

The Law of Ruins

Truth is, though, pieces of your speech
peak through when I am tired.

When I've tried too long to keep up
with the old men in the Book Barn's backroom.

When I've tried too hard to keep up
with the old men in the chess park
where they sit in ageless and endless rows and ranks,
and I have grown bone-weary,

I will send my r's to the back of my throat.

I will savor them as you did,
especially in the moments of your madness with me.

I will gargle alveolar approximate as you did,
and trim the terminal consonants
from my hard-stop words,
slurring my way, paving my sleep-time tongue
to your tempo.

Truth be told, when you wore your Sunday fedora,
when you smoked your Sunday cigars,
when you took a seat and propped up your legs
in Broca's Area,

you left the smoldering remains of your arrival
like the ashes of an ashen-shattered Dresden,
a bull-shaken Guernica,
a race-burned Tulsa,

each asking for me to find my feet,
to find each piece left piled high,
and build the city back

in a language that only my tribe and I,

in our building rite,
and our burning time,
will ever understand.

Present Perfect

Your voice has ripened
over this three-day
Mediterranean stay,
and I must use *bokeh* to shoot you
with true honesty.
Honestly, I can reduce that light
to tiny baubles that disappear the girl
who is just to your right.
I can dissolve the pillars,
the Mondrian,
turn the window mullion to blur.
I have listened to your rasp,
now grown three-days deeper with
midday crowds at the piazza,
and the laughter that spilled
out of you as you
spilled limoncello
down my back when we embraced
in this place
two nights before.
Now, your long,
crossed hands smolder a cigarette,
and I have modeled a frieze of your timbre.
I have cleared away clutter,

and ordered light to utter
the shape of your voice as you
laugh a *mea culpa*, two days old,
and offer to buy us drinks
from the bar when the time is right.

The Actual Price of Her Bangles

She will run the whole way
this time.

When the sea voices tell her to -
chanting shanties,
mouthing driftwood, barracoon songs -
she will run
the whole way
to the breakers.

She will leap the sea wall
when the voices tell her to,
the ankle bangles clanking
against mosquito-worn flesh.

She could tell you their whole
story if you cared to hear -
if the voices demanded that
she recite their names
and explain them across
the breaking tide,
and breaking time,
and the clank of bangles she
found one morning
lost in the cursed sands

of the Outer Banks.

They had staved off tarnish and time,
ever-gleaming-young,
carrying the captive magic
from the womb of a middle-passage ship.

She wore them as art –
sensuous and hip-
against the flesh-and-bone of her leg.

Now, she must sing the songs
of the ballast people,
their voices keeping time
in her head as she runs
towards the crashing waves,
the sea wall's wide-spread arms,
and the oncoming tide.

A Feminist Interpretation of the Massacre

With a frantic swirling of your hands
you take up your hair
like a Gibson girl,
then look at me with
the sudden clarity of sleep.
Standing on the edge of the bed,
wearing a concert t-shirt
that we've shared between us
down to a faded rag,
wearing the panties that ride
higher on one hip than the other,
you tell me your vision of the Zong.
They must have made a charm bracelet
of the African women, you explain,
standing on the edge of my bed.
Chained at the ankles,
each to the next,
on the 29th of November,
with the ship's water running low,
you say that the Dutch gentlemen
must have ushered those ladies
to the open window
with the utmost of care.

Third Lunch Alone in Sydney

The Chinatown in Darling Harbor is different, still.
It leans itself against the Quay,

mingling fingers with a polyglot throng,

remembering how long they said

“stay await”

“stay away”

during Yellow Peril days.

I have to wonder, alone at my brown, square table

of steaming beef and tea:

Had Gadigal soil gone fallow here,

waiting for this newcomer to plant itself

a bottle tree – sea salt and fecund seeds –

and birth its own Dreamtime-breathing seers?

The Transubstantiation of the Vanuatu Faithful

When it is feeding time on Vanuatu,
the kind white minders of Ambrym
sit down the brown children,
tell them that their ancestors pulled meat
from bone to eat as a sustenance warning
to outrigger aliens that came on waves
from nearby shores.

Imagine, then, a flocking murder of flapping black
spirit men, casting spells on dry, white wafers,
telling their barefoot foundling fold
that it was damnation fear that brought them there,
and it is near to dear God
to infinitely consume the Son,
to imbibe and eat and claim long-pig meat
without the sanguine swing of a tempered war club,
without the whistling point of a spear.

Your Use of Uncanny Valley in Your Latest Piece

I love the fact that you never
describe the monster.

You give us the woods in repose,
ancient and frozen,
and the histories of stories of men
gone out and gone missing
in the whistling timber.

But you don't describe the monster.

You conjure the musk,
suffocating and redolent
of carrion and decay,
but you never say if its hide bristles
like a boar's, or if it drags
a shag belly across the forest floor.

Finally, in Chapter 8,
when the floorboards shake,
waking the boy protagonist,
he sits up that night to see it walk upright
past his window.

To see it pause as though
there was something that
it had forgotten,
something that it had not gotten
right that night.

Soaked in fright,
he watches it sigh out
steam, and stride for the trees,
dropping its shoulders as though to say

it had done all it could do
and this would have to suffice.

First Edits of Your “The Family Horror” Story*

You never do tell the reader how
the monster came to be
in the family’s basement.

We learn how it hides behind
the broken body of the old
hot water heater,
and the cobweb Christmas boxes –
its hide like wet leather in moonlight,
dripping viscous mucus in the family’s
underground darkness.

