

Mother Tongue

I want to sit with my knees apart,  
welcome in the world the way they warn against,  
grow loose and wild until there's nothing left  
I haven't swallowed whole.

I want to tear the sizes off of clothing  
with my teeth, turn to stone  
the men who dare to look upon my face.  
I want a face that levels them

that dares to wither and grow old.  
I want the kind of mouth they used to bridle,  
the kind of hair they used to shave,  
the kind of knee and neck and ankle

it was sin to see. I want to go to war  
with arsenals of violets, crones and maidens  
wreathed with twigs and ashes at my back.  
I want the trees to hiss the hymn of our attack:

make impotent their blades, spit spells  
until their shields enfold them like a mother  
might. I want to speak my murdered sisters'  
mother tongue as I stalk surrendered fields.

I want to wear red, drink gin, suck sin,  
gorge on apples, let Eden rot. I want men  
to tremble at every pregnant belly. I want  
them to call me Destroyer of Paradise,

the one who dared to eat her fill,  
who spat their rib back out at them.  
I want to be the kind of woman  
they would burn.

### Pulling Out the Pins

I read a story of a rape survivor who almost  
got away, but was caught, at last, by her hair.  
Afterward she always cut it short, a stay  
against whatever bides its time in shadow.

In some cultures, budding breasts  
are beaten down with hot stones,  
wooden spoons, just to stop them growing.  
The mothers strike with violence and love,  
whatever it takes to spare their girls becoming  
child brides, or something worse.

At nineteen I would climb two thousand  
stairs a day, smoke and starve to shrink  
the culprits of my body that drew so many  
large, insisting hands. Even mostly disappeared,  
I wasn't safe and knew it.

What other parts of us will we decide  
to cover up or disappear or live to lose  
in order to outrun what's always just a little faster,  
its sinister warm breath two steps behind?  
What else will we erase or batter down  
just so we can walk home in this world?

I still wonder about the woman, years later.  
In my fantasies, she has grown elegantly old,  
her wrinkled lips bending in a smile, as,  
for what must be the thousandth time now,  
some gentle soul she chose and chose,  
pulls out the pins and lets her long white hair  
tumble, liberated, down her bare back.

## A Pane Apart

The other side is not real-  
ly in the sky, no golden roads,  
no bayous boiling fire.  
But not nowhere, either. Not nothing.

I think that when we die, we slide  
behind a pane of mirrored glass to watch,  
still shuffling the same kitchen  
for the same taste of midnight sweet,  
but separated by a wall as thin as paper,  
clear as air.

The heaven-hell of it is better-worse  
than what we're sold in stolid rooms.  
A universe of souls drinking coffee  
with their children or their wives,  
a pane apart. The gone one knows.

And there aren't spirits coming back –  
the glassy wall, though slimmer than a thread,  
only goes one way. The thing you thought  
you saw, your mother's ghost –  
was just a wish. From over there

the best the dead can do is press their bodies  
hard against the glass like hungry children  
when the bread is baked, and chant  
like mantras, "Take your pills. Latch  
the sliding lock before you sleep. You know  
those onions don't agree with you."

And when you latch the lock, you start to cry,  
thinking of the hundred times your mother  
told you to, the unlocked doors of your life  
pounding in the thousands. And maybe  
you hear her say it one more time  
as if whispered from across the room,

and you know it for the love it is, the way  
you couldn't know when you were small,  
perfume you only smell when someone moves  
to leave a room.

### The Most Necessary Thing

Psychologists believe anorexics  
are trying to return to the bodies  
of their girlhoods.

I tell the woman helping me choose clothes  
that I am A Four, as if it were my name.  
Last year I was A Ten, then A Six, my self  
shrinking like a countdown. And well I know  
there is a zero on the rack. There is a way,  
I know, to disappear.

Zero comes from the Arabic *ṣifr*  
which means empty. Anorexic is from the Greek  
*an orexis*: without desire. Some religious men  
call this perfection.

At ten, my breasts grew. A boy in class  
pretended to admire my necklace,  
but held them, daring me to speak.

There are a thousand  
ways to harm a girl like this, and I  
know them all.

I know the weight of fingernails  
and hair. Tonsils, spleen. Things  
I could remove. I know the bone,  
the marrow of the bone, the brittle  
inside of a woman, the girl  
who wishes never to need anything,  
to live on air. I know the circumferences  
of each limb in centimeters, inches,  
fingerlengths.

A woman says she envies my control.  
I want to say, "You are already lost."  
I want to say, "Envy is another word  
for hunger."

The hips I had were gripped and forced  
and used, and even then, he said,  
he could never love a girl as big  
as me.  
Now there is no place his love

could fit, no thing to fill his hands.  
I could slide him away like a plate  
across stone.

There are no ways to harm  
a girl like this.

“You’re dying,” the doctor says. *No,*  
*I am compressing, condensing*  
*into only the most necessary thing.*

A woman I know can carve cities  
into peach pits.

The most dangerous words a girl  
can say are, “I want.”

We will never be safe in these skins.

My Father Asks Me to Write a Poem

It is near the end of my father's life,  
his memories like old neighbors  
who drop in and stay a long time,  
picking up where they left off, then  
careful not to overstay, are out the door.

It is a good day, and we idle on the lake.  
Maybe because he knows  
there is not much time, he has given up  
asking, "Why don't you go to law school?"  
or, "When will you write something  
that will make you some money?"

Now, when he touches me, he does it  
for a long time, trembling. The waves  
rock us as the sunset fires up the horizon.  
He does not need to say, "This is beautiful."  
He does not need to say, "I am grateful  
you had a child in time for me to see him."

He does not need to tell me he is afraid.  
He only says, "Please write a poem  
about this moment," and finally, near the end  
of his life, he is glad I know how.