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The Architecture of Sex

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The Architecture of Sex

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abstract

This is a collection of poems.
The waves of death swirled about me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
—II Samuel 22:5
I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
—T. S. Eliot, “Journey of the Magi”
MARY SPEAKS TO JOSEPH

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.
—Luke 1:38

The baby woke up giggling, levitated, a column of blue air curling about him.
From where I slept, at the foot of your bed
I watched him open out like a red carnation
into his thirst and vinegar, the sleepers around him
when his sweat mingled with blood—
he is awake. There before me the plastic crusade, his silence in the courtroom—
all in the blue air around him, electrified.
He is still. And he withered—a shrub, into the dust of oldness, skin crumpling, shrinking,
until he was there again, our son, the shepherd to our meandering flock, dropping to the cradle like a leaf.

I am estranged from him, the flush of my womb—

I thought, His blood rushes, forces
through the gumball heart, his red a thrashing current, tearing through the little chest,
shuddering him, spasms banging like doll-sized earthquakes, bouncing off his tiny ribs—
I thought, We’ve been sent a waiting explosion—
he ticks like a bomb—Can you hear it?
The heartbeat like a timer, twig, twig—

Joseph, you’ve begun to glow—
like the angel—Fear not, virgin
for you will be overshadowed—
sighing out your prayers like smoke from a candle doused.

Oh Joseph, Joseph,
I’ve noticed now how like a corpse you slumber—how like a plum plucked from the branch,
how sour and how syrup like a plum
how red your flesh and how sugared—
Twig, echo—
Joseph, do you feel the evening?
The sun heaving, the clouds falling jagged
to the east like flaming swords
turning every way—the magenta of sunset,
the last flicker of green on the trees
before the black, the voice of charmers,
charming—the darkness
a canopy crawling above our garden—

He would have seen his childhood
vanish in the morning, his blossom
collapsing to a vine, contracting to a bud—
We would have seen his blood, Joseph.
Why let it linger, like the taste of meat?
The little Isaac, I’ve forfeited him as the ram
on the altars I’ve cultivated,
his body a dying plant—

In Isaac shall the seed
drop—I’ve learned how like a plum
is sleep, how moist and fleshy—
how it is like slicing through leather
to arrive at, how red is the flesh
and how syrup.

I am melted away as waters—
the poison like the poison
of a serpent.

I’m by your side now, Joseph,
I’m kissing your eyelids
and pressing my hand into the red
of your chest and falling oh,
my head at your shoulder
and falling—how like a plum
is sleep, how ripe, how tender—
And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.
—Luke 2:7

And finally silence. The female gasped her last and slumped on the feed, asleep.

Those groans...Unearthly, deep from the womb so filled with blood, saliva; she squealed and screamed.

The baby blurted out of her with so much sweat and fire, splashes of red and white.

He surfaced nearly purple, choking on the very air, gasping, veins in his neck exploding, the eyes rolled back. I forget now how it went—

was he born without his breath, or we?

She quivered, shrieked at the rope that tied them and the male, his hands at his ears roared, flying at her, seized the cord and ripped it apart. The female hurtled, hit the ground—a wild force—

folding into herself, a dead spider. The male had moaned and howled, eyes fixed on her vomiting mouth—the tumor in his throat writhing, he bellowed, ramming his temples, pressing in with his quaking hands. In awe we watched, unbreathing, dumb...Still.

And when she finally collapsed, the noise hacked off, he also fell—head hitting dirt and straw. Then was there silence. The quiet scattered through the mud, out the night, into the earth into, at last, our own ears. The infant would not bleat—we listened for his breath and did not hear it. But we saw the eyes, turning shaking—tears, a slow trickle, infinite drip on the sludge below him. What could we do?

Our tongues were dry, our hooves heavy.
The babe stirred, the wrists wriggled, the ankles flapped. And the head circled—

mouth agape, from mother to father, to the magi, the shepherds, to us—his face swathed in the countenance of the drowning. His tongue fashioned words but we could not perceive them.

We watched him writhe, his tiny bones and blood submerging in the burgundy wet soil. The earth wrapped around him, began to swallow this house of ours, the house we built, a temple of goats.
SHEPHERDS

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.
—–Luke 2:8

near Bethlehem the fire
hit our faces we huddled
like a knot the damp light
lifting into our eyelids
we breathed the smoke
swarming and watched
the gray vapor our breath
stared at the convulsions
of the flames cower flinch

in the orangepink streetlight I sway
under a black sky a smoke haze ascends
slumps, gray film rolling across my eyeballs

I twinged to be unburned
to have trickled the ash
water from wineskins
dribbled it like urine, but
remembered the nights we had
drunk, our bodies seeping
lower into the leaves
around us, the decay
we tossed in by handfuls

I stoop in the driveway, one car
the empty house yawning black,
one tan leaf blown somehow near me