We learn why it infects the disaffected
with its endless need to feed on thoughts,
how it mines their minds for memories,
eating dreams and scouring cortexes clean.

You write why the patriarch becomes
its first supplicant, sending his youngest daughter
down into the cellar to find “the greenest wreath
from the oldest box”
to hang on the family door.

But, you never type for us
how the people came to live
above the monster.

Did it grow like mold beneath them,
feeding on the dank and dark of
their unfinished space?

Did you decline to write
that it dug its way up from
some living grave that
some ancients made to save
their minds some long-ago time?
Do you want us to think that
it could spring, fully-formed,
from the family's third eye,
made up of time,
wishes unmet,
the daughter's fear,
and the father's fearsome regret?

Deciphering the Ghosts of Your Haunted House Novel

Do they haunt this house
because it once owned them,
these ghosts that you wrote?
Is that what we are to read and glean
from each chapter-passage?
That when you wrote the nameless *haint*
who drifts up and down
the grand spiral stair,
you were saying that she'd
been manacled there?
That the oldest one was bound
to the house by the cast-iron heat
of an ancient stove?
That "The Silhouette Boy" in the garden
was the shade of a gambling debt

collected by the master one day,
two-day's carriage ride away?
And did you mean that
in the mansion's middle passage,
over a sea of over 100 years,
from plantation to wedding venue celebrations,
their names had gained manumission
and only their engram shades remained?

Retreat Across the Lake

In the last of your letters
there is each pause you take
in your writing breaks
on the wraparound porch.
There is one story of perfidious hands
around dusk, and one tale of the coterie
that comes at night to hear what you write
each day.
Ensorcelled by the nightly fire,
the twice distilled,
and your latest draft,
one asks if you can't write
with your manual type
back in the city
because the neighbors are too tight
through paper-thin walls.
One asks whether they might make
the pit blaze higher and higher still

until the patricians across the lake
fear that a family is finally finding
the need for a *suttee* cleansing
of some patriarch's shame.
Or, the patricians may fear,
clear across the murk of the lake,
a fascist tribe has finally found
the degenerate books that it sought
and is sleepless now,
trying to bind paper with fire
in the middle of the night
on the far side of the water.

The Falangist Post Script

You stretched out your legs
below our kitchen table
and told me about meeting the author.
He was darker than you
had always read him to be –
more a Sephardic bard,
less of a sea captain's whiskey beard.
Professing, mostly, around a cigarette
at the corner of his mouth,
fitting like swimming
in a too-big detective trench coat,
running knuckles through a thick crop
of jetlag shadow,
he bought airport coffee for you.
His new book, he said, will start
in the Valley of the Fallen
on the day that they are wrenching
Franco from the Earth.
Revenant fascist,
draped in sand
and bull's blood,
he is bound, at last,
for Madrid.
From there, the author said,
he will write backwards
to a woman who is Catalan
and tall, like you,
her cruel lover,

who descends from conversos,
and the American father
who travels to Caruna
in 1936 to find the last
of his wandering children
before it is too late.
He is late to the fight,
only wants to take the children home,
but soon refuses to wash
the scent of burning books
from his clothes
or his skin.

Suyzhet, for Now

We can be *suyzhet*
if you choose, losing sync
with the rise and decline
of our plotline – this time
starting the story with our numb
and fumbling kiss in the must
of an apartment party's
coat room darkness.
This time, breaking the line,
we are starting without any sense of *fabula*-
without the passing glances,
then the courtyard view from your window,
then the bass they played in the flat below,
then the *en passant* men
who needed to kiss you

in a public tableau
so that they could trust that you
were not simply made of binary codes, sugar, and lust.
Instead, we can start this by flashing back
to the sillage wake of
what you wore then,
and to the churning of tan legs
as you pass me in the park,
frantic to claim a place
and play chess with
the last unmatched old man.

Marcheline, and the Spectacle of Fearsome Acts

For a split moment,
Marcheline –
the one-night woman –
stands bare in the window.
Below, in the piazza,
two old men
in those round *cappella*
that only old men own,
play a tag San Michelle.
Both play with naked blades named
“my wound brings death.”
Both blades coruscate
Corsican sunlight shimmers.
Returning to the sheets,
mocking sleep, breathing deeply,
she can still reap the heat that lives there
as she waits for you to return
with a tourist beignet,
and the coffee that boasts a trefoil
and the profile of Napoleon on the can.

The Leaving is Easier

The leaving is easier,
once she has dressed herself
in oxblood and rust,
and even her eyes
are done up in ochre dust,

once there is the taste
of oxidation and oak cask
in the back of your throat,
once the cloud curtains close
like grey castle walls,
and the rain storms in
whirlpools like an angry Charybdis,
once you finally craft
your Creole griot character
who uses wet, black ash
as a mask to finish his story.

The leaving is easier
once she is standing
in a puddle laced in red neon,
edging her questions
and hedging her bets
that your bruit is as finished
as your whiskey
and you will never pass
this way again.

In a Well-Lit Room

Apocryphal, perhaps,
but no less true,
that she drew you straight
out of a cool, clawfoot bath,
and watched you steam
in the aestivating heat
of that room.

Her story about it had no time
other than “summer.”

The scene she set for me
had few words beyond
the hortatory plea
to you to stand naked -
“please stay naked”

while she gathered her
tools and captured the light
that bounded from your body.

