

*For K, on Her Graduation (abecedarian #2)*

A child's hand, dry and wind-streaked  
by a bike howling loose on the hill that

corners our tiny cabin walls crawling with my maniacal  
desire to strap ourselves to each spine-straight plywood plank,

each elemental sigh fierce in our blood-roiling  
family fidelity, *or not*, depending on the curve of sun on the

grass and the fiery heat of a white-wicked flame  
hovering in the window after dark, a delicate dance

innocent in its instant response to each breath -  
just a single light burning to map a way home,

kilter the seesaw so you can get on *and stay on*,  
lean in, stretch toward the sparrow at the back door,

marooned and knocking, mistaking the glass for horizon - but  
nesting here instead, burrowing into the second-best

option, a settling perhaps, but not so, as I open the latch,  
push back the frayed screen and she flies inside,

quiet as a wish you once swallowed before her released song  
rises at the lintel, climbs each wall to break forth in waves at the ceiling,

spread like wings, like arms thrown open in the act of living  
through each crashing white-cap, in spite of the current that tugs you

under before pitching you out, sending you somersaulting towards shore,  
V-shaped legs spiraling as silver-sparking spokes -

whisked clean and glinting -  
(e)xta tools for song, for flight, for ascension, for (*finally!*) freedom.

You lovely flaxen-haired girl, you swing your sea-stitched eyes over your shoulder,  
zeroing in on my face in one final fast-fading moment.

*The Thaw*

You come to listen to the swamp's thaw,  
water rushing up in hushed whispers  
from the frozen ground over  
the jagged stones wedged in your throat. You

have held this shotgun-in-the-mouth silence for too long.

Each beneath-the-leaves rustle, each witch-fingered web  
of tree roots unearths a silent gasp.

You imagine your stand off with the lone buck means something,  
each budding antler rolling in a carpet of fresh moss,  
a blanket of *only beginning*.

This is the place where toppled trees  
with rotten centers become homes  
to your unborn. This is where

each wide-winged shadow of the hawk's hunt  
paints a latticework of movement

in a world inhabited only by ghosts.

Someone has laid a ladder of stone across the deepest puddle.  
Someone has carved pine-knotted stairs up the sharpest slope.

Each curve in the path bends like the belly of a spoon,  
cradling breath, the gentle echo of a woodpecker.

Loose bark dusts in your fingers, blows out like ashes  
in each pull of the vice unstrapping in your chest.

Each branched scaffold offers a toehold.

Later you will remember each humped turtle shell  
clambered upon the driftwood lodged in the pond.

You will remember the sun's diamond streamers  
waked and rippling along the surface,  
the heat of the red dirt beneath your hands

a slight burn held fast, a cracking snap of ice splintering as it

lets go.

*The Day-to-Day Letting Go*

Never mind the rust-coated vixen brazenly  
bursting before your car in a sure-footed saunter,  
her over-the-shoulder glance as she secures the sidewalk,  
snickers at your foot, anvil-heavy on the brake.

Never mind the purple-bellied house finch  
who flashes at the feeder like a sunset stroke,  
his paler mate muted beneath him on the ground,  
pecking at scraps. The world offers a kaleidoscope

of light. Look, your daughter in Florida sends photos  
of her team - high school girls with middle parts  
and luminescent skin, arms wrapped around each other  
in a sun-drenched pool, sirens with star-studded smiles,  
shoulders that make you weep.

And your son standing across  
the street in a March bluster, saying  
to an older boy, *Wait! I will play with you*  
after his teammates sneer  
*No way! You're annoying! Go away!* That boy's  
release of trapped breath, ball tossed in the air.

Each day collect a list of words: *vermilion,*  
*ephemeral,*  
*archipelago,*  
*corporeal.*

In the afternoons, roll down the window, listen to  
the children calling to each other on the playground,  
singing in a language that wisps and curls through the air  
like bird song, like an ancient unburdened exhale  
that pirhouettes briefly with a butterfly's wings  
before losing form entirely and spiraling away.

*The Single Reason*

Come with your eye  
liner stuffed deep in the gray ash  
of your pocket. Come with your  
palm-scalding pistol still smoking  
from blanks shot into a moonless sky.  
Come with your epilepsy-seized ear,  
bloody and dripping through your fingers.  
Crack the oven a smidge.  
Prop the garage door with a chipped brick.

The living have so many needs.

Bring your honey-haired, six-toed cats  
purring and pushing against your knees.  
Bring your sloppy glasses of sea green absinthe.  
Bring all the heaviest stones from your garden,  
the yellowed wallpaper torn from the plaster,  
the holes left behind like oozing wounds.  
Bring the ax blade blackened by fire,  
scorched beyond recognition, fogging seven fresh  
graves. Bring your silence, the 56 days it takes to die,  
the acid in your throat an unspeakable  
penance, the impossible-to-fix mistake  
bent-kneed for fox-hole fixing.

Get used to what cannot be undone.

Throw open the 78th floor window.  
Let the frozen midnight slap you wide-awake  
sober. Give all the bathroom razors to the husband  
you used to know. Unleash the dog you sent to the farm,  
let it run in the street, find its own way home.  
Swing the noose wide so it catches on the lowest tree branch,  
hangs like a necklace on a childhood playground.  
Hide the unfinished whiskey bottles in the bottom of the trash can,  
far from the glint and swell of amber rivers.

Don't dig them out.

Return the stolen sequined dress before  
trying it on in the Starbucks bathroom.  
Don't yank the tags. Sneak it under your coat,  
find its place on the rack, look the rich jobless wives  
in the eye on your way out.

Find God by the birdfeeder.  
Bow to the red-headed woodpecker  
who comes every day.

Loosen the stitch in your shoulders.  
Let the touch on your gnarled hand grow wings.  
Hear the symphony of each skeletal knock at the glass.  
See the full moon smudged on the horizon as

the sole reason.

*My Daughter Gets Her Belly Button Pierced on Her 15th Birthday*

After another storm, clouds thin out and curl  
across the sky like miniature fetuses before  
being whisked away, evening's womb heavy  
with rain, grayed with age, incensed in sections,  
screaming with black fury

as my children gloriously play Roblox upstairs,  
discussing, collaborating, communing in the way  
I imagined at their births: save them from the bear trap  
that is mother, that weight more dead  
and pressing than anyone can survive.

The sky darkens as bedtime passes  
and I buzz along the mainframe that is the belly  
ring at the tattoo parlor on Broadway -  
urban America whipping by as her brother  
and I squeeze her hand, and she pales out,  
her lips the color of wet cement and I think, *shit*  
she's leaning into me, *I'm so dizzy*, she says  
as her belly button catches the 100 degree sunset  
and she slides down the strip mall wall  
like a shovel-stunned snake.

*Breathe.*

*Just breathe.*

*They jab so deep.*

But now upstairs, they play, seven years apart, one  
pierced through and bleeding, one young enough to say,  
*That place, it made my stomach hurt*, and me, here, thinking:  
*I allowed them to hurt her, I paid for it*, because she wanted it,  
because she is all I ever wanted, because that glint  
of chiseled silver in her belly means love, means everything,  
over and over again, without question, as I whisper:  
*Breathe, Sweetheart. Just breathe*  
*into your wild beauty, your riotous,*  
*ungodly pain.*