I watched your throat
when the angels alit
up on our mountain
their strong feet an earthquake
a soft vee gold plaited
through their chests
the sheep ran I watched
you swallow, your fear
burning me hot red

the leaf crunches in my hand, I gulp
the feel of it around the root of my tongue
my palm chewing it dry brown to grit

we lurched forward
the angels charged us
shouting, I seized
your hand felt how dry
and warm we ran
the sheep left to thirst
alone, my thighs singed
as we raced down weeds
the terror of angels
I am flush with your memory the smoke
kisses the tiny geometry of my knuckles
my skin fills with ashes, your sighing breath
we hurried for shelter
I pressed my head against
my shoulder I pressed
my hand against my ear
the clamor angel voices
I wailed we ran hands clutching
found the manger
the eastern princes
bowing we tumbled inside
in the dark house I clasp my triceps
thoughts of your arms I feel how cold it is
here, you allowed then pushed me off
I guzzled air, huffing
on hands and knees
heard the roar an infant
on fire your body tightened
pressed your lips shut
around us crackling hay
dry cattle feed I grabbed
a piece gripped it in my palm
ground it in my hand
the rattle of the dryer my pajamas spin
timed dry high heat in minutes I will pull them
out they will be to me warmth
the little thing scorched
the air sweltered, free of you
my stomach boiled with ache
I saw your eyes the baby
wrapped around them
like a blanket you crawled
to him through smoke
the manger fire singed
everyone pulling in slowly
my eyes have filled with smoke
and hurt my bed hums my name I wait my pajamas
heating I am tearing them from your smell
the flames the baby
seared the air set smoldering
the hay around everyone
inching forward the parents
reached their hands they glowed
nodded their heavy heads
the world twisted inward
to fire to rest the goats
the walls yielded to the baby

sleep waits like a dry warm leaf on my bed but
I must cut away your name my eyes thicken but
I must finish I must kill you off

the ground moved
a slow swirl the light
swelled up I stood I faltered
where can I run? in the depths
he is there, burning
and stealing you out
scalding your memory out
from my body my body
is the memory of ashes
SIMEON

*And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;*

—Luke 2:34

Bring him sticks, Mary, wood and nails, and let him hammer together a sword. His forearms may be fat with birth, but they can pound and shape. He will make a weapon as sharp as iron; bring him branches and spikes.

The baby edges to them like a claw, the wells of his round eyes rippling. Your chest pulls in, doesn’t it. *Knife.* Your son scrapes the limbs with his fingernails and pushes in those metal thorns. He swerves it with quaking knuckles.

I will lay down my cane to him—he can strike it into a spear, and tie the nails to the end of it. Mary, I will no longer lean on my staff, I will fall, stomach forward splashing, onto that wood dagger. Let my blood pool around your feet and paint your toes—

This, Mary, this! Remember that you sliced your index finger open when you crawled your hands over the belly—they were the sharps of his teeth, Mary, and the razor eyelashes. I leak out of the earth.

I will twitch this sword from out of my body and shatter it through the stone steps of the altar and nail him to it, and gore his side and tap barbs into his skull, and tremor with a last giggle. Mary, I warn you, sink him under deep mud and run fast away.
HEROD’S VISION

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.
—Matthew 2:7

after Guernica

the angel dove in, his eyes
flung together, squint—*strabismus*,
*excelsis*—the mouth stricken,
skin grown over the open gape,
his tongue muffled—(*I am Gabriel,*
*that stand—*)

(lift up your eyes)

(here in Bethlehem
a dazed bull, two-horned
and his screeching horse
smashing—here are the four winds
cluttering the bodies
of the manger, blasting
the horse’s legs
apart— the hay whips
a pentagram on whose dead palm,
it has courséd into the horse’s
tongue—his belly
—“trodden under foot? And he said
unto me, Unto two thousand
and three hundred days; then
shall the sanctuary be cleansed”)

and light! his flying arm
has a kerosene lantern, the fingers
mashed awkward around it.

the innkeeper’s wife trudged,
the arthritic knee dragging, the spine
folded over, a fibromyalgiac bow,
naked, through the door.
a shepherd’s robe falls
from his shoulders, he flings up
his arms, fingers wide—*glorifying
and praising*—as if stretched
on a rack.
EXALT

Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib?
—Job 39:9

Terror spread through the night air like thorns blooming, even the dirt became sharp. I sped, my gallop jagged on the hills near Bethlehem. lightning hit the earth like daggers toward Rama—there sliced into my ears the bellow—wailing, the screams of mothers scraping deep into the red evening, the clouds painted with some omen of blood.

Inside the manger, the storm roiling above our heads, the child disgorged his shrieks, the drained limbs thrashing, his fingers stretched upward, past the ceiling and the thunder that called like a moaning father. All around the howling—an alto’s voice shattered labor engulfed me, this son slouched in me like a basin of aching of gore—my horn quivered.

The magi knelt, their bodies jerking as if a hand forced them down. Their heads shuddered. Now my abdomen jittering—the rain had crawled into all our bodies and infested: the sheep bleated wildly, one of the puling donkeys fell dead. My horn throbbed—both my boys have fainted, they shudder with their eyes open, drooling.
The warriors surround our city,
their horses hurtling through a pit.
I hear the rush of their swords
through small bones. The shepherds
have poured in, shouting.
The convulsing child, waves of pain—
I must bow to him
bow my head again
and bow, and bow my head
again, and again, and again
siren
STILL LIFE WITH RED FRUIT

_With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him._
——Proverbs 7:21

Within the spasm of the second hand
    I could rush to your puffed chest and rip it apart
with my sharp teeth, and gnaw
on the bones of your ribcage holding your heart
    like a plum between long white fingers.

I could wrench open those ribs
and plunge my mouth in like a child splashing
    for the stem of an apple, I could find
the aorta with my teeth and churn my laughter
    to fill my stomach. My molars
could crunch into it, past the vinegar
    of the thin rind, I could rupture
the flesh from the pit, and swallow each piece
    like a fresh strawberry swathed
in pancake syrup. My bowled tongue
could saturate itself in the citric rust of your blood
    and the last chunk could slither across
the shaking roof of my mouth,
slide down the throat, all red warmth.
I could lick my dripping wrists up to my palms.