She told me about a “sometime”
in the city

– alone and before you –
when she bought the camera lucida
that she used that day.

Antique and storied.

And, in her story,
she said, you could read
her need to capture
your reflection before it fled.

She placed you in a square of glass,

and traced you as easily as if
you were leaving tracks
in the sand,
or sending up steam after
a cool, summer bath.

Speaking of Your Hands

Speaking of your hands,
and how you mention me –
fleeting with fingers flexing
the climbing ivy of your arm tattoo.

One gossamer summer sleeve
tumbles to your elbow
as you make a panther's paw,
then a fist that you hold
for a moment, square and stalwart,
like a protest frieze caught on film,
caught on fire.

Then you make the fig of Spain
that ends my name
with a hard "t."

You hold it aloft and pause,
showing me the weft of your thumb
threaded through your fingers,
the press of their tips
against the heel of your palm.

You show me the sound
of my name held silent
in your hand,
and I understand:
I am the tribute sacrifice,
brought bound up from town,
and you have kept
your vestal vow to Harpocrates,
the mute child,

the bitter god of silence.

When Your Children Build the New Year's Eve Fire *

Your children have built a flame

on the beach,

and you have guided me

from the reach of the glow.

It is the end of the year,

and they are feeding it

with the driftwood ghosts

that haunt this strand.

Now, their pyre signs high,

as though they are wreckers

calling for hulls to ground themselves

on the shallow teeth of the reef below.

Calling for the sudden silhouette

of a midnight freighter to come

birth itself on the rocks.

They are mourning,

and they are laughing,

and they weep as they clamor

like crabs over one another

and St. Vitus balter,

and keen in the darkness.

You lean against me

in the high dune grass,

we watch the ship pass,

and you muse that its

hold is full of *linie aquavit*

maturing its way around
the world.

But, I decide that it is tea,
packed and sealed
and crossing the sea -
the leaves in bundles
fresh from the fire,
the heat, the steam
that seared them dry,
and the withering time that
gave them the desiccation
of new life.

Triveni Sangam with Our Former Lover on the Bacchanal Balcony

The next time they gather us,
collecting the faithful,
there is endless prosecco and wrought iron
railings that invite the invited up
to the new apartment
with its vaulted ceilings.

The next time, they have
gathered wax jazz that endlessly turns,
collecting echoes in the highest
corner arches.

The next time they gather us,
She is there, *ex nihilo*,
and we three gather
as French-window refugees,
balcony-high with us listening,
as she turns raconteur
of her life since our confluence.
She tells us that she stills plays
your cello, but now
she must be barefoot and alone.
She tells us that she can still live
in endless king drag
because she has bought out
the vintage men's place, except for
the wingtips that still ache her feet.
She tells us that she has chanted
my "shanti, shanti, shanti"
in a bordello just over the border,

paying board and room
by casting cards and selling stories
of *bruja* magic.

She tells us that she
still loves your burnt sienna mouth,
and that she can no longer wear your
lingering shade of red when
she goes out to see “those boys.”

She tells us that she
slicks back her hair
as though she were going to
meet a lover, and that she touched
the spire of *Sagrada Familia* twice
since we saw her last.

She tells us that she
tried to drown in the
gathering of three rivers,
and found *Triveni Sangam*
wanting— inviting her in,
but rebirthing the sin,
the knowledge, and the echo
of its own rising tide
over and over again.

Mojito Conjuring

When the *bruja* in the red dress
sends me out this time,
it is for the taste of

sour oranges and garlic.

Once, when I plied her
with a cigar called *Hoyo de Montyerrey*,
she coiled the smoke,
said that I was still feral and untamed,
sent me out for sugar so that
I could learn my name.

Scythe-swinging, field-slave-singing,
I could not return to her coven of one
until I had learned that my “Suarez”
meant that I was the son of sugar itself –
the child of wild *ingenious* devouring
the rows of cane like a dragon.

Now, red-dress *bruja* breathes out
clouds of *tobacco negro*,
turns the cigar round and round,
tells me to gather garlic and aurantium oranges
so that the sour and the *sucre* may jibe
together in me,
and leave me properly christened
for when it is time for me to work,
time for me to sing,
time for me to sweat.

The Romance of Wandering Tongues

Maybe, it was Ladino.

I don't know.

Maybe, last night,

when her voice pirouetted

in and out of mumble,
she was able to grasp
the tail of her *avelo's* work shirt
and be whisked along
with Aramaic magic
like Wendy Darling out the window
of our bedroom.

It was probably because I found out,
asked about, the books of near-Castillian
that scraped the sky on the highest plane
of our hallway bookshelf.

Maybe, it was all about
the black-and-white framed family –
big-hands-work-shirt man,
coquettish skirt-girls –
of whom she would tell me nothing
until she sat upright in our bed, naked,
and gave her somniloquy about
the romance of wandering tongues,
and the final brutality of finding home.

When You Explain the Guerrilla War

You are telling me tales
of your long-ago woman,
and I can't help but picture you
as Goya's peasant with arms upstretched
on the 3rd of May.

That was you,
in my mind,

all through that night,
all through our dinner,
and the winter of the stories
that you told
at our table.

In the first of your stories
you stole your father's truck,
and drove until that long-ago girlfriend
said it was time to stop and eat peaches
from a farmer's roadside stall.

Torrents of sugar ran down your bare arm,
down the divot of your chin,
and she wanted you to know
that it was a "stone"
not a "pit"
that glistened in your palm
when the feasting was done.

