

ENGAGEMENT PARTY, RELAPSE 2

he forgets to pack pants
discovers this as guests arrive

so I send him searching his dad's closet
for slacks that might fit and nothing turns up

only a bottle of brandy his mother had stowed
when we slept over last time after rehab

forgotten treasure recovered
his fingers excite around the bottle's throat

as if fondling his cock for the first time
scents of sex so sweet from wellspring lips

the smell alone amps him up enough for the affair
so he caps the rim and puts it back with some control

greeting my dad and sister dopamine rolls
like pop rocks bursting down his nerves

he cannot wait for everyone to leave
performative smile and badminton on the lawn

shuttlecock's center-racket-bounce
serotonin in his mouth

salivating at what waits in the room
tenor pitch and vibration hums his strings

undressing the bottle not his bride in his mind
he heads upstairs as guests begin to say goodbye

distracted, I pack the car as his mother tosses plates
as we sing along songs with his sister

cooing as the baby smashes strawberries
against her cheeks as she eats

eyeing the balloons as they whip
in winds we did not expect of mid-May

and the day had started bright—
he rejoins then, so swiftly picking up a heavy box

trots to the trunk, dutiful, pep in his step
it could not have been but a few minutes

he glugged in secret among the hanging clothes
clumsy in his sandals he ambles back to the deck

uneven gait, I see him wobble up the walk
unangelic-cherub-red his face sweats heat

damp-haired, harried, eyes unable to focus
glazed stone pupils, marbles, blackholes

when I ask *have you been drinking?*
he doesn't know how easily his motor skills tell

like a child who has just eaten all the cake
icing spackled across his face, adamant he lies

shakes his head wildly *no* he says *no*
evidenced more certainly by defensive posture

arms now crossed, chest puffed, pathetic gorilla
he furrows his brow playing dumb now

the alcohol swings mental gymnastics
doing everything it can to convince me otherwise

and his mother and sister and the baby, too
all witnessing his shame cut open in cloud-lit hubris

so blatant as we stand under the tacky joke balloon
huge helium engagement ring frenetic above us.

AFTER REHAB DROP-OFF

I bee-line to the wine store excited for zinfandel to bite my throat
so I can loosen into the intoxicant of couch cushions, and forget

a little of this lifelong process. Fluent in muscle-memory, I open the bottle.
There it is—floral draft from an uncorked well, single drip of blood

from the bottle's post-pour lip, bloom of blush of flushed skin upon a sip—
then—displeasing, grody, acid ick—bile-like unwelcome signs from tastebud flags...

So soon as I knew he was headed back to rehab, my whole being
got excited for some wine. Now wine is savorless; my body bucks the want.

At every sip, I force and try to dig my heels in hard, the drink
remains unpalatable. Another month alone.

THINGS

Less clutter than when she was alive, Dad's new
apartment, odd amalgam of eras—

instead of fringed rug over hardwood, there's tile—
I'm not sure he has an aesthetic—intercoastal wind

in lieu of the bridge-view, north up the Hudson—
she had her collections: the teapots, the salt

and pepper shakers, the Victorian children's
shoes, the scarves—what he kept, what I write—

less of her and none of it enough.

The Victorian shoes—

he keeps them on the bathroom counter—
peculiar decoration for a widowed man.

The sharp angle of their toes point to the sink—
arrows from Mom cue me

Wash your hands! Why
didn't he keep her journals?

He sorted through writing stacks, reading
stacks, recipe stacks, cosmetics from her side

of the vanity. I wasn't ready
to take them. Listen—

nothing is lost in turning away from things.
How do we choose what not to keep?

The chatchka array—it once bloomed
expressions of Mom—her objects,

their textures and parts—they didn't
live back then—now, such definite nouns.

MORNING SHOWER

My scalp itches for a good lather, so I wash, twice, with the zesty
yuzu shampoo, and what's dead loosens with the season—so much

falls out. I haven't brushed it for days.

Where else could my mind affix itself with a heap of strands

in my palm but on Mom feeling hers sluice
down her lean frame,

knotting chunks in her hands, clogging the drain? The hair
spills down and I worry for a pause,

under the hot water—what had been a pleasant thing
just a moment ago, steam winding upward—

I don't know it firsthand until now—I'm standing in this private
memory of Mom's—

I'm not sick,
yet her astonishment lives at the center of this gasp—

water beads descending down a body bewildered,
petrified knowing she'll turn from this wither

into her daughter's attempts over and over
to wake her back into a full head of hair,

into hands to squeeze or twist lumpy braids
I'd criticize and pull right out.

WHEN I SHARE WITH DAD

*Jim had an alcohol-induced
psychotic break and left;
I don't think he's coming back—*

Dad says, *I understand,
I went through this last year with Mom—*

I say, *Mom
wasn't an alcoholic, she didn't
leave, she died—*

He tells me, *on a drive
last week, I reached
across the console
to tap her thigh,*

forgetting she was just
a phantom passenger