

Terra Inferna

When my mother died, I dreamed of a man
rough-sketching on gesso, palette knife scraping
the angles of a woman's face. He knuckles
thin washes of color, the way a man might thumb
through a woman, exulting her, erasing her.
He's famous for his horses, hunger-hardened
and sensual, pupils blown open by violence
or love. Others thrash with their hooves,
escapists hurling forward. I dreamed
of the teenage girl always ghosting the interior,
cut-off blue jeans, black camisole, smoke
clenching her body in its silt halo. There's a Zippo
next to her, a crushed pack of Lucky Strikes.
Her off-frame stare says, *Listen*. It says, *I want
to tell you everything*. Once, a mare thrust
her muzzle into the shotgun window of his 1967
Chevy Nova—this was years ago—Tulsa,
a whole afternoon of hooky in the field off
Route 66 by the high school. Rabbits, tonguing
the husks off of sweet corn. His back,
sunburned as raw prayer, as the radio pulses
Van Morrison. The girl in the back seat,
offering him her body. The mare's face
in the window is a flash, a sudden weapon.
She could break the young man reaching for her,
crush his hands with her jaw. She could bite
the girl until her skin gapes and slips,
flesh pooling in plush knots. I think of this image
when I close my eyes—a girl so lovely
it hurts to look at her, a mare wild enough

to end everything, a mane that smells
like sex, prairie fire, rabbits seething
their death song into the glare. The man
will call it some heart's undoing, as if
to repeat the thing you most want will keep it
holy. Like the night his girl falls asleep,
her cigarette glimmering. He won't be able
to unsee it—her soul lunging its muscled heat
into air, screams chased down by darkness.
Or the mare, always the mare—feral elegy
he'll snare into oil, her mane so light-tangled
it could be burning.

Terra Incognita

Grief doesn't have a face like
the living do. But that doesn't keep

me from wanting the ocean,
like a god, to take me in its mouth—

my skin salt-thrashed, the whole
of me eaten through by riptide.

I kick into its frictional heat, that divine
surface tension. Longing moves

like the water, and past the tour boat's
helm, I see it—a dolphin, face

under algae's skin, intimacy before
the ocean takes it back. I search

the eyes like jags of magma until
we become mirrors: the muscular

torso swiveling before torquing
into a sun-blessed dark. When

my mother was dying, I prayed
for a child to blossom in my body

where cancer had come, her womb
tumor-ravaged, cut out by

a surgeon. I longed to exchange
her pain for one I could

believe in—a child cresting
in me, love's sleek animal,

and she would live in the torrent
my body made for her. That year,

no child took root in me
like some creature of the deep.

No child surged from my grief-
lush body like love seized open.

But the dolphin? I watch it
bury itself in the spume.

Terra Nova

I

What one calls hijinks, another calls gospel,
like Hemingway jotting six words on a napkin —
For sale: baby shoes. Never worn. This is how novels
are born. Six-word stories. I believe in whimsy,
the uncanny cells that bind us. Blood jets rendering
a story smooth. *Mother died too young. Miss her.*

Still missing her. No more words.

Imagine this heroine, black down to her underwear.
She's Mothra incognito, winged girl

cresting through calamity like another
stage of grief. Tell me you'd watch her dark night
of the soul, breathless as she splits her cocoon.

Hard as jade, tell me you could love her. You could
pity her story until another genre explodes.

II

Pity her story, its genre exploding. When my mother said,
Love is how you suffer together, I heard *Marry the nice boy,*
not the boy you'd rather fuck. I heard *Love is the welt*

a boy always leaves, thumbprints like ghosts of blackberries.

I didn't marry the nice boy, Mother. I'm still breathing
in the love you always feared, how sudden it is,

how ugly it can be when it unsutures its hold—
yellow-green love like the moon in heat. Crescent, waxing,
half-illuminated gibbous love, or the moon-is-always-
turning-vascular

kind of love. In other words, love undoing itself,
seeking a center. Forgive me, Mother, when I mean to say—
Love forms my body's reckless galaxy. Make of me

love's natural order, when I mean to say,
when I mean to say—*My body: where do I end?*

III

My body: where do I end? I'm five. She's cutting sharp
into a Winn-Dixie parking lot, our car sideswiped by a sedan.
Her torso struck with the airbag's punch.

Glass in my face. A whole history fractured in that moment
hanging, limboed by heat, another spring glitzing
through fissure, the lilt of car exhaust—I said—*My body:*

where do I end? How long until her voice
is a hush I can't recall? I used to map the scars
on her hands, the windshield's fractal tattooing

her palms. Hot oil feathering.
She called it a luna moth, the scar eclipsing
her thumb and index finger, the pulsing spot.

Evidence we can be erased. As if to say,
In her end is my beginning.

