

Above My Mouth

—after Leonard Cohen's "*Beneath My Hands*"

Above my mouth
your soft lips
are the faintly-fanning wings
of a fluttering Monarch.

Whenever you exhale
I feel the heat of silent words,
of fledgling words.

I am breathless
because you have perched upon me,
because your hands
are the burning brands of a blacksmith.

I relish the time
when your eyes
begin to fether my body.

When you hover
over me
to tease my restless flesh
I want to teach
ascetic trees and stoic mountains
the sweet secrets
of hidden desires.

I want you
to renounce to me
your capacity
for flight.

When you soar in close
to brush my body
with your sensitive setae
I want my fingertips
to be the slender pins fastening
your frame against mine forever.

Non-sonant

I don't remember
the labor that slid
into fetal distress, or the nitwit OB-GYN
who just had to finish his office hours before
heading to the hospital
to usher me into tactility.

I don't remember pounding
against my mother's uterus, begging
to be liberated, or slowly suffocating—
a gazelle subdued in a lion's jaws—
exhausted, my pleas for oxygen
unheeded.

I don't remember almost
asphyxiating, don't remember
the bright light
that blistered my eyes as they sliced
into her womb to extract me
like a wrinkled peach pit from overripened flesh.

I don't remember shivering naked
in an algid, antiseptic room, struggling
for those first few breaths; straining
to find the voice that
still falls like dust motes
in an abandoned house.

In St. Therese's Memory Care Unit

Like dried persimmons, ears
droop from their skulls: flesh
tired of gravity's pull, listening
only to the memories
replaying in their minds—
flicker shows from decades departed.

Glaucous eyes wander
behind Coke-bottle glasses;
wheel chairs twirl
in repetitive circles, every rotation
a new adventure.

Their lips twitch—
chanting monks mouthing
the same phrases over
and over: "Come here Sister!"
"Can you help me?"
"Chicken and garlic..."—
as torsos,
like portly pendulums,
sway back and forth to tunes
only they can hear.

Grandma shuffles her feet,
even now unable to keep
still, body remembering industrious days.
Conversations are circinate: sometimes
she parrots phrases, other times
random sentences fly
from her fine-lined lips, concentration
a fickle visitor.

Leaving, I kiss her blue Q-tip head
and her pupils slide sideways,
my vaguely familiar face already
fading into obscurity.

Phrenology

How tightly he holds her head in his hands as it moves beneath him in wordless
passion, his fingers following cranial fissures while she fills his hollowness
with her body.

She knows what he seeks when they slide down her neck, knows what question
his lips phrase as they brush her forehead with the sweeps of a long
willow broom.

Her fontanel has frozen well, solid as the breastbone caging his pounding heart. She will
give only what he can take, take everything
he can give.

It is a game of peek-a-boo, this dance in the dark;
she keeps the back of her head hard
against the pillow.