And there you are in Goya's Prado picture
that I paint in my mind,
with your arms stretched wide.

You are either begging her
to explain why she chose that road,
and the midday syrup of those peaches,
or you are asking her why
she cannot simply be the faceless soldier
she claims to be
and kill you where you stand.

Speaking this Way as Well

At the end of the dream
she is using her hand
to teach me to say the words.
She clutches my cheeks,
my chin, in one palm
like I am a disobedient child
and I have wounded her mother-magic
with a mishandled vowel - a wayward tone.
She makes me purse my lips,
saying that I must make the sound
in my mouth
like it sounds in "mouth,"
and "flower,"
or "tower" and "now."
She is wringing phonics and history
from me until I break from my idiolect,
and she slips a finger into my mouth
as though she were deflowering
an open wound.

By What Name?

I have to wonder:

With this country that we build

between us,

collapse, immolate, and build again,

what would be the demonym

for the dwellers,

if it had dwellers, within?

Let's say they are there,

and they wait through

our nightly ritual of soil,

famishment, and heaving dyspnea

to rise like so many golems.

What mumbled moniker

would they scrawl across their heads?

And when we are done, again,

and back to scaffold-building,

to crisscross-weaving,

to building anew,

to turning the ground,

what would they call themselves

this time around?

By what name would

their tribe of pepper-sweat flesh,

nutmeg pages,

and sweet metallic estrus

name itself until

it was time, again,

to churn fire,
burn what we have built,
and breathe life into soil
one more time.

Brief Marginalia on Your First Draft

The truth is,
I believe that what
the reader needs
is to know
more about the New York
writer woman
before you kill her off
that final night by the sea.
I mean, when you place her
at her beach retreat,
writing her memoir
and drinking Scotch, neat,
over and over,
bare feet and summer-brown legs
crossed beneath the rough kitchen table,
why do you say she has “mourning sickness?”
Why do you tell the reader that
the iron stove is cold?
Did the New York writer woman
seek cedar for her table and her beams
because the scent would gift her
the Proust Effect and the wisdom
of memory?
Why do we learn that
she can hear the boarders’ lovemaking
from the attic in the middle of day,
and that the storming breakers

don't chase her away from the ocean's edge
even as the sky swells and the tide comes up
to meet her feet?

If It is Any Consolation

If it is any consolation,
Antonin Artaud would have had
more than I to say about you
and your new helical tattoo.

The linked, ink scorpions
that climb your thigh beyond
your would-be garter line
would be, he would say,
mocking him with curses
and spells. Telling tales of
his talent for sleep walking,
casting aspersions on his
scrawled screeds and reachings
for Truth.

Opium-mad in our place
of the sane, Antonin Artaud
might ask where these creatures
go when they are done with
“burning his marrow,” with
parading his shame.

Faulty Heating Apotheosis

In our old *dojo*,
that first true school
that grew above the musty *bodega*,
the place where he taught us
the most recondite of *kata*,
where we learned the push-pull
of *dehana waza*,
and the harmony of blades,
there was a leaky radiator.
You probably never saw it.
It squatted in the corner
of the men's dressing room,
oxidized iron, ornate, cold, and coiled
during the summer months,
hissing a water-stain Rorschach
into the paste-grey wallpaper
during the winter.
It waited through autumns,
leaking bleed water
into a bucket,
when we worked
calloused feet across the *tatami* mats
and the bare wood
of the other room,
when the threads of Delilah's *gi*
came undone in my grip, sounding crisp,
splitting slits of torn cloth in my fists,

when I cracked an ulna against
the battering swing of your shin.
The bleeding-leak radiator waited
in the men's changing room,
watching over folded clothes,
and aligned shoes in perfect rows
as though each pair was planted
and planned to sprout a
new man when the steam leaked again,
the seasons changed,
and the weather was just right.

Did You Invite the Woman?

Did you invite the woman
with *sanpaku* eyes?
Did her RSVP reply disappear
into your study's stack when
we were planning for tonight?
Does she always wear something
black and tight,
with bangles that tingle crisp like silver
rain water down her arms?
Did you see the desperate way
she used her hands
when she talked?
How she out-toed like a dancer
when she walked
back to our marble bar
to claim more prosecco?
Do you know if she always starts stories
of losing Barcelona *in medias res*,
and ends them before their ending comes due?
Did her wake make you think
that the house was doused
in sweet tobacco and saffron orange?
Did you see how she kissed me *besita*,
as if I were her *inamorata*,
long-lost from some life gone by?
Did you see that she kissed me,
took my hand,

like a man -*bestia* and
wild -guided me aside
so that she could
pull me close,
share prosecco,
and bring her story
to a close.

That Which Goes up in Smoke

When you used tools
that the Old Men left
for you – and you alone –
you drew English from Hebrew,
italicized and crosswised
as you spelled out
the telling of *olah*
in your newest journal.
Over your shoulder
leaning, learning that you still
scrawled with the lateral quadropod
of which they tried to cure you
when we were still children in school,
I mispronounced the word, yet again.
Stretching the *O* long, into the romantic
“hello” of my *abuello*’s outstretched arms
“Like *hola*?” I repeated to your umbrage,
because the “burning” word you had learned
was an open mouthed “ah” with the lips

unpursed, wide, almost saying
a name of God as fire eats both syllables,
one after the other,
and the ashes of offering
begin to ascend.

