

Lesser Gods Like Us

poems

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For everyone to whom I've promised a dedication along the way.

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MYTHS

1001 Nights

Sunset means fervent prayers to the gods,
more words & stories resurrected from childhood
to keep him rapt, fixated, as she lounges amid
satin pillows. Every recollected legend means

another blessed sunrise. *Tonight, perhaps,*
the forty thieves. She's been that clever
boy, dwelling in danger's caves, always
finding his path through treachery,

bursting free, jewels gushing from outspread
palms, praising light of day, his footfalls racing
to safety. Her voice slows with the king's eyelids.
I know she feels Ali's desire, emerging richly

from the dark, his dancing a testament to
cunning ploys & a swift mind, the rapture
of liberation & warm sunlight. So easy to imagine
her revelry each rising dawn, the celebratory

new days evading the heavy-handed sickle
curved like the silk scarf across her headboard.
Some evenings, I can almost hear him snoring,
head lolling against the pillowcase

streaking, now, with the sun. One more night
means one more day to fashion a story, though
every tale, like every saga, must conclude—
with death, or the respite of a protector's embrace.

Scheherazade, I've danced that *shamshir's* edge
with a man's breath against my throat—the ruthless
snarling & unfounded accusations. I've known

what it's like to keep speaking, to say *anything*:
Late January, when he tracked slush & ice
into my bedroom, then blended threats
with apologies, weeping, & all I could do
was cling to thin bedsheets while I played storyteller

& smothered my itch to scream. I offered him
tremulous dialogue until dawn, words
to keep his hands unclenched, as if tales could
urge our men back to admiration, longing.

The Vizier

This new dusk means she'll have another story to tell, another tale to weave across the night— with this one, it's forever another *djinn* dancing out of a lamp, some mischievous boy too clever for his own good, yet still coming out the hero. Perhaps this one won't last until tomorrow.

But they always do. At the pinnacle—*Ah, tomorrow we'll hear the end, dear husband*. Each story impossibly intertwined with the previous, all her heroes tangling in his brain. He hardly remembers last night's cliffhanger—whether some peril befell their clever soldier, or had the wicked genie beguiled a dancing

girl? Scheherazade paces; he fixates upon the dance of her hips with every step. Perhaps tomorrow he'll hear a tale familiar from his childhood, cleverly purred from her lips. *My dear, just one more story?* It should be easy to refuse—but what's one more night? Eventually the woman will run out of tales, of heroes,

of villains. Then, at last, she'll find herself the heroine of his lamentations; he'll remember her, dancing like fragrant windblown smoke on their wedding night. He'll even say he kissed her each night, *Until tomorrow, most lovely wife*. They'll believe every single story he recounts, too taken aback by tragedy to suspect clever

lies. *A perfect plan*, he thinks, congratulates his cleverness in solitude—more cunning than any of his wife's silly heroes could have envisioned. She could never dream such a story if she tried. Lovely, watching that body bucking, dancing in death's final throes. *Tonight*. His courage will fail tomorrow.

He'll wrap the silk scarf around her throat, kiss her goodnight,

pull it taut until no words escape her. Now, on the night
of her doom, she's more beautiful—thinking herself clever
as she describes a grandiose cave, treasures that tomorrow
young Ali Baba will seek to claim. This thief, this uncommon hero,
intrigues him. He leans forward to consider her hands dancing
through the air, illustrating every fascination of this new story

with grace. *Damn her stories.* She'll never finish tonight.

Wary eyes follow her skirt dancing across the room—his clever
wife & her slew of heroes. He'll have to kill her tomorrow.

Conquest

I could trace it every time—splendid
fade of affection from their faces. It always
starts like slick droplets along
icicles, all our frozen moments

slithering in the radiance of her wink.
Then, faster: torrent of excuses, apologies—
You're the coolest girl I've ever met—
to justify stolen glances, sly palm, kissing

her bare skin. All those assumptions . . .
Oh, to engage wrath, like Hera spying
Semele waddling Athens, heavy
with a bastard child—one more pawn

in his increasing repertoire of infidelity.
She never aimed fury at the problem
where it lay—gods indeed prove
fallible, imperfect—but took vengeance

on his treasures. I know her heart.
She would have loved to hear Semele's plea
to Zeus—*Show me your true self,*
*as you appear to your wife—*then, flames

of grandeur licking all the places
her husband's eager hands had roamed.
Hera loved her man too much.
I'd rather watch the rogue ablaze.

Contemporary Aphrodite

*It is not heroin or cocaine that makes one an addict; it is
the need to escape from a harsh reality.*

– Shirley Chisholm

You have to understand—though I'm sure
you won't—everything coke wasn't about:
quicken'd breaths came secondary; the sheer

exhilaration, insignificant.

Even the magnificence, the slam
of my heart within its cage, rattling

ribs, a frantic beast fighting for freedom,
as though it might rupture—trifling.
Those were niceties, *icing on the cake*,

so to speak. Try substituting yourself
in my stead. Suddenly the choice is made
for you. Each day, needing to forget

and failing. Always the memory: his
blood spilling through my fingers onto the grass.

