

Le Bugue

An old woman (here you may not ask)
cranks her body up from the bench

submerged only days ago. The Vézère
has dropped to green once more, swarms of bees

cluster around our heads as we cross
the bridge. Cars chug past below on the quai,

released from the flood. The woman adjusts
her blouse, her fruit-colored hair. Walks,

a little bent, a little slow, away. I think of you,
sister, there is not a moment when I do not.

You go with me, in my pockets, in each slender
joy. I carry you up cobbled hills and eye for you

the shirtless workman repairing a stone wall
that has plunged down the hillside into fields

shouting with purple iris, wisteria,
yellow mustard. Every dog smiles for you,

and the birds—swifts and magpies,
sparrows singing in French

and the little tuxedo'd dipper riding the flood
on a broken branch, all these swoop and dive

for you, speak your name and watch me
for signs of you with round black eyes.

Le Bugue to Paris

Leaving Le Bugue, the philanthropy of rain
returns, fat clouds overflowing, filling the Vézère

once more. I wish I had your picture here with me,
posed for the cruise ship's photographer,

embroidered blouses we bought for pennies
from the impenetrable Indians at Gatun Lake,

the big rimless glasses we wore in the '80s,
our acrylic nails and turquoise

eye shadow. I was your shipmate then,
my 40th birthday lay in wait, a stone

that would wedge itself between us
for years. It's taken death to shift it,

to bring us all the way back—our father,
cousin, aunt, brother. I've seen you

three times in the past year, each an unbearable
loss. The last time, I helped you from your bed

to the bathroom, washed and fed you,
stroking your white head as if you were a child,

crooning *sweetheart, sweetheart*.

The Houses of the Dead

for Franny

I want to be happy again, to stop thinking
about the dog on the floor at the side of the bed,

the dog who is only an outline, a dog-shape
made with a black Marks-A-Lot with no

corporeal body, no face. I want to stop
thinking about the scaly thing beginning,

always just beginning, to wind up the white
iron leg at the bottom of the bed, tiny bat's wings

unfurled behind its flat head, tongue searching the air.
This morning at the end of sleep I dropped by your house,

stopped in for a chat and a cup of tea, the way I imagine
I remember doing when I lived just a few blocks away

but this time your granddaughter was there at your kitchen
table, you were gone, and when I resumed my walk I realized

you would always be gone and there would be no more of you
and me, and in my sleep, I dropped to the curb and howled

in that way I do not when I'm awake because the part of me
watching accuses me of being melodramatic

and when I woke I thought I must have made a sound
but my husband did not notice.

The city knows nothing, in the summer
it is molten, the asphalt gummy

beneath our shoes, everyone gathers up their cucumbers
and corkscrews and goes off to the islands

where the azure seas soothe and the ripe sun
blushes the shoulders of clerks and housewives,

where fir trees remind them that there once
was a life before Little League and diaper service,

the city's leftovers baking on sidewalks, the little houses
in the old neighborhoods quietly flaking paint,

the old men and old women who remain being removed,
one by one, taken in ambulance or hearse,

leaving the granddaughters to clear away the rubble
and hand out corroded jewelry from the middle

of the last century no one really wants. The dogs will go
to new cities, the cats will fend for themselves.

I will not walk by your house again,
it's been twenty years since we lived so close together,

I began losing you when I left that city you loved,
the strands that held us stretched and frayed.

And the scaly thing, the thing with fluttering wings,
I will get used to it, it will be my dog and follow me

faithfully through the streets of the city where I live without you.
I will feed it flecks of gold I find in the houses of the dead.

Weather

Sunday morning, waking to the slaughter,
the inconsolable smells, the smothering owlsh light,

sixteen dead bolts on the door cannot blind us
to the stacking, bristling idiot mounds, horses

with their limbs ablaze, the piazza filled with smoke,
we try to disappear but all the roads are blocked

 fascinated by the birdcage, the ash at the end of my mother's
 Kool, the runes on our kitchen linoleum, a bit of wither

under the bridge, suspended, the cables,
the rust, under the parking lot, the worm,

the ripening, under the narcotic sky, under the flames,
the weather builds, one egret at a time, plodding in

on snowshoes and waterskies, tossing pomegranates
to the crowds gathered to watch the drizzle set fire

to the dwarf shackled to the bike rack on the Herengracht.
The magpies gather like pickpockets, count your hands, hero,

 when I was four I had a brother, I buried
 my face in his sheets a cat rolling in grass

 when I was four I had a sister bouffant and gauze,
 far away in the never-never of our house

wasp down the soprano's voice through the old black telephone,
the clacking bones of larkspur, the rot breaking through,

erupting, chewing and casting, leaving a trail, a wandering bruise,
the leaves of the birch across the intersection signaling wildly in the wind.

Elegy for December

This is an elegy for everyone who's gotten in the way
this year. In the way of a bullet, in the way of a drunk,
in the way of a rampaging warlord or an invasion of cancer.

This is an elegy for those riding the #52 bus every day,
riding the bus to Fred Meyer for diapers and a 12-pack
of Diet Coke. For everyone who mucks through

the wet snow that fell all morning, slicking the black pavement
and drowning the sleeping bags of the homeless.

This is an elegy for the ones we lost, the ones who grew old

suddenly and died in spite of all our holding on,
this is for the way we dug our heels into the earth, the way
we heaved and yanked on the lines that broke even so,

the boat that drifted away without us. This is an elegy
for Ryan who told me Christmas is an ordeal
and for Marilyn in her Santa Claus hat,

and it is for everyone in the middle, dusting
banisters, pouring wine, pulling on damp work boots,
for everyone reading this poem or any other poem.

I give you my kind intentions, all I have really,
and this leafless maple outside my window
wearing a cloak of white, just for today.