    Within one twitch of the clock
I could hurdle off this sofa and crash
and tear at you. I could devour you completely.
    I want the trickle of you in my belly.
I want those red smirking lips.
SONG OF SOLOMON

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
—Matthew 6:28b-29

What, should I force my hands on your chest?
Should I press my palms against your neck
like a potter’s clay on the spinning wheel?

You turn like a world among stars: pucker
vomit, lick again, until slick and smooth,
a skin-colored vase, already kissed with lilies
their stems soaking in the waters of your stomach.

Even to travel there, through your esophagus
like a pioneer in the new galaxies, to your stomach
and small intestines; I should be like a sweet pastry
sugar melting in your mouth and bitten again
and again, gnawed upon by the mystery of your canines
the galaxies in your fingerprints; to be eaten

I should be like a robed flower scenting the wind
licking the air, my tongue waving in the breezes
the smell of lilies somersaulting in the afternoon
like a wheel spinning toward the nape of your neck

turning, circling your head, I am a vacuum to the air
siphoning it in until only I remain around you, like hands
forced against your chest. I am sugared air
pressing my fingers like roots in the soil of your chest
to be planted there among the stars. Will you accept
the offering? breathe me in and guide me through
and through your lungs, your veins, your capillaries

into your fingers? will you reach your hands
to the pastry box, undo the ribbon and pick me out
press me against your lips and open your mouth

like a vacuum? and will I offer?
FLATBED

Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning: let us solace ourselves with loves.
—-Proverbs 7:18

The copy machine is spending my money
like one of those women with miniskirts
who know they’ve got me by the umbilical cord.

It’s saying, “We’ll do things my way,”
as its neon lights flash up and down;
Broadway, and fifth, everything I love about Vegas.

Shall I pay you with the dirtied paper?
The wrong-sized sheets
you rolled out from your bowels?

Your makeup’s too dark here;
you’re covering everything
with fishnet stockings, smeared mascara.

You double-sided paper whore,
you’ll end up spitting out my sonnet
to the next guy in line, charging him the same 8 cents.
WOMAN TO MAN

There is the rattle of the stone heart against bone
when I clutch at his body, wrapping myself around
like strips of cold cloth—there is the clatter
of ice against ice stone. I am cold, too
when I touch him, ripple my fingers along his side.

—there is the frost, his voice—the freezing needles
fingering the side of my neck, his lips an electric ice
my body jolting to stillness, rime—mr. jangles, clank
and clink flicker glide through like an eel
in a frozen lake, jangling by and shattering out—

White winter shivers us, the arctic chill winding
whorling around, a tornado—I remember the blue flames
we lit, I can see them, miles in the distance, miles across
the ice floor, jingling steadily away, little bells
that fizz in the folds of the brain, glacier drops.

—cover me a cold quilt, quiver your hand
about my jaw, we blanket each other in snow
and ice, fracture, chinks fissures snapping our skin
in splinters, our pieces crackling to the ground,
in the morning everything buried, except stone—
trembling stone
core of worms, flies
maggots, whore—
sitting on the swivel chair
his stomach spinning  maggot
the rocks of his thighs melt
a cat screeches in the street
in the black orange-lit
black.  whore—seven demons
crouch around a corner,
seven clawtips light-scraping
his naked hip.  chants.

hilt fizz hush hot slough luss
—maggot.  a fly shizzes,
lands, legs wiping together,
on his tongue.  whore.

his room fills with buzzing
as if a giant mouth
dribbles soda to the floor
a falls of syrup fizzing
maggot.  the aorta blood
bathing fly-worms.  night
like a wet black marshmallow
slides, smears across
the window-screen, the rub
of it a small siren.  whore.
LULLABY THROUGH SUTURED LIPS

The fetus sewed itself together with a wooden needle and burlap thread. Limb to hip, wrist to fatty forearm, eyeball to eyelid. The larynx had to be swallowed, then the throat and burgundy tongue, and at last there was a whimper, then a snigger, a giggle, an opening of the chubby jaw, the chops.

The fetus went shopping at the supermarket, squeezed the nectarines and thumped the cantaloupes, always thinking about the woman, her deflating stomach, her womb like the center of a coconut.

The fetus relaxed the grocery bags on the counter as if they were newborn, found the woman’s feet encased in green, bowled itself in her lap.

The fetus turned to blood and trickled, dribbled down the belly, the legs, the chair, the shoes. There wasn’t any woman, no fetus neither. Only a green slipper with red sap.
A WITCH CAUTIONS

\[\textit{thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and he will tell thee what thou shalt do.}\]
—Ruth 3:4b

You shall be to him a blanket, a laver into which to drop his swelling ankles his mud-sweat breaking in at you—

Ruth, you will be to him a footstool of whom he will say, Swear not by her but by the big throne in which I sit.

You will wash the toes with your hair and when he hurls you into the gray dawn you will find nothing but the dirt flood

and turn back to him, he who sent you. And should you, backing up and bending to the fiery brass angel ahead, crush

his foot against a wall, he will thrash and who will raise your voice from out the dark animal recesses your throat?

You will paint your face and dream out of the window, and he will tread over you, sprinkling your blood

on the walls of your house, singing through calm reeds, Throw her down. Lay with him, Ruth, uncover you.
Rain taps against my roof
splashes into puddles near the window—
yet. The water will not slither into the room
lick my eyelids, splash my throat.
The bed is dry, the darkness arid
and my tongue, a desert
fuses to the roof and jaw.
You are my water, the rain drizzling
above my ears, the seconds we spend
like tiny taps on a long-closed door
and the calm that follows.
the architecture of sex

So Gad came to David, and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Choose thee

—-I Chronicles 21:11
I.

