
 Pygmalion running a brush over his woman's
 calcified locks. She had entered as a zephyr,
 and surrounding Pygmalion in the gust of her body
 she whispered, *kiss her*, and the sculptor-king
 not knowing what hit him pressed his lips
 to stone, full of hope and ache, and oh!
 breath met him back, beneath the skin he had
 caressed for weeks, a thin line of pulse,
 blood, sinew, bone, and she, Galatea, milky

white, as he had named her stretched and smiled.
Aphrodite stole away with a smile of her own.

Act II

There was a wedding in the presence of the befuddled
friends, and lovemaking, and a child
Pygmalion who thought the world was of his own
shaping, began the faithful work of settling
down. Until his docile, smiling wife
began to steal away at night. He found her
in the kitchens kneading bread, her face obscured
in clouds of flour. Later, when he begged *why*
she held up her fingers raw, her nails chipped
from that morning's wash, where she had beat
the cloth against the stones
she said *I wanted to know*, and there was that laughter
in her voice. From there, all hell broke loose,
she lay in the sun like the village girls until her skin
browned and her eyes turned gold; she went about
the palace barefoot, conjugating to herself noun cases,
verb declensions, she picked fruit for their table,
traveled to the Aeropagus alone. Pygmalion despaired
when there was talk of a university, of special faculties
and a soul he knew
he had been duped, the gods up to their old tricks.
Even now, the king of Cyprus is face down
on his carved marble floors, beating the stone with fists.

Pears

We wander the market stalls for something sweet,
between rows of green and ruby mangoes, figs swollen

with lust and honey. I place a handful in our basket
and sneak one in my mouth. We move to the pears,

you examine each, your hand an instrument for measuring
weight, firmness. I gravitate toward the brown and freckled,

ones where the skin is torn, the ooze of juices sticks
between the fingers. Like a child, I lick them. You tell me

lovers shouldn't eat pears. That in Chinese, the ideogram *li*
means both pear and separation, that we're risking the fates

turning against us. *What fates? And what if it's the perfect pear?*
He thinks I've said pair, but before either of us can clarify,

I've filled our basket with them: d'Anjou, Forelle, Starkrimson.
Pears to feed an army for days, bruised and soft, green

as if straight from the bloom, round and pointed, pears to fill
your empty hands, and mine. When Plutarch asked the boys

of Argos about their strength, they said they'd been nourished
on wild pears. Later we sit on the grass and you use your pocketknife

to open them, some blooming pink like a girl's mouth. You bite
those first. I think of Eve, the handing of forbidden fruit to Adam,

he accepting just to please her or, like some commentators say, afraid
of facing paradise alone. Or St. Augustine, fourteen and brash, stealing

pears with his friends, to write a treatise about them later. Such pleasure,
frenzy, and deceit! Or Erik Satie, frustrated by the critics' accusations

that his compositions were formless, wrote *Three Pieces in the Shape
of a Pear*. If we could separate time from happiness, shadow from light,

the ripe from the withered! If all of it could be this, a parallelogram of light
on the wet and fragrant grass, and you eating pears docilely out of my hand.

Origins

To think we are all here because of a woman. Inside me a child knits herself – a skull, elbows, a four-chambered heart smaller than a hummingbird’s, and I picture the hillstars and sylphs that come to drink ruby sugared water from our feeder, their wings pulsating five times a second, their hearts twice so, and my child’s is faster than that. She’s a spring, a coil of DNA that if unraveled would make the trip to the sun and back four times. Each sequence her own kind of joy danced into being. And when my husband offers me honey, I lick it from his fingers rather than the spoon. Meanwhile, she takes what she needs, my body a humming hive, she the queen, my every cell a worker, a forager, a healer. Her head weighs an ounce this week, her bones, collectively, even less. Flesh and spirit, transparent angel, so that when she stretches wings, my ribs make small cracking sighs, move out of the way. The doctor in his little shop of horrors nods *It’s all normal*. A different kind of normal than forty years ago when they strapped women down, anesthetized them in rooms that looked like slaughterhouses. Where their arms, their bodies woke to a kind of unbearable absence –that visceral plucking of a bud from a stem, and petal, seed, sap spills, it is cleaned, removed. *The body nothing but a reservoir of pain*, my husband says after our birthing class, appalled at anesthesia and hospital nurseries. How a woman might get to hold her child a few minutes before someone snatches it away for safety. Or as the pamphlets used to say, *After birthing, mothers are not to be trusted, are to be supervised for signs of post-partum insanity or grief*. Meanwhile, milk comes in, lets down, no hungry mouth to catch its spray, and I think of the myth of the origin of the Milky Way, a confused infant Hercules, Hera trying to coax milk into his mouth, an accident and the indigo sky is doused in tiny jewels spurting from divine breasts.

