

The Grammar of Lockjaw

Forget to treat a cut
and tetanus sets in.
Then if still untreated
tetanus leads to lockjaw,
and then you can't talk.
This is how kids scare each other.
When I was little
this was terror to me.
No eating,
and especially no talking,
I couldn't imagine no talking,
like in a nation with spying and war,
then probably death followed.
Nobody ever talked about
what happened after lockjaw
or what happened to your teeth
clamped together the whole time.
I used to ride up the block
on my bicycle,
practicing talking through my teeth.
Even now I always keep track of
when to get the tetanus booster.
People still say I talk too much
but I'm always grateful
that I can open my mouth.

The Grammar of Middle Age

In the car with a bar
of dark chocolate:
Left hand steering,
right hand breaking bits off.
The strap of my bra
gives.

What gives me joy telescopes:
Smaller. Tighter. Sharper.

Mouth closed, singing,
taste buds engorged.
Montauk Highway
curves out east before me,
sandy vistas all around,
grainy bliss on my tongue.
Rationalize this?
I can and I will.

Husband home, oblivious.
No parents to stop me.
No doctors to scold.
Medical research on my side.
Serenity all in pieces.

The Grammar of Old Cities

You don't speak Catalan, or Spanish either. No matter. The man and his wife, or maybe his lover, pull out one after another. You hover and flutter over them. Never saw so many fans in one place, like no place you've ever been though the umbrella shop on West 57th Street came close. Now it's gone. Your lover had taken you there after dinner, before the real after. You're shocked this place still exists, even here. They say Barcelona's a city of style where chic people gather. Not in here, with this time-heavy haze of cases and cabinets all brown like the plains of Catalonia – although, to be fair, you're not sure if Catalonia has any plains. Tomorrow you'll fly out to Paris then back to New York, and you try to remember that alone and lonely can differ, a distinction that kills your amnesia. "Never lose your elegance," he'd said to you, "never." He would speak in your ear, it was only to you. Somehow, your things would be scattered. You never knew there was so much gravitas in sex, but you loved New Year's Eve at the Carlyle, cocktail parties on lawns, charity functions. Sunday afternoon, the cathedral is shuttered, leaving the holy-card vendors in sharp shadows cast by the steeples. The museum of erotica's doors open wide to La Rambla. That's better. Paella served at every café, every door open to the street. You're a stranger. Just steps outside the fan shop, on the street in the sunlight, a festival of lovers, strolling in pairs browsing the hatters, sidewalk artists and dealers in leather, the mothers. Longing's not love. Fans are for ladies who quietly perspire in shadow, who signal with eyes over candles. Nobody has time for that now, time to squander, to linger and pore over trinkets imbued with the dusty perfume of nameless flowers. You choose three fans made out of paper, modern fans for a woman who won't stay one moment longer. The old woman writes in her ledger. You would rather have bought one of the lacier ones, silk with sandalwood slats but look in the mirror: the lover is gone. He won't be returning. Your elegant days are distant as thunder.

The Grammar of Parts of Speech

Personal pronoun hears a rustle
in the privet by my front door

and I verb you.
I verb you, with hyperbole.

You have been the passive voice
in my past tense;

your to-be predicate
is the object of memory.

Reflexively we modify each other.
Progressively we are modifying.

Future tense is conditional
on missing parts of speech.

The Grammar of Traps

Starfish sees the trap of fractals, the decorator's rule of five, Japanese flower arrangements, the pruned branches of privet, yes, and tributaries back in their banks.

Memory sees the trap of logical, longitudinal, linear progression.

Trashcan sees the trap of closure.

Ring sees the trap of whose diamond is biggest. And, infinity. Again.

Grid sees the trap of city, cemetery, supermarket aisle, cropland, parade.

Artist sees the trap of disorder, the entropy of life, the spinning-out into shambles of her process, the partly-filled notebooks, paper clips corralling scraps of extra lines, erasures and elisions between