

Italian Suit

Where is it now? that purple suit she found
in a storefront along the lane
to Santa Maria in Trastevere,
the suit my mother visited each day,
until, at last, she splurged, bringing it
back with her over the ocean
royal as Mrs. Lowell's coffin.
And surely she wore it
a few times before it would hang
bodiless, unoccasioned in her closet—
the sharp lines the flair
loud for Birmingham or Atlanta.
—No, she wore it, I remember,
her last Easter at my cousin's,
blazing betrayed because she'd only come
out of propriety, because I said I would,—
but when I finally turned up,
booze-puffy and twenty, she was through.
So I made my Bloody and said fine,
you want to be like that.

Stranded there, was she thinking of Italy,
the apse's mosaic
we stood beneath with our cokes
burning down our throats,
Jesus abstract and pitiless,
his gold book? Where is the suit
that crossed the ocean, was worn and abandoned
by her body? Off what sharp shoulders,
in which consignment shop,
pressed between dull powers,
what hidden glory?

Enrichment

I twist the bright yarns twined up my skinny arms
like Swatch watches or Viking bands, as if by sheer
accrual I can measure up. Weren't they called
friendship bracelets? The Test Administrator
has no face I can remember. Even as I'm charmed,
I distrust his measured encouragement
about the situation with the fulcrum (which he explains
away) and the string of numbers he wants to see
if I can repeat, and then, why not, repeat them backwards,
and other puzzles he pretends I'm equal to,
even as he notes that I am not, notes the sham,
the shame no ornament can hide: that I do not
particularly excel at solving problems,
but only, it would seem, at causing them,
and that my fate will be to only marginally contribute
to future profits, and that if I am gifted,
it's with gifts I've given myself, or found, or stolen,
and woven about me like a magpie, or a prophet.

Emily Dickinson (303)

The Soul selects her own Society —
Then — shuts the Door —
To her divine Majority —
Present no more —

Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing —
At her low Gate —
Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat —

I've known her — from an ample nation —
Choose One —
Then — close the Valves of her attention —
Like Stone —

The Alabama Theater

Over Big Bertha, Birmingham's Wurlitzer,
worth more than the ornate, smoke-stained building
it was a kind of tiered model of, my mother

read me the title cards I was too young for.
I tried to follow behind the mirror where the phantom
took the girl—behind the mask, behind the cards

and silence, beneath the Paris Opera House
and the production of *Faust*, to where the phantom,
the Spirit of Music, like the haint left in the house

at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, played the organ.
I understood she was divided, an understudy.
That she had no choice between men, between marriage

and a career, an inner darkness
that would never leave her, and a white veneer.
On the other side of me, my father explained

how the phantom could breathe through his reed
in the secret waters of the Seine.
We were looking in a mirror, a crowd watching a crowd

in the show watch a show in a silent movie
from sixty years before, when downtown wasn't dead,
but zoned, and the new movie palace brought vaudeville

and pageants and the silent flick to a people
desperate among the faux opera trappings not to feel
common. After the empires and opera,

but before the Depression and television
and the flight of tax dollars and highways, they listened
to the same four-manual organ and saw themselves

in the mob at the end chasing the phantom
like a janitor out of the cellar with torches.
"Feast your eyes! glut your soul!" my mother whispered.

Björklunden

The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir
—Song of Songs

The name translates to birch grove, though cedars,
ropey, creaking, growing right up to the water,
predominate, clinging tight
to rocks that come up with them.
Hearty but short-lived,
what birches there are are bare,
peach-tinged or beige against the snow.
A clutch of four outside my window wag
their tatters, dark eyes unblinking,
watching for the fortunate isles.

In Door County it's hard
not to think of an open door.

Lakeside, the cobbles' gray clatter.
A wing's feathers and bones
look mown in their wet arrangement,
three quills loosed suggestively from their row.
The skull's cocked over to the side
(lacunae that were the eyes),
vertebrae twisting after it
like tiny, articulated anvils.
The breastbone's arch, the delicate jaw tines
spongiform behind the beak, chipped,
bleached, the keratin eaten away.
Everywhere the cedar needles'
little blood-brown chicken feet.
A wisp of feather combed over the greening pate.

In Door County it's hard not to think
of a door opening.