The Busker's Candomble

Actually, I take that back.
I take that back as far
as I can take it back -
as far as I must -
without it fading me to black,
without it turning me
to dust that you blow
into the face of an unwilling horse
of your goofer *dressage*.
I take that back:
She does still wear the black hat -
that top hat bergère-style.
When she takes her cello
and takes her walk down to the
metro stop, to the taxi stand,
she wears the black hat
with that rakish tilt
of Papa Legba.
It still has its peacock feather with
its glowing blue eye.
It still has its ring of skulls,
its ring of bones,

but her father's *candoblé* has
gone cold beneath its brim.
Her candles' wax is frozen
in the shape of its last melting
on her mantle,
and her salt waits in jars
to make circles on the kitchen floor.
Her *candoblé* has gone desuetude,
and she lays that hat on sidewalk
top side down.
She takes a bow,
takes up her bow,
waits by the gate,
and the hat overflows
as she plays *Ring of Fire*
and the multitudes throw
their shekels in the rush-hour dusk.

Reconsidering the Photo from Which You Drew Inspiration

I don't doubt you,
but for now, we are drinking schnapps.
You are her biographer,
the one who wrung words
from this dark and grained
famous photo of the poet,
of Seaborn Grace in her heyday,
retouched for your book's cover -
for the darkly-grained
story you tell of her.

Fair and fine.

But for now, we are drinking schnapps
in her honor.

For now, we are telling tales of Seaborn,
and her sojourn in these mountains,
making a home like Medea in exile.

For now, we are toasting her poetry
with Schnapps,

making a stop at each *Kneipe*

this night, that will serve

ink-drinking brigands,

in search of a Generation's lost poet.

We are pondering and pontificating

on the photo that inspired you –

Paris balcony bacchanal,

Seaborn in her narrow tie,

men's twill, wing-tip shoes.

On the balcony to her left,

Jewish ballerina girl

who loved her in Russian and French,

who left her when lauded

words and ponderous ink had taken her place.

On her right, the box-and square husband-man

who claimed to "understand" why

she had thrown away her father's land for his,

who would swallow all of the medicine cabinet

when it was clear she would kill the children

of their splendid isolation.

Smiles and cocktails on that balcony all around

as they drank, as we drink,
they stare back,
moving us to a long-ago
feast where we may slake a
thirst, or we may drown.

Pilgrimage to What was the Poet's Paris Apartment

I would like to believe Seaborn Grace
would bleed down these stairs at night.

Wearing her father's suspenders
and the sharp pleats of the husband's
wool slacks,

she would move
like slow-motion fluid.

I would like to believe she
would leave the apartment -
three floors up -
and ease herself down these stairs
when her writing time had run dry
for the day and the Paris darkness
had given her grace.

I could see her, free of the all-day clatter
of her finger-chatter machine
pressing words into the parchment
she used in lieu of common paper.

I could see her, freed, for the time being,
from charting her every thought
on the butcher's sheets

she'd thrown across the floor -
manic hands frantic and cramping
as she ruminated through charcoal scrawling
and endless clouds
of Turkish smoke.

I imagine her bleeding
her way down these steep marble steps
to find café taxi girls
who drank American gin
and swayed slowly, alone,
in dark corners.

She would choose whomever had hair
that was pageboy-cut,
sienna, or black.

Whoever blew out long grey plumes
with her head tilted back.

She would choose whomever
could dance Bachata with her
while the working men watched.

She would choose,
lead them to her room,
and fill their dance cards
with stories spoken in ink,
charcoal, and Turkish smoke
from three floors up.

On the Second Night She Went to Hear Django Reinhardt, the Same Girl was There

She would forgive herself

from the night before,
and start again
with absinthe and silence
at the far end of the bar.
Thujone and sugar,
in a stygian place like this,
would make her weightless,
translate the Romani girl
with the burning-*kohl* eyes,
sate her craving to interrupt
the gypsy's storytelling lips with a kiss.
She would let her journal confess
that she dressed in fedora splendor
that night because the Romani girl
loved American gangster movies,
and Seaborn desperately
needed to be her Al Capone.
So, Seaborn would drink licorice poison,
under the shadow of her hat,
and listen as the gypsy meandered her story
through English, French, and, finally,
over Carpathian land
that she alone could navigate.
The poet would simply listen
until the girl's caravan arrived
in this candle-fire bar,
with its air full of three-fingered jazz,
its Tommy-gun poet
twisting herself into silent, green-fairy rings,

and its gypsy witch,
with her enraptured American,
turning raconteur in the flickering dark.

How She Wrote that Piece About the Colonial Veteran, Circa 1922*

How did she hound
the one-handed African?
I can't truly know, though,
because she was Seaborn Grace
on the precipice of autumn in Paris,
there must have been the long-striding legs,
slouching American-style
up and down the Left Bank,
her hands in her father's pockets,
as this was when she wore his pleated trousers
and his thick suspenders around town.
According to the letters,
this was when she had learned
to enslave her tongue-
learned the art of muteness
to earn the words of her newest muse.
So, she listened from behind
the shattered Senegalese soldier as
he bought his fruit, his meat, his Proust,
and flinched at the slamming
of the bookstore door.
His war, she would write in her poem,
ended at Verdun.
She pondered his missing hand and,

in the poem, wrote away
his entire left arm, saying
sepsis gangrene found a home
in a sabre gash that ran
to the bone.

