

## Feather Shell Twig

I can't remember if crossing the marsh  
came first or crossing the windy spit of sand.  
Weakfish bones apearl, dune-grass soldiers, blue in seelight.  
Run the phragmites-flattened trail,  
ride home darkly on brother's shoulders.  
How often I have seen this arrangement: feather, shell, twig.  
The things I'd fill my pockets with –  
the more I gained, the less my weight.  
The feather flung from the sky, shell from sea, twig  
leftover from a lightninged family tree.

What more do you want to know?  
How no one ever told me how to stand  
in a way that fit  
what I carried in my body? What I carried  
in my body never fit my arms, too hollow, too thin,  
too used to sweeping dove-winged messes  
under the bed. And even that I had to do better,  
do better, not better, do right.  
My mother told me to stand up straight. I assume  
she meant otherwise the bars inside, the devil's pikes  
would pierce the place where my wings should grow.

I did not accept anything of myself except for wrack.  
Detritus of my fear or things I had to cast off  
to grow bigger than squalls, marauding jaegers, tides, wracking me inside.  
The flood lines marked in me, signs of what it would take to drown.  
What of me would linger on the surface?  
What of my exterior but words I've used  
to keep you all at bay?

Have you ever noticed ,  
all that must be shed is not, and always what should stay.  
Shedding feathers proves that I had wings.  
assume  
she meant otherwise the bars inside

## Uncovered

When I was nine I played for days  
that were, in memory, weeks  
with a scab at the back  
of my neck, at the nape,  
under hair the shortest  
of any girl in my class.  
Chicken-pox leftover, sure.  
Until high in the arena at Notre Dame,  
in *the mezzanine*.

And I loved the way  
the new word sounded,  
loved my sister, so graduated,

meridian in our familial cylinder,  
loved my kinship's momentary concurrence  
in this place remote from our righthand coast  
and so who could blame me  
for my absentminded excoriation?  
Such pomp. Such circumstance.

I scraped the scab free.

In my hand, it wiggled legs  
from a swollen body. I dropped it, afraid  
that someone would see not it  
but the flinch.  
It crawled beneath the seat ahead, fed,  
spiderish in a cavernous space.

I never told.

Those the first notes of my *ostinato*,  
a palilial life and too close  
to exposure of a sort I couldn't afford.  
Shroud the startle  
as doggedly as the tick that cleaves.  
If scars uncovered become parasites,  
then scrape off the scab where the hollow beneath  
is not quite flesh, not quite blood,  
near to liquid, lava-like, neither fire nor stone.  
Carry me, then, into the cavern,  
the crevices, the interspaces.  
Cut me a kerf and let me climb in.

### **Cecropia, Polyphemus, Luna**

Like the three kings, they came from afar.  
Shadow puppets at twilight.  
Someone must be dangling them from strings,  
they drop and bounce so in the backlit air.  
The desert of suburbia requires  
provisions  
if you're meant to cross  
and endure  
its incalculable expanse.

The pheromone that summons  
goes undetected  
by the human sense –  
no sight, no smell, no sound we know,

no way of knowing  
if you're not a moth.  
Through the screen door I watch  
their juddering dance above the yew hedge.  
I am ten years old this July  
and in daylight watch truculent cardinals  
bolt the taxus berries  
and I take their cues. It is my job  
to sweep the ones they drop,  
red outside green like reversed pimento olives  
or like me. I burn and mutter and wait  
for the night's evanescors. I am bellicose  
of late, and abashed.

I am youngest, feel weakest, but only  
think I fear darkest.  
It has been a year of not  
being told.  
There is familial action in the night air.  
Distances covered, at question  
retrievals undertaken and assurances received.  
I believe. The silk moths promise to be there  
each night and heed the call if the wind is honest.

Easy to tell the females from males  
if you know what to look for.  
I thought, then, that this was always the way:  
the ladies' abdomens extend,  
the boys' antennae rise erect and vain.  
Always ladies and boys when in truth it was about  
girls and gentlemen.  
It is not the porch light that draws them:  
it's been shut. It's the call  
of something pungent and dispersed.  
How do I accentuate their consequence,  
these incarnate things of nearly nothing weight?  
If they were asking of me, I did not hear.  
I'd follow their star  
of wonder if I knew  
the compass point to choose.  
I don't know who the gifts they bore were for,  
but I secreted some away  
and wish all this time on  
that I'd stolen  
their dromedary wings.

## Raven

I practiced calling from my own unfeathered throat.  
My mother remembered how angry  
he was, the man who fed the bears  
horsemeat outside Onchiota.  
The vultures came, the dainty fox.  
Too pale to recognize totems  
when he read them aloud, I saw only what I wanted.  
Crows. A dark difference altogether.  
We would have counted one for sorrow, three for a wedding,  
had we known. Misplacing the middle joy.

My father, cautious with gifts, bought me a bearcaw,  
jasper and turquoise on silver. Around his neck -  
Hibernian and Teuton sides  
of the same polished, august coin -  
a cross, medal miraculous, proof of rank and name.  
Quicksilver under his collar, metal his substitute for a river gone to ice.

In the dark, on a ladder, cawing and croaking and ruffling  
feathers (all twenty-five hundred and hundreds more), flexing wing, arching claw,  
destroying a shadow already invisible in the night.  
The ravens picked the bones clean during absences of the bears. My imitations,  
eight rungs high, required painted wings.

## Echo, Test

I call myself sixth daughter, fifth sister to each sister,  
aunt to five, wary and unknowing  
that it all begins and ends with one small heart.  
I say eighth of eight as if my heart could beat  
for yours, small sister, the always-infant, tiny-hearted,  
who ought be older than I. Perhaps I am you grown.

We were all the praying sort then. We were asked  
to offer intentions, such little intentions  
as eight-year-olds are capable and I wanted us to pray for you,  
dead before I was born, and the priest asked if I meant  
for your short life or my long one.

In the womb, your heart lay high in your chest, so large

compared with the rest of you, so small in a warm-aired world, beating as a hummingbird's in summer. It was meant to slow, like all hearts do. In ten years the doctors learned all they would need to keep my newborn heart beating had it required it. The defect of your heart was that it came too soon.

My heart has grown, as all hearts do, to the size of my fist, clenched still at the thought.  
I could make the tedious list of things you will never do.  
I am conscious of it at times – capping a pen, stifling a sneeze, furtively examining a picture crooked in a mirror frame.  
My sisters, all elder, say they remember only red hair and cries  
and I remember nothing,  
youngest child stripped of tears.

Three decades more and comes my turn; they call the test an echo, and it is. The technician tips the screen and I can see the open and close of the valve, hear the rhythm, unmistakable, unimagined.  
With a catch of breath the pulsing jumps then starts again.  
I fill my lungs and empty them.