

THE PAINTER

Today a new angle.
Hung upon the wall—
Hundreds of the same face.

SETTLEMENT

When we—they—bought the house, beige and both
under and overdecorated, a blue shag carpet (very
seventies, my mother said) sprawled across the upstairs

living room. Popcorn walls and a faded pastoral
adorned the chamber where my sister and I
slept. Pristine pond lined with cattails, perfect

picture hole-punched by my father's
fist. It remained a while after, what was left of that mural,
in the eyes of a beige dog, sticking its snout

in marsh-grass. Plaster and a mesh screen covered
that hole—to keep out termites, those long-term residents
we endeavored to evict—they testified to his knuckles

barging through their home; our home, painted
purple now, with hints
of blue. Past the driveway, a behemoth

of a tree peels away, strips of bark
littering the dry soil. Buckling at the base
the canopy sways. Its branches threaten

to crash through my window. A squirrel stares
then falls, scrambling across the roof
of our Subaru Forester. I lean over the overgrown

balcony and imagine my body open, crushed
and seeping fluid, like broken milkweed
stems. Lying there, on the sloping concrete

my eyes gazed at glitters of green.
It was all I ever dreamed about—
some consecrating scheme

to mark as our territory a house
which could never be ours, so long
as all of us lived in it.

MARCESCENCE

To come out of hiding in winter
brushing the sidewalk slush with the black
of your boots. Over draughts of tea and coffee,
I learn your face: beer-flushed cheeks, eyes not jaded

but bright like verdant stones. The city hushes—
can you hear it? Winds rush through husks
hanging off the trees, unfaded remnants of the last
brisk season. There's no history to speak

between us. I draw close
though disillusioned of touch, a child of drought
from a state of stubborn gardeners
drawing life from unlush dust.

Does your past crush beneath your foot
like so much soot-packed snow? Or does it fix
to your shoulders with the insistence of autumn's
ghost leaves? Dear stranger, if you lust

for understanding, words you can keep,
old words of the soil to rock you to sleep,
place my hand in the grace of yours.
Leave when you must.

CORNUCOPIA

Abundance terrifies me—what I wish
to show you, what I cannot. Down the river path: a tangle

of trees, a vanished bridge. Crossing yellow tape
I plant myself at the edge of the Bronx. My legs dangle

over a rotten plank. The waters break over well-worn rocks
and part for a slab of concrete sundered by last night's storm. Helicopter

leaves appear then falter. The river a kaleidoscope

of gold and black. By the opposite bank, bicyclists turn back
the way they came in a repeating moment of defeat. I entertain

clichés: the ever-changing river; the dreadful symbol of the damn
dead bridge. None of it has anything to do with me

except that I was there to see all of it because I had nowhere
else to go, because I couldn't bear to be myself. Halfway

through the poem, I use the pen you gave me: it requires

a delicate touch to draw out its ink. I think
prattling on about my feelings doesn't do me

much good. I wish and wish, wish to trade
our irresolute talks for walks at dusk. Though I can't

bring you along, I carry your image in my head. I say, *look*,

and stroll under an ornate stone archway, standing a minute
at the mouth of a private garden. How extravagant

it all seems: the painstakingly pruned foliage, the cast-iron
gates. But how can I fault the plants? They make use

of what they have. They stretch toward the sun, in spite
of their enclosure. There is something precious

even in the unnatural hedges. Something alive, and hungering.

CALIFORNIA, AUGUST 21, 2020

By the side of Highway 5 a jittery train
of cars rumbles south. Past Whiskeytown
(but before Redding) on 299

the scrubbed hills stare. Black
matchsticks still stand, seared
several seasons ago. Grass mops, tenacious
as sea urchins, hold fast to bald faces

of red rock. Landscape crews fasten nets
to crumbling walls. Down the road
an exposed shoulder's picked clean
by bulldozers. Leering

like lewd seers, confetti trees line
the fields, jubilant, motionless.