Long and low, the meltwater waves
sluice through ankle-deep ice that seems
dumped out from champagne buckets.
Long and low and gray-green (perhaps the tide is coming in),
like beater bars pushing back the weft,
they slap back low beneath the shelf,
touching the hem and clearing out,
running blind fingers over the bedrock's pitted braille.

in memory of Claudia Emerson

Northern Gannet

Provincetown, MA

One great wing, splayed
as if for a midair maneuver,
or rowing into the depths,
was festooned with seaweed,
cassette tape unwound.
Its masked eyes and eye-
lined features gave it a mystic
and at once almost muppetish look.
Overlooking the beak,
I thought it might be an osprey.
I'd seen gannets dive
(not knowing the name)
a hundred yards out.
On YouTube they arrow-shower,
bullet-trailing sixty feet deep
when sardines sound.
Its soft-toned, almost haloish
cantaloupe head feathers
were faded, mussed.
The sun was setting. That far down,
the rentals were boarded up:
the Crow's Nest, the Double Dip.
*The gannet's apartment
is on the side of a cliff.
His neighbors live all around him.*
The tide peeled back, as if
in a reverential withdrawal
before the wind. Towards town,
picture windows lit up
wood beams, hanging pots.
Winda, I wrote as a child,
sounding it out the way
my mother said it.
Only later, with the sun down,
winding the rich, quiet
streets (she liked it better
where people were—even just,
like an edge of moon,
looking in) did I think of her
crumpled body I refused
to see once there was nothing
more the doctors could do.

I told myself she wouldn't have
wanted me to, as she hadn't
wanted me to call an ambulance,
hadn't wanted to make a fuss.
Call it closure, then,
when the gannet narrows
its area of impact behind
the spear point of its beak,
when I cinched my jacket,
and feeling for my gloves and hat,
just to know they were there,
owned the grateful echo
of my boots, the harborside light
that would hold another minute.

I'm Practicing Dance Moves

I'm practicing dance moves in the hallway
of Emory University hospital, Radiation Wing,
not that I have cancer, that I know of,
I just work here. I'm twenty-four, hung-over,
a secretary imagining my dance instructor,
Victor, at the studio mirror. I'm practicing
leading with my left, rocking fore and aft,
and off the hip, pulling in a twist
like I did diving as a kid.
Back here they haven't mopped yet,
I steady my spot on the wall,
a radiation sign's yellow and black relief.
A half-life below, the cyclotron spins
sugar to an unstable valence—
change, which, though you can't
pinpoint it, pinpoints change.
This being research, I'm mostly alone,
clapping the soft three on four, though one
or two doctors must have seen me swivel.
My mother, who got me this job, is a year
dead, I am as one who raises his forehead
from the bat-end of grief and lunges off.
In sympathy, my roommates brought me out
to Latin night, one brought Victor home.
His heels scored the kitchen floor with spirals
I walked like a pilgrim in the morning.
One hand raised for your hand,
the other reaching for your shoulder-blade,
I open out and leading you across
my body, turn and follow, turning you.

Door to Remain

Whidbey Island, WA

A shipment of mist is coming in from Japan,
rain ground to grist, blotting out the mountains,
lightning pushing pins into a pincushion.
An outlet to open ocean has warped the windward firs,
wind barreling unobstructed down the strait,
blindsiding the island as if the Sound's
Eustachian tube were stuck open, as in the ear
of an anorexic tortured by the white noise between worlds,
inner and outer. This door to remain unlocked
during business hours, signs on the mainland read.
God's tenseless infinitive, wielded as imperative.

Shades Creek, Panther Sighting

All the way to the doctor I kept watch,
not saying anything. When she went in
(I knew it was about her unhappiness),
I stood outside the handsome doctor's door
at the end of a narrow hallway looking out
the south wall of windows where a creek
flashed in the thicket, a bend of sand.
I imagined its ragged breathing, visible,
though it was summer, in the damp
of some ravine. The lavender carpet
had faded in the sun. There was a painting
(a soupy abstract), a potted tree,
and I was a bird perched there, listening.
The silence outside the door was enormous.
She'd said, sure, go play in the creek, seeing
that I was thinking there might be tracks.
I said I would but stayed there by the door,
mortified, red splotches printing my neck.
Mostly clay, the sand turned red. The creek
turned back beneath the street and ran
on in my mind, over the waterwheel,
a slit between fairways hardly noticed
tamped-down gray school mornings
getting whipped around those hills,
houses jutting and rolling along the ridge.