Viscid water fills the orchestra in silence
bleeding in through the fissures of stone
beneath our toes. The sounds change
through the murk liquid, thick as saliva
and crawling—the chorus shrieks, rats,
our feet and fingers tick, a tiny clatter
of cockroaches trickling in. Swamp swallows
the players, envelops them in grease,
embryonic fluid, the sap of birth
hazes over eyes, slurs about
in slimy currents. A bubble from the nose
halts, stagnant where it emerged. The dizzy
hush of muted notes—and the hooves of goats—

a black crumb flicked off a t shirt—red, and tight—
the soft dents like bruises on a pear, where his shirt
presses against the areolae. *ekkaio*. I exhale his name
and coldness touches its fingers on the left and right
ventricles of my heart I breathe in the cold—I’ll tell you.
he chews, his shaved jaw back and forth, a saw
for scraping, I could bleed my cold tongue over it,
*I’ll tell you, about the swamp*. the room fills
with sharpness the weight of snow rushes heavy
on my throat, constricting. I feel the thornbush crawling
as it grows, its roots firm in my armpit. *It’s cancer.*
I’ve decided to lie.

I will fall now and fall into the murk water
the place of water-flies and weevils, the brackish grease
of the swamp, the olive grease like grease of fishes—
*the flood strikes the belly* heaves itself
through the legs through the hollows of the ribs *darkness*
*rushes between our stones* the dead living liquid
fingered, forced into a pulse of mourning, a howl
from the depths and a moaning *the current*
*thrusts warm through the loins* the current is red
a red knife blade in the olive flow the stagnant olive pools
eddying slow with the stirring of maggots
we are carried by the fluid the surging
of our own bodies lashing, epileptic, the one called
sickness scraping his stomach with a dagger,
and the others, Quick little splinters of plague
sweating out their bitter heat, vomiting their names
into the dark water, lines of white flung through it
like veins, liquid lines motionless in the thick
slime, the one called sword panting in the water
his hand clutching a piece of torn flesh—
and the swamp swaying, swaying, O so deep
so fathomlessly black and spurring suddenly up

White marble tiles like frost
on the naked feet. Mirrors
without walls. Mentor
swoops
her arms and thighs, swirls the air.
“It helps if you close your eyes.”
I close them. I distinguish
swamp.

She lilts. “You’re wading in slime,
olive water, you’re plodding through
and stirring up those seafloor feelings:
the screams and arrows, the lips licking
the mutters, the sweat, the whimpers.”
I whimper, I sweat, I lick
lips—

Mentor summons pulse to fingertips
my blood scuttles to her like a crab.
She is a waterfall, smooth
and chilled,
her chest and legs—waves ebbing
and flowing as she resounds
she hums and purrs, she sings
and chants.

“Can you taste it? Broken glass.
The heaving the rhythm the throb
ice chips on the tongue. The
throat
a slough trickling, dripping
down, lower down to the belly—"
   My stomach boils, it quakes
   it mires, it fills with murmuring
bile—

orexis watch your hand against
his door orexis thus your palm
on pressed the planks thus
breathing a soft air just outside
on a porch of rotted wood—
wind on you when you run
away but orexis stands thus
II.

tragoidia. Yessir, it’s a house of flies, the black air humming with the wings and fleshy black bodies of flies.

You’ll see it, when they line up body on body just so, a gap between them, the light beyond the black whirring ceiling

before the eclipse of wings eats away, the black droning swallowing, devouring.

it is a vine reaching thorn by thorn into the crevices of muscles, the groin, the abdomen, eventually to the forearms, the fingers chipping at each other, thumb to thumb clicking. I have cancer. I have cancer. and his mouth turns, in a wipe, to stone, his brown-spotted eyes still, grape-green. he is aged bronze, the skin of his cheekbones and forehead eaten with acid, rotted, cratered, flaked away and a rectangle carved in the right neck flexor, sterno— he dissolves into a black bronze night, blurs through veils of dark maroon, or the fog paints him for a moment, the solid ghost blue of the deep.

and wind is a broken linnet spinning, a ripple in brine water, brown frond dropping from a palm tree, horseflies blinking, buzzing wind recoils from the swamp it is the hurricane eye, of liquid, the deep black, the salt mire of it covering us, hurling its olive green over us in pools of bile and we flap our muted splashing underneath the surface twitching our backs in a swim, the one called envy clawing his fingers on the back of some other, to carry him on and the bacteria drag us all to the deep to the low algae floor slipping our feet, slime-ridden
stabbing ricochets from the armpit, through the stomach, 
out my open throat. the words evaporate as they pass, 
mumbled, through me, I shouldn’t have, what does it 
do, who—my eyes press against the closed lids. my brain—
the frontal lobe pushes at its bone. Forgive me.

his lips have changed to black stone, and his words
spread like sores over them, scratching through the skin
scraped through the labii inferior through the angula oris
the right of his face, and the neck slowly pulls, cracking
from the shoulders, ripping apart the scalenes
as he lifts me with his hidden bronze tongue, or else
lifts above me, his body wrecking in an upward pull.

there is no sunlight in the swamp there is midnight
there is dark gray dusk there is obscurity, our pupils
dilate to darkness and they are swollen, we ask each other
what color were your eyes and there is no day—
  once I’ve seen a cabin of rotting wood, slur emerald light
  seeping through the shaded window I saw a fire,
  jade like waving palm tree leaves conjured
  in the fireplace I went to it, the undertow pulling me
away, the swamp swirl pulling on my thighs, my abdomen
  and the ins of my intestines, and peeked and saw the mirror,
  my own eyes in the windowglass and what behind
III.

