

Change

after Lynda Hull's *Black Mare*

They hang around like little sisters —
the names we changed, the faces we made up

as we went along. What becomes of them?
Each morning the street-sweeper's hungry hiss,

the pale light clenching the asphalt
in its fist. Day or night, we could never sleep.

The paint chipped, the color of old silk
and cold sweat, a crudely stretched canvas

for that still life we were living, an arrangement we made
with dead flowers and needles and uneaten fruit.

I never meant to leave you in that city that lies
beneath the grind of flesh-and-blood New York —

all exposed pipes and cracked mirrors,
unmarked doors, bricks like heavy hands

on our scaffolding of bones. Shadows
sifted through broken blinds, trails

of ash tracked in from the street,
no permanent address —

just an atlas of dust on our unswept floor.

~~~~

How did we live? Shades drawn, your eyes alight  
in the dull red glow of the nearly-spent

candles beside our bed. You were afraid of the dark.  
I saw you through a looking-glass fogged with white powder,

heard you in the names I called myself, breath  
held in chains of smoke, waiting for an answer

that never came. The walls wept, strips of paint  
peeling like faded petals. The blinds played tricks

with your silhouette. Outside in the street,  
the tired prophet of St. Mark's Place

shook our future in his paper cup, begging  
for change. He said you were my story, my skeleton

key, every bedroom door I locked behind me. Now,  
the book of our past has been burned, but still

when day breaks like taut skin under the knife, before my eyes  
adjust to the light, you're there — the one

bed I could never turn down. The street cleaners  
put their shine on the night. The swept-up world.

Your face in the frame of every window. I never meant to leave.

~~~~

Gone, whole chapters of our lives — nothing left
but a few dog-eared pages, torn paper swept up

on gusts in the wakes of trains, the streets
we worked like worry stones. How did we live?

We tried on new names like orphans try on gowns
they can't afford, a stolen moment in counterfeit skin:

Julie, Stacy, Katherine, Karen, Courtney, Gloria, June...
What becomes of them? Those spirits we conjured

then cast off like rune stones on the map
of our hidden city. Could they see our future?

All I have left of you is this broken mirror
I can never quite get clean — your ghost

raveled in its spiderweb, looking out at me
when the light shifts. I meet your eyes

in the blank stare of the blind beggar,
see your silhouette in every window pane,

find your reflection in the shards of glass
the street cleaners leave behind.

Sometimes, you remind me of myself.

I never meant to leave you to write out our story in the dust
of that terminal city, the only constant

in its changing light, veiled
by a tangled sheet of rain.

Long Division

The difference between us
is the sum of faults
along our one-thousand-nine-hundred
and seventy-six day road. Divide
that by the length of my hair
you wear locked up on that chain
I gave you; does a piece of me hang
even now on your indifference? Throw that question
and its sisters on the pile. Take what you get,
then add each night I lay next to you —bare—
while you mused on lost loves, parting
your lips, gazing over my shoulder
at your litany of Eurydices. Finally,
factor in all those mornings
you refused to look at me, in spite
of the fact that I had become
the curator of your back,
or that I'd mastered
the delicate instrument
of your hip.

Princess Lines

after Ai's *Young Farm Woman Alone*

What could I do with a man?

Let him shape me like this corset—
skin-thin satin over stainless steel ribs—to fit
at last my form of loneliness:

An hourglass on its side, time
cinched at the waist.

Bedtime Story

after Marie Howe's *Prayer*

The bed is still warm and already
my legs have opened like mute lips
for a new man with cold hands
and a foreign tongue. His pleasure
is quiet but even so

I keep hearing:

*This is the way it is,
the way it was and always will be—*

head held down again, in a strange bed
or a bathroom stall, afraid the lock will give,
afraid of sleep.

There is, I almost remember

another way:

something you saw in me beneath these men
like the pentimento of an old Master,

known only to the one who restores, lifts
the new false colors like veils.

Remind me:

Who was I when you were my story, the only one I knew?

Atlas of Light and Shadow

after Lynda Hull's *A Style of Prayer*

There is a prayer that goes Lord I am powerless
over these hungry turns of alleys, dark
mouths, serrated roads, this city's cease-

less beat of pilgrimage—faith useless
on streets that require an atlas of light
and shadow. A prayer that asks

where in the task of evening is mercy? and *answers*.
No map shows us how to follow each night
from hereafter back to that rapture we lived in

when Gloria had her way with me—the prayer
that went *Ob God, yes, there*. No promise of safe passage just
please don't stop. No consulate for the state

of the body. Where was refuge? Home? Was that love
legend, compass rose and figurehead? We cross a line
and the prayer goes Lord, *we* are responsible. Perhaps

there is no one to redress us with grace, no North Star
to steer our stories—
perhaps *prayer* is just something we're told to do

with our mouths when we're down on our knees.
And yet in spite of all that, when I take our old shortcut
through Tompkins Square Park in late September—

when the heart of the East Village beats in time
with stiletto heels on dead-end streets and the pulsing signs
of after-hours bars unmask the dark—I hurt

for the kind of fix that only faith delivers.
What I'd give to let Glory to be anything more
than an echo of that chorus we lived, a refrain drowned out

by the tune that goes *how much for the hour, how much
for the night?* I forget myself and find that song
has a dance my body still remembers. I catch Gloria's eye

in the cast-down glance of every passing stranger,
trace her lifeline on my open palm, and ordain in her name
this new style of prayer: *Love*, take all our uncharted sins

and spin of them a clean sheet of rain
to throw over me. Make the chant of her laugh
an autumn updraft, whirling low and light, the wind

a silk slip that drops forgotten to the floor—the effort-
less benediction of barely-parted lips, each breath
the heaven we make ourselves.