Proof

Proof of teeth is babies’ gums
Proof of babies’ gums is babies’ mouth
Proof of babies’ mouth is laugh
Proof of laugh is trust
Proof of trust is gamble
Proof of gamble is coin
Proof of coin is moon
Proof of moon is night
Proof of night is winter
Proof of winter is frost
Proof of frost is ghost
Proof of ghost is story
Proof of story is loneliness
Proof of loneliness is hunger
Proof of hunger is teeth
The Tending

*after Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene by Hendrickter Bugghen*

The women gentling arrows
from your chest look as if
they are pulling splinters—so calm—
while dusk velvets your
limp grey hand. I've heard
you were patron of dispossessed
queens and tomboys, diners at the altar
of lady ham. Oh Sebastian—

I kissed her mouth
on the couch after roller skating.
Her cat stared, and it felt like God
laid a finger on my spine. In the background,

the shape of the tree mirrors
the shafts in your chest.
We are meant to read the symbols:
tree, arrow, crimson cloth,
hands, and threes. I don't know how
we pick our emblems or anchors,
how you became a book in a library
of velum eyelids and slanderous
hips, how we wake realizing our bodies
have been lighthouses all along.

Her mouth was soft. The couch
was warm. A ship in a bottle
sailed the desk. A tree
touched its fingers to the pane.
Home Again

molasses March idling like a car
latch unhooked, lock parched
my mother home from college—the first to go

palmed kolache from
thick syrup months on the farm
bee-stung fruit, the bites found under arms

her mother saying, *Your eyelids have been flying
at half mast a year now.*
saving it up for later, this season’s excess

home now with the tin siding blues
mulberry mouthed, hinges crack
my mother taught me

earthquakes felt like nausea
and a woman could eat her way
through a cellar of unlabeled cans

my mother taught me
doors with rusted rims
and the hush they shut behind you
Larded All with Sweet Flowers

*after Ophelia and Laertes by Benjamin West*

It was the only way he could paint her—
turpentine, stripped
down to her canvas
bones, then softened
voluptuously, toned gold and

gowned.

Oil slick, she drips

flowers, robe held open, seams
braided with opium and morning glory,
folds holding fibrous stalks, feathered green heads.

*It's oregano,* she claims as Laertes finds her arm, then her hips.

He turns towards a king who stutters, *To each his own poison.* And I—

who once knew how to
unscrew the cap from a mushroom—I know
she scatters rosemary and rue, a patient
prick of blood where trembling fennel bites her fingers, but I
only recall pansies—relics of my grandmother’s garden
and hospital rooms where a gold thread
trickled and hardened in her veins, her lips sewn with
spit. In hospice, she made roses from clay,
cluttered couches with bouquets that dried
yellow, tickled cotton air as,
bile rising, she slurred a prayer for death
ending in her husband’s name.

A boy I knew once claimed:

*Every girl has a favorite flower.*
Also Milk

We were watching monkeys wring the wrists of each branch, spring babies losing their hands in their mothers’ fur then letting go when you said, *My momma’s letting go of language. She calls everything milk. Ketchup is milk. Water is milk.* You were still you, but also milk. And I tried to feel some of this for you, as if that would make you feel less. The monkeys’ cages widened an ache in us. The quiet after one golden howler peeled a cry. Why were we here? Both of us at odds with corrals and coops. I spun out the iterations of grief, kinds of giving enough in the doing. Here is the tonic of crows and the thicket in your mind yielding to touch, here is the hand.
The Selkie

The selkie shed her seal skin in the ocean
to comb her hair
with human hands. Her body was
seamless and silken, a moon's blister,
translucent with salt, shins glistened
loose light around her feet,
her hands a dark thicket,
her inky mouth gritted
with laughter. I listened for her
after the sound had stopped.
All seals took on a glow.
Black butter eyes allured,
a fishy gawp enticed.

The selkie knew what kind of girls
watched the sea like that, let the rocks bite
their toes. Girls who had learned sweetness
to get by, who wore out their nights
with apologies. So this was not the story of a sailor
hiding a seal's skin in rafters. This was revision
like shore is revised: sand transcribed
by tide, woman into seal into woman.

She let me stroke
faint whiskers above her lips,
dappled spine, rough knees,
her hair like oil slick.
My feet mangled
with kelp, my hands
in the foam at her hips.
Waves slurred against our chests,
drunk on brine and whining.
    The tide caught in our mouths,
    did not stop rising.
Mary Magdalene Washing his Feet with Perfume

Messiah with loamed toes, with mired heels. Mary mucked with the mountain, her legs carrying it still. You, who go to the mountains wearing boots ordered from the internet, who have not read the Bible—I send you perfume in the mail.