Atropos, Picking at Her Bandages:

I learned on a fifteen-year-old boy
who picked the wrong time to run for
the grocery store. Then the tapestry
blurred; I couldn't even bring the blades

near the loom until Lachesis started laughing.
*Weep as long as you need to, little sister; he's
the one left lying in the middle of the street, using
all the time you take to die.* Clotho interwove

her mirth, leaving me mute, clenching metal
in my fists until blood dripped onto the skein.
Perfect unison: they guided my stained
fingers, urged razor edges to his dangling

thread until the wool split, his mother's
scream echoing in my throat. I knew it then:
I'd cut only so many threads before those scissors
would start to look like the best way out.

Final Bows

Medea at Corinth

Tomorrow they will call me a monster,
among harsher titles, between prayers and vows
for vengeance. Once they put out the final fire,

they will leave you to bury charred Creusa and her father
beside our two sons. But while I have you here now,
think of tomorrow. Calling me *monster*

won't stop this. I still hear my brother
pleading, *Jason doesn't love; he lusts for power
and vengeance. Once you've put out the fire*

in his loins, he'll already be seeking a new lover—
I cut him off, then, with a few well-placed blows.
They've called me *killer* and *whore*

across the Aegean, from that first murder
to this last. There's much to be said, you know,
for vengeance; I recognized the fire

in your heart as fabricated the day you kissed her
at sunset in the street. But it's time for final bows,
my love: Tomorrow they will call me a monster
of vengeance—if they can put out this final fire.

Creusa at Corinth: *Apologia*

What to do with this superstar
drawn from dark & heaving
seas, tossed to land dazzling

our shores? He slung
notoriety across his shoulders
like some plundered trophy,

spoke in triumphant crescendos,
diminished minors, relentlessly
nuzzled enticing notes into

my ears so even my name
became music. Your presence
hung about him, bearing down

until every step carried the burden
of you & two toddlers
lending voices to the chorus

screeching his name in every city.
I knew my place—the king's
daughter wouldn't dare lower

herself to such petty seduction,
but when he kissed me
in the garden, I couldn't think

of what would follow, what I'd
stolen from you—with me,
he didn't clench his fists

or flinch.

Crucial Detail

Everyone knew her story. They would have heard fables of Zeus masking his identity: how he carefully concealed himself behind horns, delicate ashen flanks, so that, while he was prancing

by the unsuspecting girl, she might caress his skin without reservation, aimless fingers along his spine. He thought he'd lose his mind waiting for her to climb his back. In the end

she proved predictable, swinging her legs across his flanks. Without hesitating, he crossed the sea to a surreptitious cove, continually opportune. The reward, then, for her *service to the gods*—an island

to call her own. Not quite an apology, but Zeus knew what he was doing: Europa couldn't call it rape, not with all of Crete to witness her new nobility. And if she tried, wouldn't someone raise the question, *What were you wearing?*

Leda's Retrospect

Myself at fifteen? I'd give anything to rescue that girl, studious little creature, unconcerned by young love & accompanying minor dramas played like tragedies upon adolescent stages; I'd tell that remnant of purity what I know now, bless or terrify her with knowledge of what lay ahead. My former self, gracious daughter,

always heeded her elders. If only her daughters had been the same—but that's another story. This girl hardly pondered her future. Why ask for knowledge privileged to the gods? Whether she would find love unexpectedly, or lose it entirely, was a decision purely left to the Fates. Or if her destiny might be tragedy,

striving to prevent it would only cement her role—tragic heroine. But the same way every ingenuous daughter eventually turns from childhood, abandons purity for the taste of a more alluring world, discards girlish frivolities for sensuous delights, she learned love the notorious *hard way*, trapped, knowledge

thrust upon her while he grunted approval. She knew that moment threw the balance. Nothing, tragically, could remain innocent—all thoughts of life or love skewed to this new balance. Sons & daughters now added to her vision, my terrified self—a girl who never disobeyed—now questioned the purity

of faith. In time she'd be deemed fallen, an impure woman—any attempts to prevent the knowledge of what grew would prove futile. Still, the girl took it upon herself to stand firm, facing tragedy with a head held high. She must love her daughters

& their brothers, no matter what: a mother's love

should be unconditional. Knowing what love
would bring to her family, if I could—purely
to enlighten her—somehow divulge her daughters'
indiscretions, share with her the knowledge
of all that came in their wake, the tragedy
& wailing mothers, the war her precious girls

left behind—that girl, with her fierce love,
might prevent tragedy. But I know her purity.
She'd keep the daughters, forsake the knowledge.

Altruist

It will be worth it when he turns around,
she's sure. Reflected back at her, his eyes
echo wordless longing, the voiceless sound

all stumbling hearts make. If she could find
proper words, spill earnest desires, he'd realize
her worth. He'd have to turn around,

yank her up, feet flying off the ground,
whirling them in a circle. All the while, his kisses
would echo earnest longing, no voice, only the sound

of his lips dancing over her fervent mouth.
Such a well-calculated plan merely requires
words. They'll be worth it. He'll turn around.