“The swamp is in your stomach—are you remembering to breathe?”
Mentor trickles to the white marble crosses her legs and closes her eyes.
She puckers her thumb and naked ring finger.
I remember to breathe. I feel the swamp gurgling, circling in my stomach.
“Notice that you steal the cool air here and it warms in the body—when it exits your open mouth, it is steam.”
I learn the warmth, the wetness of breath.

“What are you feeling? what thoughts are churning through the swamp? One collects itself into a toad, and splishes jumps! to the gullet, mumbles the sound—
\textit{hu}—the grunt of gushing release, the emotion \textit{like a bubble rushing to the surface, exploding}
from the mouth—\textit{hu}—like a droplet falling to the swamp—\textit{hu}—a drop of green olive water—\textit{hu—hu—}”
I taste the water, the drop, the toad, the bubble.
I resonate, I pluck a \textit{hu} from my abdomen.

in the glass I saw green eyes, like fire, lit pupils and quaking lips, my own open jaw and behind it—
but the swimmers frenzied round my feet like chains fixed \textit{wreathed, strong weed round the knees}
and the darkness rushes us downward the one called \textit{fear} leaped to my neck and pressed his tiny hands on my shoulders one flicked a yellowed claw and ripped my armpit \textit{pestilence} we dove
into the brine, water-crows, flurried away from the cabin the damp wood the fire-jade like cords around my eyelids tearing at them

\textit{orexis orexis} the beginning of an \textit{o} on his mouth, my name, youth, \textit{anticythera} let him lull a hypnosis his left eye moving in and the flesh of the face his stomach \textit{rectus abdominis} charred, scratched with fire, the thigh \textit{rectus}
femoris cut, a square and his lips crease down
the round base of the cheeks, the tension a twitch—inside
the skin a strained pull, the left depressor angula oris
wrenching down the left depressor labii inferior
tightening as a claw—and now a clean chiseled
slice on the left lower lip, a w forming—an o
is a w— we can— the words wash out—
he is shipwrecked—anticythera— we can work

who found him in the dirt underwater, anticythera,
the body shattered to handfulls— here, latissimus dorsi,
here, thoracolumbar, here, inguinal, his ligaments
thrown to salt, saltwater— who pieced him together,
a metal rod through his core, where his stomach
should be and his esophagus— he is only his
muscle, he is only the bones that meet his skin—
sternal ribs, carpus— and his stretch to moves
so steadily so like a hewn rock rolling over
a tomb the weight of his muscled arm, the brachii
a gray stone loaf of bread, and his irides flattened
and black ringed— he has copper in his mouth

Planetlike, the deltoid. The arm
stretches, the shoulder rotates
like a planet on the axle of the humerus
spherical and turning as a finger points.

Or perhaps the shoulder is an apple
formed soft and round—tender
like a ripening fruit, stretching the skin
as it ages on the branches of the scapula.

they fall into me they press
small hands wide out pushing on the bones
of my ribs forcing down
the thyroid cartilage adam’s apple
their lips slick, algae
on the trapezius my left shoulder
the one called need bites the clavicial
suckling their feet
on the gastrocnemius their toes
the claws digging
The white marble is cool. It chills my feet.

*I’ve seen her cross-legged in the mirrors
gazing, her stare knives through my pupils.*

The skin around my ankles tightens, the ice is weight on my feet like cold metal.

“What does your ‘hu’ mean?” she asks, she lengthens the curve of her back—

Chainlike, the spine. Each vertebra a link. The arms extend
the spine lengthens
like a chain being tugged upon.

Or perhaps the back is an arch chiseled in the academy
among Grecian faces gathered.
“*Today we learn Gemini.*”

*orexis he reaches  clutches
an invisible round  air  his words
his tongue  moving  warm
is a  choice  to be warm
orexis this is a trap this is a sharp cage
this is  only one  of three*
IV.

Elias dropped the 30 meters, only a cord
connecting him to the surface of water. He has returned—
they were ghosts, he says, naked women naked
men rotting in their syphilis. He has returned
with an arm. It is not syphilis. It is some other
disease, the slow corrosion of bronze.

the one called famine took my wrist and pulled
down on me, the bog-suck like a whirl-pool,
and the living soil of water-beetles ticked
at my feet the swamp digs inward, carrying
in it the slow cold flame like a flickering cancer
into the blood and the swamp waters around me
fill with dark motionless red above the surface
the moon falls on blood, slippery and white,
and below the shadows eat through the joists
and girders of the body at the base of the skull
the lower brain is enveloped in thick grease

the face reconstructed from within, the lips
reconstructed. they are a trap—
we can work through the problem
we go deeper than cancer goes—the skin
ripped at the serratus anterior, the ribs pressing
the muscle bronze-purple. his body igneous, rough
cratered rock he is fissuring, muscle broken
like stone, fractures climbing through him, through
the thigh, the vastus lateralis splitting, breaking apart
the tensor. he pushes, stumbles the left forward, steps
heavily, the weight of bronze clamping against him,
his right foot lifting, the arm extending—

I teem with water
it seeps into my eyes
between my fingers
presses and prods
until it has my lips
my tongue within its clinch
the one named *adam*  his throat
   jutted out  he has swallowed
   an ankle

*tragoidia*. Yessir, it’s a tangle of cancer
the whole mess of air a tangle,
black cancer spreading its strings out

slowly. You’ll see the white blood cells
fighting up way up there through the dark
but the cancer’ll wrap it’s vines round

and choke them out. A snarl
of cancer, this sky.

