

Elegy for John Denver as my first imaginary friend

You had a wild-bear smile; that's what my father used to call it: wider than your cheeks
and wrapped in egg-shaped glasses.
It appeared in photographs like a ship in a bottle—that, once opened,
never moved again.

A lady at Sunday school once told me,
one day you'll find yourself a nice boy to marry,
and I found you—

sitting by the radiator with paintings we hadn't yet hung.
I must have borrowed the shape of you
from album covers. Nebulous below the chin, and all in denim,
you leaned on an oil canvas field
of sunflowers, holding a fiddle—always, just about to sing.

What was a love song but two people
sitting next to each other?
Happy to be close, but not needing to be closer?

I imagined us survivors—leftover cowboys,
praying to the gods we made up. At the end of the world
and whatever grew after, we ran barefoot through bone-dry fields
that rustled like fire.

I learned, with you, to hold a wet reed between my thumbs
and make it sing. *The dead are birds,* you said, *and this is how you call them.*
We cupped our palms to our lips,
breathed into a space created by knucklebones,
and fluttered our fingers like wings.

You sat with me, one night,
as I cut off my hair in the blue-cloud dark
with a kitchen knife; fingers trembled, loose, as wet rags.
You told me, *you look fine with it*—and anyway,
who's left to appraise you in the end-times?

A love song was this:
a girl and a ghost sat two feet apart in cowboy country,
whistling grass.
It was walking with men who don't have bodies
and writing of women who do.

These days, I still dream of the desert after
an apocalypse, when all the other cars are still,

and we tear past them—I want to hold a living person there, or else
remember how to love a dead one.

I confess, I like to miss you.
I practice loss, and you are easy for it:
easier than the house, and the burnt-out fields of cheatgrass,
easier than the dog
and every girl I've dated since.

I try to see you, now, in the backseat of my car—your glasses, in the rearview mirror,
lifting as you smile.
I drive the logging roads, where swaths of forest drop
into a sky
so wide that touching is a waste of it.

I count the birds on fenceposts.
I cup my fingers to my lips and blow between the bones.

Notes from observation

When you called this afternoon, to tell me you had your second baby,
I was chasing garter snakes in a roadside field.

I wanted to see their glisten after molting, and as I answered,
held one up to the midday sun.

I confess, I missed the greeting. But when you told me, *it's a boy*, I heard
your tongue push through the gap in your teeth
as you smiled.

I didn't tell you on the phone, that the snake shone
like freshly cooled lava;
I didn't tell you,
I've begun to dream of the apocalypse again,

as I did when the bank sold a prairie at the end of our street,
where we'd trespassed for years,

as I did when you met your first boyfriend,
and you drove me to a diner to explain, over eggs,
the taste of someone else's tongue.

The same dream, each time—sharp bones of a church,
with a hole blown in its flank like a sunken pirate ship,
inviting me in.

I lie in its pews, counting the eyes of fresco men above me.
I play officiant sometime; I wed invisible bodies and join their hands.

Recently, I sit awake in my Adirondack chair
for hours, and think
I haven't changed since I was twelve years old.

I've caught an immortality, like the women, soft and vampiric,
you told me not to pine for—who glint in and out of their bodies
like scales in the sun;

I didn't listen. Years later,
I watch our hills regrow after wildfire, the churn of dirt into houses,
the gentle way you mutate, in love.

Driving into the tornado

Where the whole body rocks
on its wheels, braces the road at the end of which
is the funnel—

close enough
to see it churn; then
closer,

still, to the updraft breathing shingles
off roofs, rise and fall
of the cloud's green belly,

and the county sirens singing us
underground.

Where the body, off its wheels, catches the rear flank draft;

it opens the cloud like a trout
chasing a fishhook—sees line attached but takes the flash in its mouth
anyway—
tasting blood and barb.

And I am some slippery thing, body breaching
squall.

And I restrained in rain-sheets,
tossed with telephone wires, white
vibration—

and you the spinning. The hook and reel.
The eye of the thing
where want and wrath are the same.

Backcountry inheritance

And once you've gutted the bird, what then?
Its insides, rendered on the thigh of your jeans,
shine.

Roast it on-spit; watch it juice—
the sting of self-sufficiency, something
risked for, like sticking bare hands in a bees' nest and gorging
on honey.
Or, the taste of chicken with nothing on it,
in a halo of blowflies,
a tent from the 80s that your father

(without saying)
gave you.

Birthday present from: he can't walk this far anymore,
so far the pine-sounds deafen,
creaking and your knees creak back, in a language
your lips forgot and you'd worried

it was all bred out of you.

Like a dog howling from the porch:
by morning, he won't recognize the sound
that escapes him.

On being dead in Scipio, Utah

When you die, there's be a town: a real town,
bloomed between the cow skulls and the LDS homelands. I promise
you'll find it, eventually; everyone does—the interstate delivers us,
or the horseback trails.

You'll flock to a one-way street—
asphalt split and lined with
sapling palms: stains of green on the sun-bleached land.

At the end of the road you'll arrive
at a Chevron station, with a door on both sides: one for truckers, the other
for shimmering dead.
Just follow the ghosts of cowpokes, friendly, and traveling salesmen
counting the money they died with.

Inside, convenience-store Charon runs
the register; he'll ring you up for a candy bar or a ticket to the sweet beyond.
He still takes drachmas, or Visa, or a fistful of buffalo nickels.
He'll count them with too-long fingers, one by one.

Beneath the brim of his Steston hat, you'll see
his eyes are made of cactus flowers, his cheeks of sand. They erode in layers
over the bone, dusting up the counter. He breathes it all back in.

Come night, the ferryman packs his van of recently departed
and drives South—through a furnace of sandstone baked the color of snake-shed skin.
He smokes out the window; he never stops for gas.
Don't be afraid, of the desert blurring by. Go ahead—

tilt your neck out the window and look,
as you'll drive past pastures of zebras, emus, and buffalo,
eating cheatgrass off the road that divides you—

a stretch of highway where drivers burn through gas like cigarettes,
burn out chasing a false horizon,
and you never remember their names.