Orion Nebula

It is a cradle of stars, and I wonder if our own blue marble was born there from the swirling of dust and gases, a veritable cesspool of color, compression, heat, and did the Original Movers set all this in motion, as Aquinas argued. If so, did they speak, or sing? Or better yet, kneel in the soil of existence like gardeners, the stuff of dirt, slime, staining their glittering robes. They lingered for a while in Trapezium, that area of the belt where six young stars can be observed with the naked human eye.

It's the nativity all over again, infants hovered over by benevolent creatures, palms caressing, shaping, spinning, assigning gravity. And then, these same creatures take the long dark corridor that runs through the center, *the fish's mouth*, a slow departure toward the edges, lit areas we've named *wings*, and *sword*, *thrust* and *sail*, and I ask myself if we strain our vision we might catch a glimpse of them, God, through a telescope, or the tail end of his/her glory. Oh! How pronouns have failed us, and science has taken a wet rag to a filmy window, a pinhole through which light sneaks in.

Communion

My child kicks my ribs, a popcorn *pop!*
a long sigh. Inside the body's cage, pain
traverses from ligature through the hive
of nerve endings straight to the brain.
It nestles there with memories of hot bread
melting our plastic bags on our way home
from the grocery store, my mother putting
out a spread as if for a multitude, though
we only had two loaves, and a few curls
of butter, and a fig or two to spoon onto
our steaming slices. We burn our mouths
in that high of bread we swallow in chunks
on the floor of the living room, with the balcony
door thrown open, and our neighbor, Mihail,
whistling *Don Giovanni* arias while shaving
at his window. He can smell our bounty, hear
the crust's crackle on our milky white teeth
and we wave him, his wife, his children over.
He invites the kid with the lame leg who hangs
in the stairwell, going up and down, *practicing*.
Our two loaves have now turned into a thousand,
as everyone sits on the ground. Gabi, Mihail's wife
passes a flask of wine, or is it something stronger?
I am eight years old and I take a secret sip.
I know it dims the hunger, so I give it to my sister.
A few drops and something akin to happiness travels
those zig-zag pathways to the brain. *Pop!* Another
heave and my rib cage opens like the pearly gates,
my daughter so near now, pushing my heart
into my sternum, my lungs into the vertebral column,
and the chiropractor folds me over like cloth, hooking
something in here, unbuttoning something there,
the grind of bone against bone, a hymn ascending
through this column of tissue and glia cell, his fingers,
a bow to make my skeleton dance. Vibrato of hollow bone,
the dulcet sighs of marrow, those two cords of life,
mine and hers, that merge into communion.

Among the Bees

I am watching my father fumigate
the hives. At one time, he used tobacco
leaves wrapped in brown paper, now a tin
box with a cylinder attached, filled
with something sweeter, vanilla or cloves,
and *the ladies*, as he calls them, grow
quiet and slow in their hive dance, some
mid mapping their next nectar harvest,
some mid feed. Their tune changes,
the air changes, only my father becomes
more agitated. *They dream of flower fields
the way we dreamt of this country.* He gesticulates
as if from an invisible pulpit, Scriptures flying
like doves startled from the cages of the rich,
homes in which, during the week, my father
carves intricate wooden cabinets that need
many keys and once again, I am small, glazed
as he handles his next phrase like a scalpel
I don't want my daughter growing like a weed
the cut quick, painless at first, or like a Maestro
sweeps a baton and what gushes from us
is a music, hemorrhaging the way smoke pours
into my face now, as he gets close, his green locked
with mine. We are one person, one color, held
by that most violent sound, the whisper,
which ushers from him now more like a line
of melody, something about me being a doctor.
I am lulled by a future that appears and dissipates
in smoke rings, the sweetness on my tongue,
clouds of pollen on my skirt, in my lungs,
surprised by the honeyed heaviness that issues
from me, an equally deadly caress *No. No. No.*