An astronomer enters in, blue-veined, enters,
   thin, slow his feet on the tile.

Where a space was there now the astronomer stands,
mumbling, soft and icy, beginning

   his song his song of songs.

*Choose thee, orexis. Thus*  *famine,*
*sword pestilence. Hunger,*
*the stomach clenching to stone*
*crumbling, a blade slitting*
or  *the disease algae clinging*
to the *trapezius the round*
of the axis chipped in,  *a decay*
of skin  *and marrow orexis*  *Choose*
A giant telescope lolls on tiled ground.
   And the room is wallpapered with charts
as large and full as two bodies reached around,
   charts of stars. The astronomer starts,
astronomer buzzes, his words coming down like a flood.

"IN THE GREEN chasms of the sky
   the deep sea black between the galaxies,
within the straights that you and I
   will map with our astronomies—
between them, I say, swirl sawdust grains.

For you breathe and you take in
   molecules of weak airy water; in the black
there are also grains invisible, forsaken
   by the telescope’s strict track
from light to light, from present star to present star.

And I can occult the giant Al Hena
   five times the diameter of the sun,
travel vast compression waves to Dirah—
   between them slither splinters in disunion
aching, winding together, the waves winding them together.

This is a vacuum in sky, attracting
   by its gravity, more—the slivers of space
snatched together, clenched, compacting,
   shackled, the flecks of wood set in place
and building: now splinters of bark, now floating twigs
and branches, a nest, a knot of sticks,
   the air between compressing, and two seeds
grow in the center. And you, children, fix
   them in your mind, for he that heeds
my words has hope, for they will scatter through the dark.

The vacuum perceives them, too
   and when it does, the dust bound, the nodes
fastened in, the black air buzzing, and you,
   years distant, watching—the vacuum explodes
into a blaze of fire, light, speed, a hurricane
of light. And the shift of it
   pummels through the deep green
gulfs, and the force of it
   stirs the night between us, the marine
layers of the universe, water hovering over the galaxies.

The explosion is a wave, and the waves
   wind new dust together, and the seeds have exploded
and fall shattered in the new twigs, their staves
   already forming, the black sky eroding, eroded
to white, and the stars will fill the sky, fill it up,

for what does Pliny say, but
   *Out of the firmament by night,*
   *there was seen a light,* and what
does Pliny say, but *the night seemed as light
   as day. And oftentimes besides, yea, and oftentimes besides.*

The star is a spark.
Someday it will burn the universe
   out.

no reach but a hex and I lift *take his hand*
*orexis* no stretch but a curse I step toward
his slender forearm his hand a claw *take his hand*
*thus* I let my hand against his the fingers
the index his fingerprints cut mine through his lips
curl up his canines glint, they are sharp
and the blood I smell the blood of rabbits
the lines of my palms fill with swamp water it
pours through the ducts into the scars on my back
into the lines of my eyelids into my open mouth
my gums eroding my eyes covered over
the liquid blurs him out I cannot see him he is not
there I am touching only olive water
the bacteria rushing there is gasping, humming
and hot currents on my ankles fire swims across me
they come to my body they tie their limbs
around my own the water hurling in a thick haze I cannot breathe
Funny how one drowns
how every atom fights, how the body
seizures, how the stomach quakes
and the eyes tremble. The hands
reach for the surface, they stretch
and quiver.

I’ve heard the drowning
will grab at anything, how whatever
brushes their hand they will clasp
and chain, pull in the water.
The drowning will take others
with them.

Hu the spark. The flash of light.
We sit on the white marble, staring
into mirrors. “What is your ‘hu?’”
she asks, she stares into my eyes
unfolds fingers to my face.

My blood is churning like the swamp.
What is the hu? What is the hu?
I reach, I widen pupils, I scour
the black for flecks of white, I gape
into the fire-jade, I shake.

There is no light anymore the sky
is blotted out—In the green—
What is the hu? In the—
My body corrodes, shreds apart
a mute clatter of bones on the algae
below, and the darkness lifts up
the severed feet, the ankles crumbling
to dust—In the—the swamp spreads
past the shore leaking into the earth
around it to the horizon closing in—

In the—my muscles dissolve,
flake off in the tearing salt—In the
beginning my fingers tense to
the surface pointing all to name
the stars, but there is no surface—

In the beginning the swamp trickles,
carrying  In the beginning God  and
darkness  on the deep  awash
and a glow hovers  over the  wet
the beginning God created  the waves
stilled down we are not

the heaven  and the earth  And the earth
without form  darkness  upon
the face of the  deep  And the Spirit
of God  moved  upon the face  of the waters
moved  upon the  face of the  waters
voices from water
COLD SEPTEMBER, MY BIRTH

*Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.*
—Job 3:3

There are shivers through the side of her face
like a beaten dog
guarding with her forearms the rounded belly
a bowl of blood fingers stretched as webs
around this fleshy house without electricity anymore
or running water but the stagnance
and the smell of vomit swirling
The baby inside her would cry
if he were not already dead wrapped around himself
a knot of soft bones
There is moonlight creeping through windows
the tips of its fingers brush her stomach

At night she sings to him still
the child will not kick clap his small palms
He is silent She sings
*your father left us, he left us, flew out the door*
*in a hurricane it felt like this*
She jiggles the womb There is the noise of skin
at skin. *The night you were conceived*
she scratches wants to rip it open
*I saw him scoop up his clothes as you and I lied*
*in our nightgown he flew away*
She twists to one side takes the pillow cover
between her teeth and chews and cries