Every sentence she invents, desperate to shout—
Don't you see I'm mad about you?—his eyes
echo, wordless. Longing for words, the sound

she makes, arms extended, nothing but a half-moaned
plea. Each clever speech she conceives dies.
It will be worth it when he turns around
to hear Echo's wordless longing, voiceless sound.

Memoirs from Carthage

See you on the other side, he always whispered
as she drifted into sleep, nestled into him
like a child during a thunderstorm.
Now, when she sees his face in dreams, she knows

he hasn't drifted far from her side. He's sleeping
somewhere, beneath a coverlet decked with stars,
seeing her face in every dream. She knows
only the war his letters describe: a violent marriage

somewhere under cover of arrows like shooting stars,
endless litanies of soldiers lost, prayers that soon
his letters might describe war's end. Her marriage
conducted in correspondence. Every day she peruses

litanies of lost soldiers, praying that soon
she'll fold him in her arms. Then his name appears—
nuptials reduced to correspondence perused every day,
imagining his voice, pretending she's still sleeping

enfolded. Except he's no more than a name,
& she a frightened child, bearing storms of grief
for an imagined voice. *It will be just like sleeping,*
she whispers, climbing the pyre. *Aeneas on the other side.*

Visiting Demeter

Always feels like sleeping in a shrine to childhood when I'm back here. Have you even changed my sheets in the past five years? Chrysanthemums, not my favorites, but a lovely gesture. Thanks. Maybe a bouquet to what's-her-name next door. We met her little daughter two days ago. Precious child played with our youngest after she disembarked.

Yes, Mother ...

that means she's deceased. Oh, *please*—don't give me that grimace. Life can't always be pomegranates and burgeoning lilies. The ferry filled to overflowing kept everyone busy through your merciless winters. Beloved neighbors, even that busybody from down the street—good choice, freezing her to our depths. She filled me in on what I've missed,

all the details of my kidnapping that you fed to her. I thought it only fair, correcting some minor inconsistencies. She reacted to *ran away with him* almost as delightfully as the day you caught us behind the backyard oak tree. She didn't scream at all, but her blanched cheeks matched yours perfectly. So, Mother—

Mother!

What is suddenly so fascinating about my curtains?

Pantoum for Eurydice

*Only once did love soften the Lord of Shadows
And still at the threshold, sternly, he called back his gift.*

— Friedrich Schiller

Dim ringing haunted her ears as she fell,
followed her to Stygian confines, the only sound
tethering her to memories of what came
before these shadows & wandering souls.

He followed her to Styx, only the sound
of his voice to plead his case. Through
rustling shadows, the groans of aimless souls,
came plaintive notes, a half-whispered elegy—

his voice pleading, pulling her through
the dark, to reach out & grasp his hand.
She came toward his plaintive whispers,
desperate, clutching his fingers, urging, *Don't look back.*

*The dark will reach out, clasp me
in its tethers, leave only a memory dangling
from your fingers ... But he looked,
& she fell away. Haunting, his dim weeping.*

After Eurydice

He'd searched through the lost to find her,
gather her back with melodies she'd remember
from her life before this Hell. Without her
voice, the house feels more empty than a tomb,

& melodies can't gather her back. Does she remember
this? He won't, can't know. Every instrument fails
to fill the empty house with her voice. Her tomb
sees him weekly, wretched, keening her name.

This failure he knows—every instrument won't, can't
resurrect her embrace. He should have savored
the daily sight of her. How wretched, keening her name
to unforgiving stone, knowing he had the chance

to resurrect, embrace her. *I could have saved
her life.* Now, only this: Hell without her.
The engraved stone, his only chance. Every song
he prays will find a way through the lost. *Find her.*

TALES

A Start

It came simpler when we were fourteen,
kids signing pacts in notebooks, promising
the world, what we knew of it, without borders,
faltering attempts at charm. We invented

fables, spouted without reservation, flowing
rapidly from pens; I wrote pages in a single day,
& you filled sketchbooks in measured heartbeats.
Before we learned theories, felt hearts break,

we ravaged paper with imagined splendor,
dreams of tomorrows set loose & dancing
through a universe we envisioned—
inked the savage simplicity of adolescence.

It's harder now, at twenty-one, to paint the sky
overarching azure. The words I want to give you
remain simple as youth, childish as coloring
books, jagged edges, fractured fantasies

Though their pages & spines have frayed,
you're still filling sketchbooks;
I'm still writing words I can't quite say.