Bless the Forgetting

When tante Nutzi calls from Romania,
 she bids me tilt this and that way
 so she can see my growing belly.
 Her hands ascend over her head, clasp
 over her heart *Binecuvanteaza, Doamne!*
bless, Lord, bless and my daughter leaps,
 this language a thread we've stitched through
 each day, woven into ropes to tie us to earth.
 But I shudder, *erasure* on my tongue, as I search
 for a simple word to end my sentence,
 something to tell her when I'm giving birth. I use
 an English one instead, my tante frowns,
 her hands separate now, she shakes a finger
 towards me, tells me I forget. Later, my husband
 lies beside me, his hands on my body, head resting
 on my hip. He asks me, *how do you say* – child, *copil*,
 skin, *piele*, breasts, *sani*, which he pronounces
 either sin or zen, and I clap even when he gets close.
 We grow quiet when he asks me that same word
 I couldn't summon for my aunt – birth, *nastere*,
 he beckons it for me from thin air. How could
 I forget my birth tongue, or the country
 in which I was birthed, this act essential to all
 crawling, standing, winged things, of which
 I consider myself the latter, the ache I feel
 when staying in one place for too long, my love
 affair with *vanish, depart*, a lust for *wandering*.
 A long time ago I asked my father if we had
 gypsy, *tsigan*, blood and he changed the subject,
 his family's ancestry accounted for all the way
 to the 14th century, the time of Stephen the Great –
 they were landowners, *Romani puri*, and I wonder
 about that word, pure, as I toss and turn, my dreams
 all in English now. Yet in this dream, my daughter
 has hair black as the wings of carrion birds, her tongue
 untangled and sharp, singing words I no longer know.
Our blood runs in many directions, I tell her, and she twirls
 and twirls her colorful skirts, her hands making magic
 shapes in air. Or are they letters she brings back?

These Letters that Are Mine

When I return to the page after months of absence
I return sheepish, afraid. It's like that lover
that I'd been dodging for a while. The one I was
supposed to call back, but for months just kept
his number in my pocket, his voice a question mark
on the answering machine. He wasn't the pushy
kind, the loud, insistent kind. The one who made me
disappear so deeply into my self, I forgot my own
name. Not him, not this – the blank expanse of the page
the possibility of truth inside each word,
yet I had no words, I had only this hand, this temple,
this lock of hair to rub between my fingers. Only
this body to offer in return for all the spaciousness,
the blankness that was so still I could almost slip through
its enclosure. No one will notice now, just like that time
I was pushed in a corner of the bathroom
and that red-haired boy who I thought was my friend
(we would often sit at the long picnic table outside our classroom
and share apple slices, daring each other to bite the core,
seeds so bitter they made our tongues curl),
but that day he had to prove he was a man,
his hands so clumsy, so hard on my newly grown breasts,
the blue fingerprints that would take weeks to dissolve
so like these words I write and erase a thousand times
just to watch them undone one by one, blue to white
because here I am not in the powerful hands
of someone else, but this page, these letters are all mine,
and I can tell this story how I wish, with blistered finger-
tips from burning other versions, (in one, the boy apologizes
pink-faced, ashamed and I push him, my arms so strong

he collapses on the classroom floor.) But his hair flames in my memory
and sets this page on fire and into ashes, those dark curls
of paper, of heat, the heat that coursed through my body
each day, as we shared a desk, our two chairs touching
the way I wanted to lock my fingers in his hair and pull until
I saw skin and he saw stars. But I sat in my desk primly,
my socks folded where the ruffle showed prettily, my pen poised
in my hand, and that acrid smell of ink, of rage staining
my vision, like a dark river running all over the desk, over his pale
elbows. I kept my face blank, I kept my lips soft, I brought
all I had to the moment of the page -- that power in my fingers to write
words, only to erase them.

Shadow

Two hummingbirds circle each other, menace
 across the ruby feeder, bills & bellies filled
 with sugared excess. They flicker jewel-like
 between maple leaves, beaks frothing.