IV

Begin me, IV drip of morphine,
Stanley Cup playoffs on the TV
Nurse Linda rigs toward her hospice bed.

Begin me, Penguins winning the series 4–2.
Begin me, liver necrosis dropping its gloves,
hoisting her past the final scrimmage. My mother, the trophy

refracting. Begin me, circle that will not end.
Begin me, wound never closing. If love
shifts within us, begin here, as if

longing is a verb. Her oxygen tank
on the La-Z-Boy, her breath's rasping engine.
I want love as strong as this cellular chain.

If love must break us, begin here, Mother—
is it the world or your blood still clenching me?

V

Is it the world or your blood still clenching? When you died,
Mother, I stopped eating. Nothing could force
its way inside me. On bad days, I dream

I'm the darkest hole your body left.
On better ones, I'm tearing Sunbeam bread
for gulls in my dreams. I'm breathing in salt, cracked shell.

Those years, I watched you in your strapless one-piece
turn golden under a hymn of oil. You'd rub
aloe where the skin peeled, a blister's

glitz-born violence in your skin. Planets,
not freckles, unhusking your epithelial heat.
How can all of this exist in a cloisonné urn?

I envy the ghost-gulls, their bodies lunging
toward every sliver. Pilgrims, they feast on ether.

VI

She came, my mother, like a pilgrim of ether.
A portent, awoken, in a glitter of yellow.
Yellow rendezvous as I spoke my vows.

Yellow, slinking like a clade of wasps.
You could hear her blatant murmur against my throat,
her risk getting handsy with the small of my back. Every fleur-de-lis
within reach, graffitied by our lady of the torrent: Yellow,
yellow everywhere. A piss-bright heat.
My husband whispered: *Your mother's with us,*

and her ghost is raising hell. Pity my rhinestone tiara,
my glass of prosecco. Even the cake was spiked—
nothing survived her blaze. For an RSVP,

my mother preached her gripes. In every picture,
I'm a flash of torched vanilla. I radiate.

VII

If I could hawk you six words smooth as snake oil,
I'd quote the Gospel of Grief. I'd deliver a sermon:
Six words can preach, bear witness. Their spirit can testify!

I'd doctor you sequels with names like *A Story After the World Ended*
or *Lovely Apocalypse: A Whole New Normal*, until their Hail
Marys vibrate your blood: *Things are okay*.

Every lost daughter would abandon her loop of shame—
Mother, forgive me—and save herself. This is my story.
An eight-pound tumor raged through my mother's colon,

zigzagged through her uterine walls.
Her ovaries, synchronous metastases.
Emergency surgery. Doctors cut it

out of her, that little death baby.
When she died on the table, they shocked her back to life.

VIII

Oh mother who died on the table, oh mother of the failed liver,
oh mother of the tumors fruiting in the dark.
Begin again. *Oh mother of wild persimmons*

in her liver ducts, oh mother of harvest starring her lungs.
Again. *Oh mother of the last bowel movement*
less shit than blood, oh mother of the BiPAP mask,

oh mother of the living room hospital bed,
oh mother of the coma. As if to say—oh mother
of the last meal, oh mother who no longer

drinks water, she's too busy drinking the last of God
from the air. It happens this way, the body a color
radiating blatantly: love tongue, mother tongue,

as if to say—*I'm a puddle of light.*
Or, between tongue and glottal stop—*holy.*

IX

Dear Mother, I'm ashamed. I've forgotten what's holy.
The past is hijinks, not blood jets. Death wore me smooth.
People say we look alike when a picture snaps me

with my head thrown back, my laugh all horse teeth and sass.
And sometimes, a pull off of an unfiltered cigarette
and you're here like hard jade, another dark night of the soul.

Sometimes, I dream of your steel-blue eyes, wake up
with them instead of my own. Which is to say, *God*
is the geometry guiding our mercy. I want to say *love*

is the cigarette smoke haunting a heaven without you
in six words. To win a bet like Hemingway.
To master what's never been mine. So I say—*The dusky*

half-life is most familiar. Mother. Mother.
Even the name obliterates me.

Terra Firma

I sink my heels into darkness, that silky tether.
Grief is an island of mercy touching my skin.
It hurts like hell to bury your mother.

Longing is my other story— not cancer,
not coma hushing her into its dirty hymn.
I sink my heels into darkness, that silky tether.

Too wicked to die, I thought she'd live forever.
She seethed all night on cigarettes and gin.
It hurts like hell to bury your mother.

I swallowed her storm, as if love was duty, not weather.
Surges, riptides braising my heart with her din.
I sink my heels into darkness, that silky tether.

I hated the menthol scenting her black leather
jacket. I still tangle my body up in its sensuous sin.
It hurts like hell to bury your mother.

What is pain but a story of mercy? It lingers
in my blood. All things end to end again.
I sink my heels into darkness, that silky tether.
It hurts like hell to bury your mother.