The Brink

September 2006, County Cork, Ireland

I discovered an easy remedy for jet lag—chasing dinner
with too many glasses of chardonnay, manners muting
protests. Was that my third? Fourth? Later, forehead

resting against the car window, I watched the road wind
beneath us, steep climb to UCC's music building,
a haphazard cathedral between Annie's Pub & a butcher. We
traced

the path I'd walk Monday mornings, crossing the Lee alone.
The only day I'd make it early enough to catch sunrise
through fog, I'd forgotten my camera. That first night,

wavering tremulous on a railing, Cork a miniature smorgasbord
spread below, before I knew the curves of St. Patrick's
Street, intimate & foreign as a new lover; before experience faded

to a worn mental photograph; before the Gap of Dunloe
stretching green grass below gray sky, rocks peeking
through hills like the faces of curious toddlers, lofty peaks & valleys

where wind pressed me back the way a playground bully
holds off a kindergartener's desperate fists pounding air—
I clung to iron, bent to the night like a first kiss.

Nothing Gold

Autumn never rested well with you;
a thousand tiny deaths rained
upon the sidewalk, remnants of what
was green, relentless testimony

to mortality. Something about the air,
crisp wind clawing at windowpanes,
wailing like a widow, raked your senses,
wilted your burgeoning affection.

It drew me back to Cork, Patrick's Street,
late October, when tattered remains
of cheap umbrellas littered the gutters,
snippets of fabric still clinging to wire

skeletons. We skipped lectures,
watched pregnant droplets pelting glass,
the way a lover flings persistent pebbles.
Rain evaporated to transparent prisms

& refracted shadows. In Spoken Irish,
Tá sé ag cur báistí—it is at putting rain.
The chill—*fuacht*—permeated my hood,
the toes of my boots, and lingered.

Arbeit Macht Frei

Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, May 2008

Outside the gate, I thought I'd make it,
kept together & stoic despite the threat
of tears like the pressure of convicts' hands
on prison walls. Rather than clutch iron
in my fists, I left the capture to camera,

seizing the image in thousands of pixels.
Closer to the words wrought beneath
a stopped clock, the professor's prolonged
narration lingered on each excruciating detail,
how they stood in *just this spot*, freezing,

sweating, blood caking tatters of clothes
hanging off haggard frames. They stood
in ranks for hours, listening as guards rattled off
numbers, restarting the entire process
at every missed response. When they pleaded for life,

I hugged my chest where they clutched each other
beneath a torrent of gunfire. Blurring in the foreground:
a group of shrieking adolescents played tag
where gaunt bodies once scattered like ash.

Substitute

They say you die without it—touch—
like oxygen or dihydrogen oxide; losing it kills
you by inches from inside, the same way

starvation & insomnia peel your mind
from body, shred you down to the essential.
This dearth of mere physical contact is fatal.

I tell you, it *is*. Consider for a minute life
devoid of your fingers splayed on my back,
subtle kiss of thighs when sharing a seat, even

the loss of entangled knuckles, curled & knotted
appendages linking one life to mine. They say
it's vital, like breathing, & I wonder if I could

respire pure contact, inhale your dance of fingertips
along my ribcage, fill my lungs with startled glee
& get away with the replacement. Kisses for air.

Brennen: *To Burn*

after Hephaestus

Fire ravaged all our could-have-beens
into smoking ash & glowing midnight mist,
grinning words wound around clasped fingers,
when you said *Hey, I'm not just about sex*—
& we burst laughing in your face.

du brennst

Devastated pages waited to be shoved into flame
as you said, *I never found a girl*—
She crossed her legs. I chose silence,
You're full of shit smoldering in my brain.

ich brenne

Like ravaged cinders, *Why are you so
mean tonight?—I don't know, must be
hormones.* Your eyes traced her lines.

sie brennen

You said you *never found a girl*;
I called that cruelty unintentional.

ihr brennt

We're both liars in our own right.

wir brennen

White Space

The air between my right shoulder-
blade and the cage protecting your heart is barely
enough to fill one tube of paint. Finger pointing,

you murmur something I ignore, so content
just to breathe your cologne, bob my head
absently, stare hard at some pastoral landscape.

Your voice in my ear, hands at your sides—*Really*
something, huh? Pondering consequences of turning,
seizing, clenching fists into that t-shirt—breathless:

You know, it really is. The painted shepherdess
matches my gaze, both arms snug around the neck
of a bleating ewe, cheek flush against wool,
studying the portrait we make, *almost touching.*

Status Quo

*There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray,
love, remember.*

— Ophelia, *Hamlet*, IV.v.

Old music & aftershave bring me back:
stolen knit cap snug around my ears,
finally ransomed for a burned CD. (You said
I needed to hear *Strange & Beautiful*.)

Summer moons turned the scenes *noir*: sneaking
furtively beneath a canopy of trees, whispering, *Knock,*
knock to spare striking fists on metal. We watched
Brick on HBO, still life in blue light, lounging

parallel across sofa cushions. Your pinky hooked
my fingers, holding me in place—onscreen, a dame
pleaded, *Let me go*. Weeks later, I strangled
a ceramic diner mug, & stared down at the tarot's

Knight of Swords. Nearly a soothsayer, my closest
friend clarified why the Knight's no King: *You see,*
he can't control his blade yet. He's still hurting people,
innocents. Plummeting glass shattering silence, the phone's

shrill interruption: . . . *just not into you*. Should have known.
Now I'm like the Queen of Swords, tranquil as a viper,
choosing stillness over screaming—or floating in Antietam
Lake, clutching memories and singing myself to sleep.