After she pushes him out the jumble ribs
toes knees round soft skull
the floor creaks under her, she walks
with swollen feet the other side of the room
biceps still tight She is tired thighs wobble
She is thirsty the deep moan
to the rope she tied
up one heavy foot the stool trembles up the other
A cough or the floor mutters
She imagines a cliff her hair blown off the sweat
feels the wind around her neck and jumps
I was the baby
PRAYERS

Pray without ceasing.
—–I Thes. 5:17

“Send it, send it”—” The highway flashes green, tree leaves flickering, jade billboards rush
with wind.
The highway speaks in wisps of air, the open window
a medium through which the green earth preaches.
The grass quivers. “The sun is no sooner risen
with burning—”

The heat today! Such hot, static air. The sun chars
the bare roads. White clear sky and an acrid glare—
the unbearable heat, hateful—thrusting its strong arm
through heaven
clasping the car in its fist, squeezing it to a sphere
of twisted, rusting metal, the car squeals, cries.
“It was water that did it, that dug
with needles at my skin
water that pierced the surface, rain and salt
ripping, scratching through my yellow peel.”

He laughed at the thought of it: even the car
was a lemon—“Life is sour!” He shrieked, whinnied
whined, “life is bitter. Send it, send it—” and again
he screamed, a reedy voice: “Send it—”
shrill, sharp, weak desires:

Late last night, streetlights staining the walls
as he twisted and distorted under sheets, sweat
creeping from the lining in his stomach out thin, filmy
skin, gossamer—
If the lights were lit, you could decipher the veins,
the layers of slight, gangling muscle, the lines
of bones and tiny hairs in the wrists, like cursive script:
“cut. slice. sliver. divide.” The violence, however—
he is too frail, too weedy and blood so wet—
No, the streaks on arms are not speeches but charts,
an atlas, streetmap—
His flimsy carcass deformed, spindled rubber bones.
He hurdled off the cot and heaped the notebooks
like a decaying harvest in his rank embrace
a stagnant stench of fat and grime, plaque, sewage
mess, muck
ran to the car, yellow trash of bars and beams
and drove, drove to sunrise, no wallet,
    had grabbed all his cash on the way out
crammed the gas tank in Alabama, urged it away
and now. Today, he began to pray: “Send it, send it—”
In heat and grease he leans forward, over the wheel,
    broken, synthetic circle
repeats the request, again, again, “Send it!” again—

“For what is your life?” The tree leaves
each aquiver glance, fore, back: the yellow car,
the road to come—“It is even a vapor” they say,
a smoke, a floating coil of mousy hair, fragile,
falling, falling out; a fleeting smoke “and shall it end
in smoke” he grins—
The wit, the raw snickers still drop about his throat,
what was this life, the pervading hollow—
the empty arteries, stark white walls,
    the flavorless foods and dulled touch,
each symphony enfeebled in the ears till only notes
loitered, and they, too, tiptoed off—He slept
    in silence
seizing, cleaving to the slim pillow, holding it with
slow, sour moans.

His passenger at present: the notebook pages
shaking in the blur of air, blue ink babbling
his scribbled night-time wailings, swirling in his mind
    a spinning pond, salt
and dark—but here the daylight bakes the paper,
the navy blue evaporates to white—

Oh the oppressive heat! the overwarmth where no warmth is.
The wrath of sun, withering him away to bones
and joints, the skin of the skull trickling off
the teeth exposed, a deadman’s grinning—
There! a truck turning the curve, coming
    thirty-three miles—
He triggers the turn signal, tick, tick, it narrates:
“For that ye ought to say, we shall die—”
    twenty-four—
tick, the highway glares, the pavement yellow
“like gold, like gold—” tick, twenty, tick
He’s in boxers, skinny skin sallow, white
chest concave, brittle ribs, the tongue on fire—
“forgive us our sins; for we also—”
sixteen—tick, the turn signal green, green
the world in green, ten—Fire approaching.
A ball of fire, a world.
WALKING OUT

and aren’t his fists curled
tightly about my kidneys
and vines sprout
thorned
my stomach shreds open
a tangle of spikes
he grows up inside me
as a black plant, a root
out of my blood

my spine barbed
my bones split
and shatter to points
the spear
in my side
and aren’t his teeth out
he clicks his canines
punctures through
the liver casing

I am caged in his sharp skin
the claws scratching
my head fills with veins
that splinter
into needles stinging
they leak warm
he stretches himself
inside, yawning out
his slashing

I snap my teeth together
red seeps through
he pulverizes
I press my hands
one at the other
he rips me apart
outside grew brambles
when I walk away
my toes slice up
briars tangle the path
    stairs I cannot
cross the burdock
    if there were a gate
    I would go through it
if a shepherd
    I would stamp along
    his footprints
    but the garden
beyond it locks itself
This Jesus’ feet solid  
on the water above my head  
the lashing waves—He stands  
steady he’s come back  
who is this Jesus who—  
Come, he says. I walk above myself  
into the air over saltwater—  
still like panting through a wet napkin—  
my body sinks below me.  
His hands now the scars  
through his wrists—I want  
the palm of his hand  
heavy on me he slumps  
and grabs the arms—mine, reaching up  
he connects the body—mine  
to that part of me balanced at his side  
I surge I climb he whispers  
or he calls forth, I toss off the clothes  
that clutch to my stomach—the day is long  
I want to sleep again—Come, he says.  
I hear him over the waves  
they overtake me, salt, salt  
I am my own voices sinking  
disperséd, melted in the ocean—  
it thrashes all the pieces of me  
through it. He waits for me to collect  
my arms to reach at  
this water, that I thirst not—  
but my body is not an arm  
or a leg or a waterpot or a rib  
—all empty, and not even eyes,  
only salt flung across a sea  
I am only voices from water  
and many I am water calling to him  
—Come, and he hears and stays, his feet  
flexed but soft, his toes  
tapping the surface as he stands  
like a cross planted  
on the top of a crumbling church  
in the rain.
WAITING