Cicadas chirp, then scream almost, amped
 by their own transformation. Nymph
 bodies discarded for wings, their briefest
 time on earth, singing, mating, dying.

The ground is strewn with their husks,
 and I am reminded of the man who gave us
original sin, that filament that twines itself
 around the heart, the brain. It is not the demon

on the shoulder, rather the shadow within
shadow side, shadow self – is it darkness, or sin?
 Is it the lion mangling a gazelle, beautiful
 in his waiting, springing, charging? The body

a vessel of blood, bone, sinew, the body
 a well of darkness, a bowl of light & heat,
 that wild heart still pumping xylem, blood, water
 even after hunger has taken all that it could take.

We Fell into an Oceanic Story

What did you say to me then that hadn't already
been said between us, sisters who share everything

including a uterine house, a hollow bubble of blood
and flesh? If they took us apart, cell by cell,

we even make (are) similar mitochondria, the energy
that's powered the life our parents grew between them,

of distance even differential equations cannot articulate,
the sum total of tangled bed sheets and four bodies in repose.

The DNA hive we built, a collapsible galaxy. Sister,
do you know inside me orbit planets only you can name?

Do you still say that I hold your life in my open palm,
a blood-veined orchid, that I close my hands

too often, hide them behind my back, make you guess
where, in which one, that you never know where

my next hare-brained idea would take me and your life with me.
You called me an ocean: I take and don't give back,

but, sister, I handed you your life, the way waters yield
epistles in bottles, or the bodies of anemones. It wasn't me,

the undertow of our childhood, the quiet violence inside those walls,
the blue that bloomed beneath our pink skin.

It wasn't me that caused the earth distend
beneath our father's feet. It wasn't the election year,

it wasn't the black president. Deeper voices rose
inside our screens, inside our very skin. They swelled,

and I went where their din was strongest, and you stayed –
you stayed inside the shell, the familial womb,

cocooned inside one story, the same you tell yourself even now.
I am passing through, beeswax to block the retelling,

tied to a white slip of mast against a darkening sky.

Homesickness

There is a German word for homesickness, *fernweh*, but it is not what you might think, meaning some place already familiar or beloved. This is the odd man out – that inexplicable longing for a place you've never been, though in your bones you feel its song. There were men who saved others from drowning, from gassing, from what famine does to the body. In their little black books, they kept the pages blank; they produced travel documents from thin air, they loaded Gypsies and Jews into trains, and barked that the orders had changed. They made up names of imaginary camps, clinics. Their own bodies became the borders that others crossed, became soil in which the lives of children sprang deep roots. Every day they set their clocks for resurrection. Every day they knew they were ghosts bound for paradise.

EPILOGUE

Lullaby for the Old Country

after Adam Zagajewski

No rest, not tonight. The moon guards you stiffly,
pale fingers reaching through your charred land.

No dreams, not tonight. Your people are merchants
of sorrows, who trade their dignity for bread. You have
given them the parched soil of your body.

No tonight. A tyrant writes the rest
of your days in runny ink. Ulysses at the gates
of Hell wrestling winged spirits, Tiresias late
as in every re-telling.

Memory is black horses, ordered by Stalin
to be fed to the Poles, loaded in the trains,
stumbling through silvered ruins.
How unlikely its sublime survival!

You are at a crossroads of trade routes,
your only guardians, the slipping arc
of daylight and the dissenting pamphlet.

Memory opens and closes – the revolving door
of a wound, of happiness.

No gentleness in the way night reaches for you.
No lover's warm flesh to write its consolation next to yours.
Your sorrow echoes open fists, incidental blossoms.

No enchantment tonight, the stars are swallowed
by the sky's savage throat. He won't exchange
his addendums for the open vowels of your lips.

There is no late feast, just history's dust & painful swallow.
Even the promise of time has left you. And yet, your tongue
grows slow and thick with joy. Your haunting music soars.

Draw ashes over you like a thick blanket,
those lost will fall like snow, will speak the language
of birds in sycamore trees, where the world's smallest
stars hang benignly from the highest branches.

Cover your chest with leaves, caravans will depart soon,
words will fade in the Milky Way's waist,
Das Kapital will quench your hunger.

Think on such things through the long night,
dream with your eyes fixed on the horizon's bloodline,
and watch the injured light wrap its flesh
around what's left of the world.