Ink

This meant forever—you kneeling before
me, nearly a proposal, fingers clutching
the hem of my shirt, the sketch fluttering

in your hand—curlicues swaying with your
measured movement. Inching fabric
up my side—pause & faltering breath

when our eyes locked. You said, *Here,*
right? holding the paper to my skin,
preparing the tattoo. Your ink & design

tailored to the dip of my waist, delicate curls
spelling out my request: *Seanachai*—
storyteller. *I like that.* We both knew

what it really meant: permanent installation
of your presence, the thumbprint I'd wake
to every morning, trace, and treasure.

Equinox

I'll close that door when I'm ready for it—
end the phase we entered as kids. I believed
saying, *I'll never stop loving you*, meant it

made us invincible. That first summer, we thought
we knew our story's ending: we'd ditch these
digs and close the door on doubt. I wasn't ready for it

when you said, *I can't keep doing this*, and split
for better scenery, her bright new smile. She
said she'd always love you, and meant it

through the winter, until you craved midnight music
more than an embrace; when she finally needed
to close the door in your face, you were ready for it,

already calling my name—*I treated you like shit;*
can you forgive me? That summer I granted reprieve—
saying you couldn't hurt me again. What you meant

was you would stick until the chill of autumn wind
tugged you into her arms. Beneath the rain of leaves,
I taught myself to close that door. Now I'm ready for it.
You say, *I'm never coming back*. I think you mean it.

They Know Not

for Rachel

I didn't recognize the girl on my doorstep,
pale-faced creature, matte hair I remembered
as frizzy chestnut, not ironed black, cheeks
hollow as her greeting. Years later, *Thanks,*

Mama Nell, for all my efforts, assuring me,
I'm almost clean. When she joined
the Fellowship of Christian Students
in seventh grade, we teased her for her faith,

the cross she wore everyday—Genna
sneered, *Looks like a tampon with wings*.
How could we know? By fifteen
it was PCP, week-long benders, & our little

physics whiz claimed adulthood, dropped out
of school & into the arms of a college professor.
Even now I want to tap quantum theories,
wind back time to early morning roundtables

& reassure her that faith could propel her through
the breaking point, remind her someone loved her
even if her mother wouldn't—grab her shoulders,
shake her, entreat her . . . *disregard our ruthlessness*.

Prelude to Divorce

She's told me the story enough times I almost
imagine myself a part of it. Their first night:

wrinkled scar of country road, glimmering
pinpoints of stars colliding with the headlights'

glare—and in the minute she turned to admire
his silhouette by glow of dashboard—

the way some natural disasters assault
small towns, no warning, just the sudden strike

of whirling winds or quaking earth unleashed,
before they could brace or brake . . .

He escaped with mostly bruises, but she bit
down on the wheel, nearly losing the chin

left permanently scarred, & her teeth extracted
from beside her nose, above the lips he'd fully

meant to kiss. How easy, believing his earnest whisper
as they carried her: *It's okay, you're still beautiful.*

My Mother's Daughter

I'm curling a backward C into your side, the way

I used to, Saturday mornings before you remarried

and I learned to share. Chewie chuffs. I bury

my face in her fur, so you don't see me flinch

at your murmur. *You're built like a 12-year-old boy;*

soon the only people chasing you will be women.

Swaddled in heavy blue velveteen, skin still damp,

smelling of Midnight Pomegranate, I beautify

my reflection, until you come down to make your

voice heard. *I wouldn't even feel comfortable*

introducing you to my friends. Then, the only sound

left: sizzle of ceramic burning my hair imperfect.

Near Life

for my sister

She asks, *When did you have a near-death experience?* making me wonder if she's forgotten what I can't—just shy of adolescence, the lake

so gray & calm I could only refer to it as *Silverworth*. Everything before the boat is lost with time. I remember the inner-tube, red

& black—doughnut with a rubber-filled hole, draped across it, holding its sides & hands (she didn't mind it then) for safety.

Tranquil waters relinquished a glossy surface with the first rev of the engine & we bounced across waves like skipping stones, shrieking,

unbound with each satin swell.

Then the tube flipped. The ocean blackened. Sucking water, fighting to find *up*.

Then lightning split clouds:
her hands on my shoulders, one solid yank tugging me close. *It's okay. I've got you now.*

Metamorphoses

In an instant she dropped back.

— Ovid

I'm a girl again, every time, without fail
or brief consideration—immediately
I'm eight years old. My father only has to say,

Melody Rose. I'm felled the way a wizard conjures
storms from sunshine, induces enchantment
with the aid of a whisper.

& I'm reminded of him
when Paty raises Nicole to say goodnight.
My simple Spanish—*Un besito para tú tía?*—turns

her little lips upward. *Buenos noches,*
Tía Melody—& I'm undone
before her kiss.