The flowers grow more, in Spanish,
   the words—me hace falta,
opening from their dirt, in the lungs
   and burgeoning, putting forth
   their shoots and vines
and the warm fragrant,
   filling the chest with vapors
an incense of petals trickling
   and cycling through my body.
   Those words—you make in me
a hollow.
   Hot water fills
   around my tongue, scented
   and swirled with milk and honey.
   My mouth is a cup to drink from
   but there is only
   the copy of your name scribbled
   on a receipt and now
   the dreams that quilt over me.
   I slouch in the softened panic
   of drowning, my body
bludgeoned, punched with brass,
   through my scalp, my stomach.
The stun of darkness—
   I boil in my own blood,
   the pond of it running
circling through my lips, holding
   still the shape of your name
the last movement of the tongue
   when I call at your pictures
from this heated, salty ocean—the ll
of tell, or love, the empty word,
   or allow.
      I holler my arms
through the water, I roar for you
   to lift me from it,
   your veined muscles coming down
upon me, around the neck
   torn by salt red water
and screaming. Even one week
   and I suffocate from it
the hole in me like a bullet’s path
through, you walked off
   where they speak Spanish
and already I thrash in the gulf—

come back, come quickly.
IN EXHAUSTION

the mascara—
    syrup string—seeps
    off and across the cheekbones
    down in pillows.
_Better_, you would say,
    to pluck the eye, to claw
    the socket
    stretch and cut
the cords connecting,
    better to rip them out
    to bleed forth—
    or I will fling you
into the fire
    already licking
    your soft ribs, the flames
    pressing fingers
against your lungs—
    better to break
    your knees, heaving
    the splintered cross,
better to run, your bones
    shattering, grating
    sliver at sliver—
    or I will vomit
when your gnarled name
    thrusts in front of me
bending, blinking—
    I will hurl you
away. But I can’t
    feel you as I swell
when the wind hits
    my triceps—
I can’t hear you as I hear
the wind howl
    as if it ached
for someone
to find it—Jesus,
    I fall to my bed
and sink, and an ocean
    folds around me.

    I waste
    as the delphinia, jumbled about
    on their stems, rotting.
The dreams
crawl to the warm body
and drizzle
thread upon thread
a web
around me, the intricate coffin,
scuttle to my ears
and crinkle
their legs wrapping under
their bodies,
eyes glowing blankly.
They gnash
their teeth in a song, a warbling,
remember the boy’s
chest, slabs
of rock like tombstones—
remember
his stomach, wooden,
the stretch
of his lined shirt, his proud body,
remember the shadows
curled under
his eyelids, how he moaned
when they
giggled about his height—
everyone
at the theater filled with breath
and he strolled easily
across stage—
the dreams purr over my lips.
My body
twists in and puckers,
a bud
blossoming, light
blue blush—Jesus,
who have I in earth but you?
and who is mine
to hold his feet
in my unfolding palms
to rest my lips at his toes?
But I creep away,
a withering branch
and you are the vine—
I stretch, my arms trembling
out, and off.
And who is my father
but yours? the hover
of his wings: the wind a wall
staying the water
that surrounds me.
The scarlet seats
at my sides yawned
their emptiness.
I dove my hands
to my shoulders—
to hide a son between
these biceps!
or a leg, or the tired boy
sauntering out—
as you must moan for me,
your throat ascrake
tongue dried out—
but I cannot hear,
the pound of this echo
against the cavern
inside me, shout,
reverb—Jesus—friend!
I sought and saw nothing
in the dark urn
your absence, the dark
stage your absence,
the boy loiters at the wings—
Be mine, Lord.
COVER, SPRING

You spoke a cloud into being, filled the throat
swallowed the puffed air
and it vibrated your whole body, the forearms
and the toes trembling
like rainclouds, the wet of it washing through
your coughing mouth
your watery lips. You said white and the world
became cloud-covered,
gray and the rain gathered around it like a chain
constricting, swarmed
and muddied the place. And why then
should I close my eyes
when your chest begins the deep gush
of black. black. black.

Ezekiel’s valley, I clattered through the bones
a collar, a finger—my feet
dried, my skin tightening. You must have begun
with my skeleton, lightly
snapping me into being, from the mist pouring
from your throat, you sang
me into the world, your tongue flooded in warm
honey. You rattled me
awake, stretched tendon to ulna, soleus to calcarius.
Your palm held me
up. These bones, standing quiet, slumped
under your strong wings—
My stomach was a stone—you hollered
for wind! and tumbled me about.

LORD I plant my feet into your soil, five toes
five seeds digging past
the top of a muddy field, I roll downward
I heat in the damp ground.
You wave me into a sprouting leaf, you whistle
forth, you channel a river
through my skin, you spread my ankles
to a gurgling stream, you
break the mist and shatter it to shards of the day
I rush my hands out
I giggle the leaves, they dazzle, flutter—
The air is chocolate, I fall
drowsy in your earth, I sleep, my arms flung,
pears, plums, peaches, grapes.
biographical sketch

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