

*Swansong for a Concert Pianist, like*

must've finally gone deaf to the melody in these hands, like

at what point in remembering the story of that  
boy did you lose him  
to remembering—like

telling that boy he had a piano player's fingers—just needed  
to grow into them like ten wisdom teeth  
crowding the same jawbone—

never dreaming  
they might wind up crooked, and so loud—like

finding that boy curled up  
inside the nest of a stranger's palms, looking always  
for the one that feels like home—feels like  
hand-me-down shirts that fit—feels like teach me how to grow old  
like you—

should've taught that boy  
how to make room for hands like these—  
sing-sorry hands—  
stagefright hands—these  
treat pants pockets like second skin  
hands—these borrowed birds—  
strangle themselves when given a moment alone  
hands—like  
were these fingers piano strings  
they'd be worn chords  
chorusing the piano's broken  
teeth

## *Lowstringin'*

Lately, I've mistaken my shoes  
for conch shells, only  
when I hold them up to my ears

I do not hear swelling  
ocean, I hear screaming  
*There is nothing left for you here!*

I can read it all over  
fading brick faces  
lined up crooked like tombstones.

The soil that once knew life  
on this small patch of ground  
I thought I could call my own

is now cracked and bloodless,  
any familiar faces long since scattered  
like anemic autumn leaves.

I am going to leave this place if it kills me.

Ask me what my shoes are screaming now  
and they will tell you

*move as far away from your family as humanly possible!  
throw your cellphone into the river  
that you might have an excuse when you forget to call!*

*leave all of your ironic tee shirts behind!  
(you won't need those where you're going)*

*Keep going until your friends  
are nothing more than old ghosts  
haunting all of your stories!*

*(Remember, you are leaving behind a ghost town,  
only none of the inhabitants have died yet)*

*Keep going until the smell of your house  
fades from the lonely pair of jeans  
you bothered to pack!*

*Keep going until the horizon swallows you whole,  
and you find yourself in a strange land*

*where the sidewalk has a pulse--!  
where night is not an anvil pressing against your chest--!  
where the soil doesn't drink your blood--!*

*Go! Godspeed, you reckless Sailor!*

In my car I become a satellite.  
I treat the solitude of the open sky  
as an excuse to see the world,

and the instant I stop to catch my breath  
is the instant I drop in a blazing downward spiral  
with no safety net to catch me.

Why should I bother inventing my own traditions  
when I will only leave them to starve in the homes I bury?  
It would be so much easier to adopt them from the cities I orbit.

In the meantime, it's a long shot to get to Boston,  
an endless struggle to get to September,  
although it helps to pretend

I'm in the middle of a movie montage,  
able to skip right to the good parts  
just as soon as the staccato of low string music drops out.

So I'll want to pick a CD at random and pray  
for plenty of cello, light up some cigarettes and drive  
head first into a horizon beckoning me with open arms!

This must have been how Pioneers felt,  
winding up the Oregon Trail  
towards nothing more than a smiling promise,

walking until they stumbled into a nameless grave,  
not because they wanted to—  
nobody wants to die hungry—

but because their legs never gave them a choice.  
They would rather die  
with blisters on their feet

instead of behind their smiles.  
They would have dust coat their teeth  
before they would let it settle over their bones.

I am going to leave this place if it kills me.

Although, on the day that I die, when you ask me  
if I want to be buried in Worcester, I will tell you

I thought I already was.

## *Slipcast*

Study this, the cartographer's map of the face,  
twenty-two years in the making  
much uncharted country yet left to be explored  
and you will discover a landscape  
with monuments bearing no name, whose stories  
are heard ringing down decades of damage,

tectonic plates grinding behind  
cheekbones, summer stormclouds caged  
inside eyelids, fault lines carved into smiles.

I have buried the faces of sadness  
like so many fossils underneath  
a million million tons of stone.  
Over time the residual bits of shrapnel  
will sculpt themselves into a slipcast mask,  
they will not let themselves be forgotten.

Behold! a heavy painter's canvas, a portrait  
thousands of layers thick, fresh faces  
to slip on like armor.

Do not stare for too long  
my truest colors will always bleed  
through the cracks of me:

this face,  
inherited from a lifetime of dirty laundry  
guarded behind dusty closet walls of flesh and bone  
from the inside out warped with rot,  
I cannot figure out how to keep  
the smell of the compost pile  
from creeping past my eyes

these neon lights blinking on and off  
*Do Not Enter! Do Not Enter! Do Not Enter!*

## *Questions to ask a Mountain*

The boys role models  
are older than most,  
world-wise, yet slow  
to respond. He throws  
his questions into their  
cavernous ears, begging  
for secrets to whisper up  
from their veins.

You silent towers of stone and years! What  
is it like to be tall—? to live  
with your head in the clouds and still  
have enough oxygen to survive—?

Where do you find the strength  
to carry the sky on your back  
on the nights it threatens  
to swallow you whole—?

Can you teach me how to stand up straight—?  
or else how to carve my spine  
out of something stronger than doubt—?

Can you teach me how to plant my feet  
so deep in the Earth I never have to worry  
about being knocked over—?

how to swallow my anxieties—  
crush them into diamonds—  
bury them so deep they're worth digging  
for—?

The boy never learned the subtle art  
of stillness, to be most solid when his body  
is at rest; to stay in one place  
long enough to catch seeds  
on his tongue, to carve his story  
out of the tree bark. For once,  
he wants a home to grow on him.

You ancient titans standing guard  
over the world like teeth!

Make me into a giant, a force  
to reconsider, something to look up to.

Give me so much mass  
to withstand hurricane winds  
erupting from the throats of those  
who would see me eroded,  
would see me leveled out, see me even, see me  
and never even hear me!

The boys role models are proof  
that the world grows by inches.  
Only now is he learning his echo  
is a gift falling from their mouths,  
and still he marvels that his voice  
can be so loud, that his words are worth repeating.  
And he will learn to show the world that he is large,  
that you need to crane your neck  
to see how high is he willing to reach  
when he wants to grab ahold of the stars  
and carry them around in his pockets.

If his shoulders are too broad  
for you to walk over, he will not crumple,  
an obstacle waiting belly up for the bulldozer.  
You may howl until there is no wind  
left in your lungs, but you can never  
break him all the way down, you will never  
grind him into something smooth.

His belly is too full of smoke.

And you will behold that boy  
as he blocks out the sun  
on the day he opens his mouth.

*Mulatto (or Being Brown In America)*

brackish boy. looking like a question needs  
to be answered, the tooth-end of a smile or  
a timebomb born into rebel skin, as in  
*where do you come from? why are you here?*

make no mistake, Miami, there are no half lives  
in this war fought in the dark. They smell  
the brown on you like blood. Either one  
keeps quiet, or else learns to kill.