Best-Laid Plans

A fan perched in the trailer window spins August,
and the scent of horses. Reminds me of
the last time we stood framed in the threshold
to his new house, how Dad used his hands to sketch

rough dreams: attic bedrooms for unborn
siblings, backyard playground. *I know it's not
much*, he says, *but I've got plans*. Now,
he's worn thin, skin stretched tight to his bones.

He never planned this part, I know. Shaking
his head: *She's filing for custody*. He tugs
a Parliament free, mutters, *I'd quit until this
fucking mess*. I understand more than he'll know,

remembering how I clutched Camel filters
after every recent holiday he missed. Outside,
all I can say is how *sorry* I am. He shrugs
off the cliché, hugs me close despite the heat,

gestures up the hill. *Ever drive a four-wheeler?*
Never in my life, & I'm terrified, but he squeezes
my shoulders—*you're doing fine*—& jumps
off, leaving his voice in my hair.

Incredible Lane

In memory of Teresa Candito

Some mornings I'm sure I imagined everything—your laugh,
blonde mane whipping through the air, as pleased as a lioness.
In the end, we weren't allowed to see your lost
hair. I tell myself the laugh lingered. These days you're more
a decoupage of memories: three treks up Incredible

Lane, a rocky strip of earth that wove & dipped
like a college drunk, as I lay curled in the rental car's backseat
We'd meant to visit the San Diego Zoo. Mom was "dying to see"
Hua Mei & Shi Shi munching bamboo, fat & happy,
monochromatic
Buddhas. You were my lesson in Zen that day, swapping children

with my mother, nursing me with Sprite & *Ever After*
as I fed the goat in the backyard. You hugged me close, kissed
my forehead—a blessing. I can't remember your words
at Mom's wedding, only your purple velvet dress, its Celtic symbols:
peace & love braided across the front, continuous, unending.

FABLES

Demigodly

The world looks so clean up here, as if we've mounted Olympus
to witness stuttering lights—lives we could touch, bless,
or ruin at will. From this distance, they gleam,
voiceless

& shining . . . How easy to believe they'll persist
eternally, inexorable & dazzling—like our childhood
faith in constellations & love, legends

without change. Beneath our feet, the city
glistens the way galaxies of smoldering gas, as if mirroring
the motif of planets chasing suns chasing stars,
band

& spiral into themselves. Your hand
eclipses mine, pulls in light & clouds into our clutch. We stand
poised, sentinels to guard what's stellar &
motionless.

Time unwinds, enveloped in your arms, glimmering
like this muted universe, just beyond our reach.

Old Magic

It used to explain the positions of stars
before we knew they consisted of nothing
but heated orbs of glowing dust, molecular
clouds untwinkling. They began as thrones
for goddesses, and seats for tragic lovers,

even recompense for Io's rape & transformation—
centuries of cud instead of the ripe, Athenian fruits
because bitter Juno found no fault in her debauched
spouse. But no apology, just the recovery of slender legs,
pale flesh & a seat among those sky-dwellers.

We've sucked enchantment out of "godly intervention,"
now defined as "atmospheric turbulence," the eye
of Zeus reduced to "interstellar dust." My darling,
what's left when science eradicates myth?
Doesn't overarching Orion still patrol the sky?

The Curse of Beauty: 13th White Witch

She therefore wished to avenge herself because she was not invited, and without greeting anyone or even looking at them, exclaimed in a loud voice, "The king's daughter shall in her fifteenth year pierce herself on a spindle and fall down dead.

— German myth

I.

Nothing like a spinning wheel to turn my stomach:

Coarse wood like a husband's hands
to secure a girl in her place, situated

doll-like, stationary, opposite
what once stood proud among comrades,

hewn and hacked to pieces, gored,
twisted, and warped, a remainder

resembling nothing of a tree. Her perpetual
observation: uncultivated fleece whipped,

thinned, spun, until tame and serviceable.
Hours with only a monotonous melody—

some anthem to industry—humming in her ears . . .
Music to whirl her into deference.

Better she'd avoid those damn wheels entirely.

II.

If I'd simply left her to their so-called *charms*—

Hauled off at fourteen by some Henry VIII replica,
bloating wallet to complement his gut, shoveling his maw
to overflowing with succulent dinners she wouldn't prepare

or eat, long pulls from Shiraz instead. Never shouting over
the blaring television, he'd prop Italian boots on her father's
antique coffee table, raise one hand to summon her.

She'd learn the taste of blood, like wine, from bitten lips,
nights when he'd roll across silk sheets to force
a kiss, gripping her flesh beneath the sweat

of his palms. Sneaking to the kitchen once he slept,
she'd uncork a fresh bottle from the collection, hiss
to a wide-eyed servant, *Keep this between us.*

Death would have been a gift.

Friday Night Keats

Here lies one whose name was writ in water.