She probably leaned on a gas lamp,
lighting fire to her cigarette and watched
the way the African – one-handed and
dwelling in Flanders nostalgia – had
learned to tuck his parcels into the crook
of his well arm and doff his cap
in one motion, then disappear
into the gloaming throng
like mercury vapor,
like mustard gas,
like fog.

The Unnamed Woman of her Fourth Journal, 1939*

Seaborn Grace didn't recognize the language
that splashed her as she passed
the woman in black.

It was warmer than the Carpathian tongue
of her last lover, but not so hot,
not so dry, that she could not
plant olive trees and rosemary
in the rocky soil of her voice.

Nameless on the street that night
she also wore the clothing
of a second-hand man -

hers, slick and black
like a dandy from Harem,
an American renegade,
with double-loop zoot-suit
chains that swayed down by her knees.
Seaborn Grace, in her late-night pacing
would never know the word
her woman muttered,
but would turn on her heel,
and trace her wake back
past the glowing drinkeries,
back past the vendors of flowers
for sudden impromptu lovers,
back the way she had come.

Her Take on the Pain of Magical Realism

There was one night,
that Seaborn Grace told the woman
called Margarita to slap her.
It was the usual bar,
where Seaborn told the woman
that her diary knows only as “Grita” –
the woman who rolled cigars for her
and snuck behind her
to plant a lilac in her hair –
to slap her face
with the wideness
of her palm,

because Seaborn Grace wanted
to write the life of a *jibaro*
who dwelled on the side
of a living mountain that
breathed like a deity and fed
from his sacrificial pain.

Rejected like Cain
from the good graces of the mountain
he would lash out at the mute woman
who called herself his wife.

He would say nothing,
but would strike her
with the shapeless, brown mass
of his hand, then return to his land,
demanding that his farm
curry his favor with plantains today
and mangoes tomorrow.

Growing something that the mountain
would accept as its tribute.

So, she asked her Grita
to strike once that night,
in front of the drink-drowning work men
and the shambling poets,
because she needed to feel
the sharp, smack-cracking of
callouses across her face,
and finally understand the sudden
violence of silent men.

Rowing Man Alone on the Seine, 1940 *

Seaborn watches the last of the men
rowing his scull.

Already shattered, the ice
of the Seine parts for him
as he cleaves the dingy watercolors
of a late afternoon.

She writes his poem
in a cockney brough,
says that he is a lean ex-patriot
who wandered here in '39
after the fascist tide drowned his company
on the ragged edges of Madrid.

She says that his right
hand tremors,
remembers, the opening of skulls
against barricade walls.

She writes in long-hand and black carbon
about how the tide
has drifted him to Paris.

He still loves his *demitasse* coffee,
she decides, but the beautiful boys
and the languid opium girls
have grown one shade more faint -
more *Wermacht* grey.

He wonders
whether he could parley
with the Channel's weather,
and it would be kind enough

to conjure a fog
that will swallow him whole,
if he would be just man enough
to row his boat out to meet it.

Layover

The terminal in Berlin turns
with this woman at its axis,
as she hijacks the poetry
and asks us why
we have dog-eared so many
pages so far back in this book,
but forwarded fast,
through the bio and foreword
by the foremost biographer
of this Lost Generation poet.
She is Greek, this terminal woman,
and connecting with the flight
that will bear her home.
She watched and listened
from two first-class rows away
while our landing was delayed
and I read you works of the poet
in Paris pining for a Roma girl
in the darkness of a bar.
I twirled your dreadlock blond
between my fingers and turned
the pages with the sweeping slowness
of my free-hand.

The terminal woman now taps
the book's cover with her black nails
as they hail her
to board the last leg of her trip home.
Her frantic fingers flay the pages
open to show us the scholar's
herculean labors
and I recall that Greek uses the same
word for "change" – loose coins dashed
about in the sea of an empty pocket –
as it does for sixty-second shreds of time
strewn across liminal space
waiting for the next flight to arrive.

His Recollection of the Sideshow*

His diction grew clearer
the nearer he got to the
denouement.
The more he told us of
the long ago and gone carnival,
the crisper the candy-apple photo
would grow -
developing in the chemical brine
of our child minds.
We could see him pay his way
with a worksweat dollar,
and take a place
in the front row of the tent's
"Whites Only" throng.

We imagined (we discussed and agreed)
the pan lamp's glow would have danced
on the Brylcreem's slickness
of his hair, and on her scales
as she broke the surface
of the freak tank's water,
smiled, then dove
To touch the gravel below.
His speech reached the crisp slow-motion
of a Toastmaster's prodigy
as he said that she swam twice in circles,
let herself float,
and "mouthed my name as
she looked at me through the glass."
And he was speaking with the purity
of a prophet as he said how
he nearly burst his heart
running from the carnival tent,
the lush mouth of the mermaid,
and the acrid reek of desperate men.

Desiccated Man*

This desiccated man will still kneel
in front of you
to undo your shoes' sling backs,
and tell you stray stories
of an empty fishing trawler
found adrift, no catch, no crew –
a dementia patient shuffling

across the tossing void of the Bering Sea.

Tea still boiled in the metal kettle.

He will steep you in a story,

he swears, that something hungry

in a hoary frost in the Boreal Forest,

stalked him across the Canadian border,

calling his name with the voice

of his son,

of his mother,

of his last, lost lover.

He will always end with the story

of his revenant father and the lopsided library

that he built for the Tlingit children

in your town.

