

Proper Care and Feeding

his husbandry leaves much to be desired

she's always itchy, always sluggish

the water too stagnant

the light too bright

she adapts

she spends days circling, waiting for feeding time

the feed is inadequate, tasteless

dissolves like tissue on her swollen tongue

she adapts again and again

the stress frays her

her hair thins, her nails band and split

the corners of her mouth redden and crack

rough patches bloom on her cheeks, multiply across her body

like lights reflecting on the surface of a cold sea

she's a castaway on the swells of her body

she can feel salt crusting her joints

stiffening her limbs

blistering her skin

she adapts

she drinks more water

she stops looking in mirrors

she starts looking through windows

Splinter

A glass splinter glistens in her fingertip. She watches the skin redden and swell around it, hoarding it jealously.

She traces the bump of inflammation, the hard edge of the glass with the tip of her tongue. She tries to squeeze the splinter free, but her flesh won't release it. It burrows deeper. The pain is mild but a constant companion. A burr snagging her attention--here I am, here I am, here I am.

It's trapped. She wants to free it. Her skin burns around it. Her unpricked fingers tingle in sympathy.

With a thumbnail, she pushes until a slick of blood washes it out. The blood is pale, mixed with clear fluid--warm and salty.

Jellyfish

1.

When the windows are open, she can't stop shivering.
When they're closed, the air eats itself. Swallows its own oxygen.

She wonders what it would be like to have no air at all,
to gasp and gasp and come up empty, to struggle and still die.

Easy to kill with absence, with neglect, with inaction.
Easy to cause suffering with want.

She wants for nothing.
Her husband makes sure her every need is met, but her body is
reluctant to open, its language opaque.

But she knows the body's need to pace from one room to another.
On the hot, lightless days, she drifts down hallways, down stairs,
her body light and aimless as a school of dust motes propelled by an unseen draft.

I'm a jellyfish, she thinks.

She likes this thought. She's watched many videos and documentaries about the sea, about jellyfish.
She knows about currents, about seas full of things that can't swim.

She thinks about stillness absolute and total, about being at the mercy of currents that could sweep her
to waters too cold or too hot or too barren for survival.

In placid waters, she would die.

2.

At night she lies next to him, listening to him breathe, and lets her hand hang over the
side of the bed. She keeps her fingers still, trailing like jellyfish tentacles through the darkness.

Her skin prickles in anticipation, alert to every stray stirring of air.

She imagines herself long and gelatinous, a shredded curtain ready to tangle and feed on whatever the
currents bring her. But her fingers twitch, a muscle spasm gives away the game. She doesn't catch
anything, but she closes her eyes and drifts off anyway.

3.

She sleeps. She dreams of seagulls out of frame and unseen. Their voices over compressed, full of data loss and distance.

4.

The next day she dusts half-heartedly, lets her thoughts return to the jellyfish. Even the most helpless of them are not helpless, unable to move on their own but with limbs covered in harpoons and poison. They tangle, they kill, they feed.

She'll watch that documentary again when she's done with the cobwebs in the corner of this room.

5.

She's boneless, jointless, heartless, nerveless, brainless--
nothing but nematocysts, dangling arms, and a gut full of digestive enzymes.

But she wants to make her own currents, to propel things away from her or to draw things towards--
she'd like to have that choice.

Fissures And Trenches

She keeps a list of all the cracks, gaps, holes in the house. The newest ones are:

1: a short gap between the baseboard and floor in the kitchen. The floorboards have settled, or the baseboard has warped, or both of them have shrunk from each other. It's a narrow gap, a thick line of darkness skirting the edges of her vision when she flicks on the light in the mornings. Her gaze falls to it, and she wonders how deep it goes. How many crumbs, dust mites, shards of broken ceramic have made their escape.

2: a gap between the floorboards near the foot of the bed. This one's wide enough to swallow the small, narrow things she drops--coins, paperclips, wedding rings. This one groans under her weight when she crouches to pry bits of metal from its hungry, patient mouth. Sometimes she lets it keep what it takes. A few safety pins, a penny--no one will miss them.

3: a crack in the foundation. At the foot of the basement stairs there's a long sliver of disruption not even wide enough for her fingernail. The only things that could slip through are air and water, and so far she's felt no drafts. When it rains, it stays dry. She doesn't know how deep it goes, if it even reaches the other side of the wall.

Osedax

She repeats a phrase she heard on TV: "This house has good bones." She says it to herself over and over, trying to wear it down, smoothing away the parts that prick and jab at her. It's unsettling, this idea of a house having bones and her moving through them like a parasite wiggling through the body of a huge beast. This makes her a bone eater, a worm boring snug tunnels through walls of rigid tissue. The goodness of these bones is unknowable. They yield, support the hollows she carves with only the occasional groan. Is that goodness? A willingness to be honeycombed, a talent for silence. Maybe better bones would resist this. Maybe the best bones would splinter, would cave, would have buried her long before she got this far in.

Benthic Zone

her husband is gone for the evening

she's alone. it's getting dark. it's raining
the bed sheets sag with damp and the hiss of tires from distant traffic reach her in lazy waves

it's the ocean again, thin and full of static
saltwater fills the room

her skin thins, expands, dissolves--
she needs room for what's floating in her, she makes room--
blue light spills in a stream of bioluminescence from the phone on her chest but she ignores its pulsing

sound muffles, slows in her
her mass distorts it
her mass crushes things that don't belong inside her

tonight she wants the soft, hungry things swimming through her currents to be uncrushed
she's filled with fangs and nematocysts and
a depth charge: another pulse, another swirl of light
she can't answer--

a dead leviathan is sinking through her slowly enough for
its bones to be colonized, bored into, dissolved
its flesh flaking away and trailing above it, below it like a veil of snow
this body will feed many, many mouths
this body needs a witness, needs gratitude
for the gifts it gives to her depths