— John Keats's gravestone

I ought to write her something, he thinks,
tracing creases of the letter freshly unfolded
on the table where Tom always sat to pen
a digest every week, always encouraging,

never complaining, only the awesome
account of sunrise through the trees. Now
John paces, pursues his brother's phantom
footfalls through corridors, wonders how

to give words back to her. *They must buoy
her further than this lifetime.* He knows oaths
& earnest claims come too easily. It must be
more than a scrawling pen. Give her hope

beyond the truth. (He can't contest the future.) Softly
sentencing from the shadows, Tom's ghost coughs.

Revolution

*It doesn't matter where you're going . . . You are where you're at,
and you just dig that scene.*

— Joel Gion of The Brian Jonestown

Massacre

I. The Dandy Warhols' Second European Tour

If a multitude of British indie-rocker wannabes
crammed into the arena, screaming requests, lyrics,
curses, unnerves any one of the Dandys,

it's impossible to detect. Courtney grinds his lips
against the mic, every word a kiss for fifty
thousand willing mouths, passionate & slick.

The band croons harmony, sweat sliding down
their cheeks to the crash of snare & cymbals.
The Brits adore every second, each new sound—

here's music they can dance to. They swarm & fall,
undulating, rolling hips, rocking to “Hard On
for Jesus.” Arms are for hugging the Dandy Warhols

emblazoned on his shirt, one kid sighs, *Man,
I came 'cause I thought I'd see Zia's tits again.*

II. The Brian Jonestown Massacre—Industry Showcase, L.A.

It starts just the way summer storms sneak
gray clouds across the sky, ominous streaks
startling sun into hiding. Matt Hollywood—

whose name is the closest to that hallowed
city he'll get—hits the wrong chord in *Love*,
& Anton's torrential in an instant, deluge of

denouncements: *Off my stage, motherfucker!*
I'll play by myself. Rolling over guitar
riffs, Hollywood thunders choice phrases

in return, until, clouds now colliding, center stage,
they come nose to bloody nose, fists & wires
enmeshed, rumbling over the scene. Bouncers

become floodgates, pressed almost to overflowing.
Through it all, the lightning of Joel's tambourine.

III. Modern Blues: Bright Eyes at the Temporary Autonomous
Zone, 1999.

It's nearly a perfect take—Conor's blue
and throaty, rasping into the mic, singular

focus, clenching the guitar like it's all
there is. Maybe he's right. Weeks since

her last phone call. Now, he's scarring
strings to match rude marks she gauged

beneath his shoulderblades, crimson
and raw. For six verses, it seems he'll

stick it out, but the denouement comes
swift and unexpected, tearing the seventh

apart. Then he's screaming, clutching
the fretboard as if he'll choke it to death,

bottle of Jack in his free hand, *Forget
your face by the time I wake up.*

IV. Ariennette Hears Her Song

*So don't leave me here
With only mirrors watching me . . .
Oh stay with me, Ariennette
Till the wolves are away*

— Bright Eyes, *Ariennette*

The only part of him mirrors ever
watched: powder-coated interior

of his left nostril, origin of infamous
fevers. Those fans only want

to know about the conception
of genius, how he brought about sounds

of captured madness, the part I played,
why I didn't stay. I want to know

what they would do with a sweating
pianist shrieking down the telephone

line at four a.m., howling apologies
at five, screaming again at six. *Where*

are you, Ariennette? I want my pound of flesh.
Those wolves that frighten him can have the rest.

April is in My Mistress's Face

Twenty years before the Apocalypse Triptych
at Vassar, the National Women's Party, Alice
Paul's teeth clenched against her supper, (The matron
in a D.C. prison first poured it down her throat—

We'll have no martyrs here—but after a while
they couldn't compel her jaw apart. In the end,
they forced a plastic tube through her nasal
passages, scarring them to thwart her hunger.),

before bloomers & protests. Before dancing her joy
on that Harrisburg staircase, Violet Oakley swept
the ceiling of the Capitol, paintbrush unfurling
feathered wings over top hats parading marble halls.

A century later, commissioners of her murals lie
six feet deep, not far from here. Her angels
still stretch pale arms above my head, watching
our miniature madrigal choir clustered beneath.

Meanwhile, our pianist plays the *Pathétique*, small,
earnest frame bowed into the keys as if ivory
were his bones pulled taut by wire muscles.
Strains of Beethoven, wrought from hours spent

huddled just so, wind like ivy around columns,
trail from the outstretched palms of marble saints.
The piano man hums a B-flat so I can't ruin
our entrance.

What Joan Knew

Some days, reaching you comes easy. Closer
than my own breaths, you read me just the way
a scholar gleans truth after seventeen perusals of *Lear*,
sudden, startling inside my head, & I'm the same
with you, sanctioned within your mind, a foreigner
visiting sanctified sites. Those are good days.

Lord, have mercy.

But days can't all be good—the worst times
you're remote as Russia, a vast, frigid continent
I never took time to study. I'm lost; your signs
remain inscrutable. Those times, words I want
to reassure you drift from my mouth, lines
drafted, flown across countries, lost in the end.

Christ, have mercy.