Sitting down cross-legged-pony-tail

father reading tales of Otterman and Oedipus

to a sea of gleaming, black eyes.

The story peels dry from the stalk

of his voice, as he says that

the children say that

The Reading Man still intones

the tomes and walks the halls

when they are left to find titles

on their own.

Fumbling fingers,

telling stories sodden with words,

mixed with drink,

finding brass clasp and strap

until your one bare sole

slips free and touches the cold
wood of his living room floor.

Woman in Repose with Local Craft Beer*

Giving it a second thought,
I would frieze this scene –
bare arches of your feet walking
in summer-time grime back out
to the couch of our cabin's porch.
Rain breaking the heat for the
first time this week, you sit
and your beer bottle sweats
the condensation
of our underwhelming freezer
on to your undercrossed legs.
I give a second thought
to the edge of a working chisel
and how the block would spit chips
of Carrara stone in protest.
I watch you with the brown bottle,
quiet and side-eying,
as you tip the rim to your lips.
I can imagine using the steel wedge
to separate out each strand of hair
that crosses your forehead,
the swan sway of your lulling neck
against the crest of the sofa's back.
I wonder, though, if I could sculpt
the rain's rushing pattern

that falls behind your profile
like a veil, without turning
the droplet trails into slashes,
or scars, or the bars of a jail.

Your Great-Grandmother's Mountain Goat Stew*

You write her last recipe on paper
made from rags.

Carita Bombagina from my roll -top desk,
thick-socked feet running from hardwood office
back to marble-cold kitchen,
you charge yourself with capturing *abuella's* tale
before it flees like steam.

On the last visit -

her last visit to us –

she trusted your brain to retain
the ministrations of the matriarch
whose name became your own,
who slaughtered a goat

high in the Pyrenees,
and flavored it with weeds
pungent enough to snuff out
the bitterness of war.

“No writing it down. You just remember it, right?”

she said to you that night,
driving me from the kitchen,
rooting out marrow from the hollow of bone,
telling you, the story, alone
in fire and spice.

But, now, you strive to remember.
You try to write her trials on that
high mountain trail,
desperately fighting to find
the refugee mother and bind
the ingredients of her weirding ways
to deckle – edged paper made from rags.

The City, if You Recall*

All that you've said is fine,
but all of this is memory.
All that you've said is fine –
mind-pictures of basil leaves
crushed and kneaded to dust by
crones over roiling cauldrons of steaming meat,
brick dust swirling around naked feet of workers
who plod, cat-like, at sunrise over cobblestones roads,
girls who sit astride marble ballards
outside the library
and read aloud to each other
in the lilt of foreign tongues –
but all of this is memory.
Most of this city that you've said
has, somehow, disappeared, understand?
Sand from the leeward side
of the mountain ate it in shifting bites
that came and went with a scirocco.
That, or the ocean made good
on its pledge – returning to run

through open windows and storefront doors
left ajar, up through floors of hardwood boards,
down the narrow necks of chimneys,
and up the highest spires
until the weather manes drowned.
Probably, though, it was mislaid fire
and paraffin flowers set ablaze.
That was the torches of stumbling bacchanal men.
This was the whipping hair and the sudden flailing arms
of paramours when mouths devoured the taste of sea
from their bare necks and a desert of burning votives
was left forgotten.

Speaking of a Tree at 7.78 Hertz *

You spoke with this same voice
when you schooled me
on Schulman's Resonance.
You spoke with this back-of-the-throat
smoke in your voice,
barefoot on the crest of autumn,
a cigarette dying between
your thumb and forefinger,
your palm turned up as though
you were prepared to catch
the lowest apple from the neighbor's tree.
It had grown over our fence –
wayward and free –
hosting the bees that hung on
for those last overripened days of sugar.

“You can tune it in this way,” you said
about your naked feet
against the backyard sod that night.
“As when lightning strikes the ground,”
and the living Earth crests its wavelengths
like a breaching whale in flight.
Now, there is snow and you savor
the winter smoke born from
our wood-burning stove to join
the tobacco in the back of your throat.
You show me through the window’s frost
how the tree still reaches
with a dendrite skeleton hand
over our side of the fence.
You take off your shoes to leave
our warm winter rooms.
The Earth, you say, still needs to speak
to your feet through the solid soil,
and the tree, boughed with frozen snow,
still hosts a harvest and waits to be plucked.

Skinning the Commas*

Be sure that when they come
to mince your words,
you tell them that they
must do it with the proper
amount of garlic.
When they begin to speak,
cut them off and tell them that,

now that they have come
to take your words,
they must mix them
with fresh and burning garlic
done just the right way.
Show them how they must roll
each lobe between their hands,
their palms fighting to find friction,
skinning the commas of
your appositive pain.
Tell them that they must crush cloves
between mortar and pestle,
as mother and her coven of aunties
did in the cauldron of our kitchen,
before they can blend and scarify
all of the tongues that live in you.
Let them know that when they leave
with bushel baskets of your words,
their hands will reek of allicin,
and that when they try to speak
the words that they have captured,
their accents will have forever changed.

Quintessence Comes*

Quiescence comes with a small glass of rum
that he has learned to balance just so
on his knee.