Venus in Transit

Pearl month, midsummer, the north inclines
unto its star. Sugars in the peach
are knit in self-forgetful concentration.
The estrogen molecule sails through the blood,
shaped, in the *Scientific American*,
like Botticelli's shell. At the top of the stairwell
to the observatory, a collie's sprawled
under a table, out of the dome's
searching slat of sun—*For to withstand
her look I am not able* goes the old poem.
You stand on a crate, looking not up,
but down into the eyepiece. The simmering
disc is the sun. You're looking for a kernel
intervening, Lucifer wending
among the worlds, a merchant-adventurer
flagged, for the balance of six hours
out of hundreds of years, in the doldrums.
Morning star and evening, spotted now
in the middle of the year, of day, day's dark
roving pupil, no star, demoted to the wanderer
you are, spot of time, spot on the liver or lungs.

Across the Street

I ran across the street, I didn't know any better.
Ran out in the street, I didn't know no better.
I just knew a woman was there, though I'd never met her.

She sat me in her parlor, distracted me with trinkets,
milky glass birds and fish, distracting trinkets.
She said my mother would be fine, but did she think it?

The world was a blur of crystal wings and fins.
My tears were casked in crystal, wings and fins.
She was the first of many lady-friends.

The tree shadows shortened, she brought me a drink of water.
Morning matured, she brought me a glass of water.
I drank it so fast, she went and brought another.

I kept looking out the window, she didn't ask me what for.
I watched out that window, she didn't ask what for.
The seconds broke off and lay there on the floor.

I imagined my mother's route, as far as I could.
Her long morning walk, followed as far as I could.
Nothing I could do would do any good.

Suffer the little children, and forbid them not.
Christ said suffer the little children, and forbid them not.
Said love thy neighbor, sometimes she's all you got.

Anesthesia Awareness

three times cut open: four items removed
a boy, then twins: a girl and boy, then
a length of intestine: three separate
procedures: in one of them rendered
merely still save for her toes: which she
could wiggle and did: it's going on
twenty years she's been gone: how she took it
how a woman is: dismissed: that no
one remembers: which it was

Morro Bay

—for Chamberlain

I keep writing to people that the harbor
could be Ptown, except the boomers
are straight, except for the iconic
rock, sea otters, mountains.
Brown pelicans instead of white.
What look like lymph nodes
keep the kelp close to the light,
where you can see their luxurious
slow-whipping tails. I'm out here
visiting my twin. She was right thinking
I'd like it: the foggy hill-and-harbor
and little 60s flat-topped rental's cross of low
cinder block walls and gratuitous redwood.
I'm watching her scroll the digital controls
of a dozen school buildings—
kilowatt hours, temperature setpoints,
little HVAC gif blades blink-spinning.
She's getting highschoolers involved
in reducing their school's footprint,
food and water waste, intent
on turning no one with interest away.
She's always been preternaturally sensitive
to issues of fairness and access. She's always been
environmentally sensitive—playing alone
in the woods, reading, honing her vision.
She jumps on a call with corporate bosses
gone nonprofit, dialed in
with a swagger I savor.
Who isn't afraid, like me,
of the big picture, like looking underwater
at the deep-end in Memaw's pool, or being afraid
doesn't prevent her, which is being brave—
facing west, facing waste,
facing fire, desert, race.
She says I'm making her sound boring!
I can't get her to believe my admiration
isn't condescension, a humble brag
that her work is beneath mine.
—*Beyond* is more like it,
I'm barricaded behind the spit,
rose hips blooming, the path worn down
to neck level in the swale, turning back
like Orpheus instead of looking ahead,

subject to fog...I try to explain
the Marianne Moore line about "Man
looking into the sea," looking into the sea.
Once when she visited me on the cape,
I put on an accidentally
nested pair of contacts and wore
for a moment, for a moment
saw through both. Like realizing
there's a second line of mountains,
or a black-out shade behind the see-through one.
All that militated against us,
the nightmares where she refuses me help—
I've thought of every interpretation except
how much I need her. *This active geological
beach area*, our short-term rental permit reads,
is subject to swift and quiet collapse.
My insistent sister, hope is the thing
with bladders, with anchors, tethers,
bilious colors.