Just when I relinquish hope, resign myself
to your certain departure—it's then you turn
back, smile my name. What's left to tell?
The marvel of your voice, inexorable wonder
of your arms. For that moment, I'd endure Hell,
give myself over to flame. For you, I'd burn.

Lord, have mercy.

Sophie Scholl's Last Visit with her Mother: Stadelheim Prison,
February 22, 1943

Die Sonne scheint noch.
— Sophie Scholl's final words

Like watching two thousand doves let loose,
Mama, taking wing from university balconies—
descending petals of 1700 white roses

dispensing our message. *Unsinn*, Alex and Willi
called it, but I wanted to dance in that shower
of leaflets, arms overhead, whirling in our words.

You must keep dancing—like the day I came
home an hour early, found you and Papa
waltzing in the kitchen, before the White Rose,

secret meetings in Hans's dorm, *Freiheit* in war
paint on München walls. I wish you had seen us
at the university, children again in those few

moments. Never so proud, so liberated; I told them,
*Ich würde es alle genauso wieder machen. Ich bin
stolz darauf.* You see, Mama? The sun still shines.

Posthumous Monologues

I. Cleopatra

An aspic kiss, to wake in his embrace
beyond this world, paradise intended
for more than mortals, lesser gods like us—
my dear Antony, we were never meant

for petty trivialities like war.
We could have conquered all the Earth, but why
waste your strength, my power, on Caesar
& other pathetic creatures just like

that braying ass? I was created to dominate
heavens, my love; every shining star
should be subject to my claim, each great
planet circling, jewels for my wrist. At last, our

union sanctioned. This was my destiny,
though they'll say I gave grief my sanity.

II. Ophelia

They say I exchanged sanity for grief—no
father, lover sent away... What else had I to do

but weep & sing to wilted bouquets? *Remembrance*—
a frozen blue in Laertes's eyes the first time

he slid a clammy hand along my thigh,
nothing like the Danish prince's reverence

& me wrapped in his covers. My brother cringed
at our fevered hands entwined, clinging together

through Elsinore. His biting whisper—
Vain love; that fool will never be king.

*We know he's lost his mind. You've heard the way
he raves.* I sensed it then, prologue to our river scene,

his hands pressing against my hair, like the burden
of a lover's grief-tossed weight upon my grave.

III. Desdemona

A lover's jealous weight—to force my lungs
full of satin despite my struggles; not enough,
dragging overripe honor through Venetian
filth. *No* proof, except some absent cloth ...

Delighting in its return, I'd tear the damned
scrap to shreds. So quick to dub
me *cunning whore*, though, as husband,
he wouldn't consecrate our bed,

preferring slander spat from a viper
who couldn't make lieutenant. Thirty minutes
could have proved my honesty. He preferred
to desecrate what sanctity those quilts

retained, saturate wedding sheets with tears
and pleas, rather than the sweat of lovers.

IV. Emilia

Pleas for mercy turned to lover's sighs
beneath his unyielding mouth, curdling lips—
devious delight, having found in *wife*
contender & lover combined. New tricks

for tangled bodies: *Just try to hold me
off.* Alarming decadence, uninhibited
responses from both sides. He'd only dreamed
of a spouse who allowed sparring in bed,

trembled only half in fear when he raised
his hand, then belt. Though I sincerely pled
against excessive force, it was too late:
he took my whimpers for implied consent.

What terrible sense it made—a final feat
of love that ran me straight through to the hilt.

V. Regan

Love will run you straight through if you let it.
My dear sister could tell you everything
she knew on the subject, if she hadn't

clogged her throat with steel. Now, guilt? A little late,
I believe—& to what point & purpose?
I'll tell you why. She didn't have the taste

for blood. She'd swear up & down she could
kill without mercy, but the little duchess
softened, weaker than the men she censured

for their frailty. Look what finally
forced that elegant hand: *Love* of some man
she couldn't have. & poison? What a cheap,

impersonal scheme. She just couldn't face
the truth: he would have loved me anyway.

VI. Cordelia

In truth, I would have failed them anyway,
eventually. We're all torn from grace
in the end—stars tumbling away

from heaven in the night. No one can keep
perfect forever. At some point, we slip,
stumbling into vanity, or the deep

canyons of temptation: It's a story
beginning with our first days, when Eve
grasped the forbidden fruit, surveyed it, sheen,

glistening in the dappled morning sunlight,
slick and illicit, the promise of delight
bursting beneath her tongue. Though I'd strive

to uphold Heaven's laws, I'd rather prove
true with my spilled blood than lose their love.

VII. Juliet

I didn't spill my blood to prove my love.
What purpose would it have served, when he lay
a still & silent shadow, like the day
I rose before him, listened to the soft

whistle of his breaths? That morning he stirred
beneath my kisses, eyelids trembling
like starlings testing wavering wings.
His lips warmed against my smile. What inspired

him to swallow that draught, I understand.
But why couldn't he wait moments longer
for a *sign*? I'd have waited forever
to feel his heart stutter beneath my hand.

Patience failed. When he died, it sealed my fate—
why should I wake if not in his embrace?