We are apart this year, as we were last year and the one before. Never have we kissed on your birthday. Mary poured a litra of nard, heavy and hotly fragrant over his ankles and arches, lending comfort to a man who when faced with the smell of his mortal body went to the desert, sand in his hair, sun parching his back, peeling the skin from blisters. I sent you the smell of sacrament, of sex. Your hands oiled, you call me to say, All I smell is you.

You call me to say, Come here. Mary took her long, dark hair from its braids, pulled it free to wipe his feet, pressing her brow to his toes, wiping with spice, with earth, with musk sweet dust on the heels, her neck, her shoulders, her back bending to it, her mouth, her eyes, her mouth touching his ankle, the rough arch of his foot, wiping, warming, warning that you are loved now, you are loved now. And I tell you it is so.
Coda

*after* Wisteria *by Claude Monet*

Monet, I reach the end of the notebook
given to me by my high school art teacher,
and it is already two months from her death.

Is this like losing sight—
holding brush strokes too close to see the volume they form?

I wanted ripe, ripe summer, to un-smell the whiskey
on her breath, to un-hear the grey gluttony of Hail Mary.
The seams of the pond are knotted
with weeds. Sometimes the wisteria
is not in bloom and the perfume
of pinks and blues finds its artifact framed.

She would say, His hand touched that,
a map, movements
in an orchestra, every stroke echoes.
Even now, I try to be generous with language, like bats with blood, who turn out their stomachs’ larders for hungry drifters. I tender my bluntness and barber my temper. My hands dance open with speech. Tell me again how wings and tongues make consequences out of air.
The Mountain

Deep, dank, and dizzying girl,
come out of the water, come out
of the moss. Trick tongued
girl, wily and riled girl, girl
of white branch, of speckled
bark, girl with tender bows, with
thunder gloves, with jade
in her eyes, stone girl
coated with flies, itching
girl who has forgotten
all you were, remember
you sat on a rock and saw
the purple world all around you,
mountains in every direction,
rutty trees, knobby kneed,
pools of resting water
flecked black with tadpoles.
You dipped your finger in.
This is important.
Remember, you were there
to watch, to keep time,
to witness the earth
dip off into blue
and it was not easy
to climb up, your heart
in your stomach, how hard
the stone was,
girl with raw feet,
sappy, sore, and oozing girl,
swarm of limbs, gentling yourself
through your own thoughts, jamming
foot after foot into crag,
straight up. You climbed
and did not stop
until all around you was the wide world,
until there they all were in front of you
waiting for you, only half waiting.
You must remember the way
they didn’t even move,
didn’t even look up, so certain
you would make it
and clean with readiness.
Baba Yaga In Conversation with her Home

Under the roof, in the bones, I bent double. You quivered: underfed doorframe, hollow rafters.

Remember soot. Remember spruce.

I lined the lock with baby teeth. You couldn’t unclench sky from memory, startled easily in a storm, winced at snow’s weight.

Remember staleness. Remember ice.
Your skin young and tight. Remember cramped.

Now we only know ourselves when we are moving—calloused chicken legs.

Remember Vasilissa. Remember Ivan.

The children came with questions. I knew from schoolyard games how asking could tame flesh with wrinkles.

Remember you aged a year for every query, crumpled further into pine bark skin. We

are a bristled shadow, blood dappled,
arms thick with birds.
Over the Body of Orpheus

We made women to break
marrow
from the quaking ash to
madden man
with withered hands
chipped teeth
  glitter like pottery
  fragments
  mimic a softened jaw
  songs of
lecherous eyes
smear of red on our legs
dregs of poison sumac
  wreathed around our
  hair
pollenated air  fecund
  breath bare as
laurel in winter
soot-haunted  sun-chased
  breath a sweet
fermentation  wheat on tongues
  crimson sickle of smile
  sweating through
  summer itching
    inching heat under  skin-pricked
grass-thick
  we speak in the plural
move in the singular
  still hungry  still
  gluttonous as the day we were born
whining like wolves to dust congealing
  in the sky and he joins

    bitter as silk  strange
sweetness of an olive
singing in our dusk  hallow
cyst of sorrow  a shadow
  shallow hidden in his pupil
  so we peel
  his skin from muscle in a spiral
    apple-kin
  his tongue left where he left it
set like a ruby on his jaw

    reddened still with her name
Pinocchio Revisited

I wanted to be floor—
my under-beams, my littlest
knots and private
crannies for toes. Wanted
cotton sounds
of footsteps,
back cracks
from cold at night,
crooked groan. Holy holy
of a well-placed
nail. Want to be
doored, even
framed. Wanted
a maker, who sucked life
from deadbolts.

Felt always
crawled through,
each part moved
to rise, to speak.
Could not trust
it was me who did
the rising, my eyes
leaking sawdust.

Dreamed often
about trees I once was.
They say Lazarus
felt most calm
hands-deep in dirt.