She sees that he has finally settled back
and she settles in to read the novel

from where she stopped the night before.
It is the story of a *jibaro* who farms
on the living hide of a magic mountain.
When it weeps in leaves, he plies it
with tobacco and libations from the town below.
He braids furrows like cornrows
through its fecund brown.
When it finally demands tribute,
breathing and seething, she reads,
the *jibaro* gives himself to the jungle
in a final, wild, naked offering of his love.
And when she is done reading,
the seat, she sees, has finally swallowed him.
His rum, neat, is still balanced
on his knee as sleep rumbles deeply
in the heap of his frame.

Revisiting a Lesson on River Mumma*

The kitchen remembers where
I left my unfinished story.
It sends up torrid steam
that rises counter-clockwise
to find lines I left unsaid,
as you stew the roux and wait
for me to be the raconteur,
instead of you.
The windows grow hazy steam-heat
cloaks against the outside cold,
as I explain that River Mumma

had curls and curves like yours
when she rose from the *Rio Cobre*
to drown the men whose hubris
sent them down to fish her waters.
Lush in the leather of your Barcelona
boots and the tumble-fall cascade
of your hair,
you ask if I ever saw her
breaking surface in the moonlight
of my childhood,
and if any man's greed
ever escaped her,
as you churn the fat and the flour
on the kitchen's open flame.

Women Reading Seaborn Grace's Collected Works on What Would be Her 100th Birthday

The restaurant you chose
will do just as well
as any other, I suppose.
It reeks of whiskey and holds itself up
with wide vaulted hips,
as she did,
with a wine cellar womb
that seeps draught and damp.
If it had the desire or the will,
this place,
it could stand like
a patroness on this hill,
lording over this dying side of town.

It chooses to slump itself down,
on days like today,
when the rain comes to route
off the rafters, pour through
gutters, and the rusted spouts.
It fancies itself a bistro at moments,
but soon is consumed
with echoing itself
in the deep reaches of the women's room's
checker-board cavern.
This place you chose
is where we will shake out her bones.
This is where we will
honor her-
dress like Paris pinstripe gangsters,
break open tomes,
read her screeds, letters,
wandering stanza poems,
slurring our way through whiskey
and words, and Left-Bank pain
on this 100th day of her revenant rain.

Still Life with Katana*

To solve the problem,
I gave you my grandfather's sword.
Instead of the clay pot covered
in tourist Grecian words,

I had you grip the crisscross fabric -
the rough *tsuka* handle -
of his Tarawa prize,
tilt your head down
raise your eyes,
stand in front of my bookshelves.
I posed you,
first in my worn-out robe
falling off one shoulder -
the dark berry of one nipple
peering back at me.
Decided to make you naked -
peeled and undone -
told you to hold the captured weapon
with both hands,
in the waning rivulets of
golden hour sun,
the point digging down into the
wood of my living room floor.
The story rewound –
how Grandfather, wounded,
set fire to the owner
of this blade.
I asked you to
wet your lips, slightly.
I sketched you that way,
with bare feet
with undone hair,
with your wild, dark thicket,

with the curve of your thigh
mocking the arc
of a Japanese officer's sword.

Impressionist Experiment with the French Maquis Pistol*

This time around,
I use a French Resistance
war maiden as my muse.
This time around,
I give you a man's shirt –
linen, white, too tight
for the places on you
that are too Rubens
for its buttons, for its cut.
This time, I decide
to give you the confines
of low-rise jeans –
to paint you
with men's denim
from your waist
to the pale tops of your feet.
And finally, I gift you
the polished angles
of a rectangle of wood and brass
passed down to me
from a French Maquis
before she died.
Inside the velvet lining
of its jaws, at my request,

you seek the sleek, black symmetry,
the three crooked notches.
“Three Nazis,” I say
“she seduced as dispatched
to float in the Meuse.”
And I paint you, as you pose
in my request -
your back against the stone,
the nine-millimeter gripped
between both manicured hands,
your curls living wild
like sudden scrub brush across
your eyes as you dart
your head,
furtive as a bird
in the dangerous shadows
of high grass.

Her Nazi Occupation Letters and the Opiate Cure*

When you get in
the midst of Seaborn’s
war letters, look for her voice
in the harsh white noise
of her wavering script.
When you get to her wartime letters,
look for the trailing tails.
Look for the trailing tail
of her ampersand from
her shaking hand.

Look for the trailing tail
of her attempted serif –
her flourished ended stroke –
of her cursive L
as she wrote the name
of the Moor who had become
her lover in the crux of the war.
These are the attic letters,
the war journal entries
from when Germans came
and she retreated to that attic
“to wait for the Return of The Sane,”
she mused in English,
watching the river continue
its meander.

These are the trailing-tail
attic letters she wrote
with a wavering pen’s right-hand pinch,
drinking the opium tincher
a Belgian gave her
to kill whatever had found refuge
in her stomach,
while she minded her silence
and watched the iron cavalry
gather to drink at the river’s edge.

Showing up Drunk to the Family Plot*

Wine didn’t mean to
keep her grieving

at the top of the hill.

Wine expected she would
leave the ossuary throng
once the talking was done
and she had imbibed
enough of the family bile.

In fact, wine demanded
that she meander
back down the hill
to the gin mill,
and taunt the old gin men
as she loved to back then.

Taunt them -
them in their outlaw leather,
them with their
confederate beards.

Taunt that old one man's
singular glass eye
ocular wanderings.

Taunt them with the
cotton wash of her
mourning dress against
tennis legs.

But she stayed,
betrayed the Bacchus Imperative
even after the family had
retreated to feed,
crisscrossed herself in the grass,
prayed for the departed

and poured out libations
on the newly-hewn grave.