

what I'm really asking

## Tree house

I don't know how to see myself  
as a shining tower, not a crumbling one.  
Growing up in a city—  
it teaches you about heights  
and how to fall from them,  
like how I broke my foot jumping  
from a churchyard playground platform  
onto a sharp, innocent rock.  
When I say *heights* I mean promises.  
When I say *heights* I mean all the days  
my father and I talked about building  
a treehouse, and never did.

The red maple we'd staked out is gone now,  
abandoned to rot years before Paul sawed it down,  
but looking back now I have to admit  
it wouldn't have been sturdy enough.  
Maybe that's why Dad and I spent  
our time wandering around the idea,  
instead of climbing up to it  
and hammering the first nail.

Nowadays my godmother, rooted  
in the house by where the treehouse tree  
stood, uses an electric chair to glide  
up and down the stairs. Lyme,  
old knees, the stubbornness that comes  
from losing too much. She complains  
the climb is too slow—slower than she was  
when she crawled, twice a day,  
down, and up.

## Bruin

Our ancestors were so afraid they called them *bruin*, literally *brown one*, to avoid summoning muscle and fur and roaring. The original name's been lost to time and fear—no way to know what word we first gave *bear*. Hold it in your mind: when the world was so small we had only fire and breath to protect us.

We still have that power. Say *rapids* and there in the mind, crashing. *Tomorrow?* he asks, and she curls with regret. The breathless fragile innocence of *songbird*.

But think too of what's lost. Once, perhaps, a greater word conjured the slow pink promise of what's now just *sunrise*. We could invoke beyond *rage*, the kind of anger that makes a father break his hand on the stovetop. Long ago, there was a single word for how the horse thunders, streaming, across the plain.

who will I be

last night I asked you how  
to describe absence; you answered

with an image of winter trees waving  
through car windows, and I

took that as gospel: bare branches  
are empty of everything but promise.

I was really asking why I have such  
trouble admitting to the fact of

journeying. beginnings I've had,  
and endings, I'll decide, but

the time it takes to go anywhere  
in life, the next town over or

success in one's career—I can't  
fathom it, this dark depthlessness

is less challenge and more, well,  
failure. what I'm really asking about

is fear. what I'm really asking is if  
you ever noticed that "admission"

is both something you receive  
and something you pay; if you ever

marveled, as a child, at the wonder  
of walking past a subway stop you'd

only ever skipped. there's only  
so much space in the mind for time.

I will never be bigger than I was the day  
I told my mother her hair would grow

back, and I will never be more alive  
than that afternoon in Central Park

when she said "so, listen,"  
and my eyes got hot. when will I accept

that wallowing in the muck of life  
is living? who will I be when

I open my petals to the sun  
and think only: "now"?