

## The Realm On Foot

I'm exploring the realm on foot,  
meeting maidens sacrificed by night  
to greedy men, conferring with old women  
in remote corners of the empire,

trudging through winter-browned fields,  
past stone temples topped with sculptures  
of gods to comfort, protector gods of the sea,  
pale in the starlight. I follow the coastline,

smuggling wads of hundreds with rubberbands  
around them. Pygmies I pass paint my route  
on bark cloth fans in reds and browns.  
I move in slow motion like a prisoner  
of war, adjusting my sense of scale

to the world just around the corner,  
navigating the boom in development,  
the new apartment buildings, the parking lots,  
the broken glass in the street.

Mornings, I walk a precipice  
and gaze down to where summer rain  
has fallen in sheets, where floods  
have swept through avenues of shops  
shaded by drooping palms,

through marshy fields of lilies  
and water chestnuts. At night, I listen  
to street musicians playing old neighborhood songs,  
sparse lyrics to women in poses of repose  
and undress. I sing along in the local dialect,

sing to a barely surviving childhood,  
my ragtag performance ripe for documentary.

I try to stay in tune with the times,  
to grasp the value of heirlooms

and branding consultants, to get the hang  
of exacting words to talk about myself.  
I make up reasons

to step out for sandwiches and spend  
hours drinking lemonade and reading  
the paper in a coffee shop with walls the color  
of the white lipstick favored by twelve year-old girls.

I read stories of cruel men with clear consciences,  
of upticks in sales, of mournful pageantry  
in the interludes between sparking swords,  
of wonder drugs, and of friendly fire.  
It's a quiet adventure, despite the din  
of café conversation.

I walk through the town in the afternoon,  
through shadows of spires like fangs  
on the sidewalk, lured by the rustle and verve  
of rolling on floors and the buzzing of speaking

in tongues, sounds like sacks full of snakes  
from behind church doors, pulled by the curve  
of a current, a jostling torrent of ragtag protons  
urging me toward an exuberant, perilous future.

I usually blend in. Sometimes I'm plump  
sometimes lanky, sometimes I look  
almost priestly. I'm cross-eyed, my nose  
looks broken, and a birthmark mars  
my forehead. My intelligence rests

in economy, in one raised eyebrow  
or the gift of a four leaf clover. I carry  
a mirror for divination and wear a scorpion amulet  
for protection from storms.

At night, I lie on my back and reflect  
on a world I've read about, a world  
of high-curtained windows

and mountain lakes the color of jade.

I wonder if this is the world  
I've been waiting for. I sit at the edge  
of my bed, my shoulders hunched,  
lowering my head, holding my fists  
to my face, distressed by the sound

of my breathing. Knowing I behave  
like a lout, I pull back from people  
of conviction, finding relief  
in what I can wrest from a single  
musical phrase, a trace of a song,

or from the pale perfume that hangs  
like a haze in pastel blue sanctuaries  
filled with expensive things, longing  
for sleep, for dreams of my body

breaking out in wings, lifting me over  
grand, leafy neighborhoods, over  
sodden towns with boarded-up stores,  
over picnics with skateboarding dogs,

over survivors at sea, waving up  
from their lifeboats.

I wake and mistake the rain  
against the bedroom window  
for piano. But it's the wind,

the wind that moves the trees  
to alter their stand on waiting  
for Fall. That wind stalks me  
like a tax collector. It tears the door

off the church, blows dust, splinters,  
and the sound of a man sighing  
up in a gust and down on the leaves.

It blows in a wolf that lurches  
through my house, howling,  
drenched in my cologne.

I work in a crouch  
among cool, flat surfaces.  
I converse to keep away bears

and reflect on the insidious pleasure  
of scratching. I read and re-read  
the lines I've written, wearing  
the words down to lint. I wonder

what it's like to be a bird,  
to listen for worms, to float off,  
helium-light.

My sister and I once snaked  
through lush pastures  
and serpented along the seaside.  
We surveyed a rugged world,

watched buildings heave with rage,  
and listened to guilty verdicts on the car radio.  
Now, I visit her when she summons me.  
She keeps her door locked and is visible

only through a keyhole in silhouette,  
squatting, wrapped in a blanket,  
wearing a red cap, mistaking herself  
for a devil.

When our mother died, I sat  
for a week in a soundproof room.  
When I went out, I spoke to people  
from behind curtains and hedges.

I dreaded the coming of Spring  
and was intimidated by the unfettered  
ambition of toddlers and the metabolism

of birds. I was free from my old addictions  
to dreamy heroines and gateway drugs,

but didn't yet know what else I could do.  
I marvelled at lemons and teaspoons and  
searched my drawers for names  
and phone numbers I'd scribbled  
on the backs of shopping lists and receipts.

I felt like a young parent who'd given up  
a child and wanted it back.

I tried drumming out the neighborhood sounds  
but couldn't. I still can't now, drumming  
on my own skin. I smoked cigarettes and cigars  
to erase the taste. I taste it still. I wove bangles  
through my granddaughters' pigtails  
and never used them up.

Now, I'm standing in the rain hailing a taxi,  
thinking I might catch a break somewhere further  
downtown, but as streaks of yellow fly by, I realize  
that this is not a great corner,

that I'm going to be stuck here, perhaps  
for quite a while, holding my umbrella  
with one hand, the other hand trying  
to wave down a cab.