

## *Guadalupe*

The virgin, she is everywhere. En todas partes. Tiled into the corner store wall, painted on houses along Chicon, hung around necks and between breasts of the pious. Her mâchéd figure lurks in the live oak groves that line the río; she bows to cursing lovers and the needles that line the curbs. Shrouded in azul de bebé, the virgin watches with a face impassive as plastic. She has learned to expect little. Her heart flares. I know she dreams of escape, of shattered tile and crumbling brick, of God taking her right there on the sidewalk in front of all the pimps. The ladies de la noche will mistake her for one of their own, offer her a cigarette as she rises from the rubble. She'll finally feel what Magdalene felt—like a base human being, like una criminal, whole. The night will tattoo her onto its belly. What will the men say as, for once, she undresses con las estrellas?

## *Gift*

It came as a gift—  
a small sack of lavender  
in the drawer of winter. Safe,  
like an eye pillow or a  
mousetrap. I crawled  
in after it, let its moist  
scent surround my hands  
and feet, seep into  
the small hairs of my thighs—  
my bare body married to it,  
buried with it. The drawer  
seemed the best place  
to wait for the snow to melt.  
It fell and fell, until I fell,  
finally, asleep.

In the spring I woke withered  
and the sack was empty:  
the scent was gone. What  
is the half-life of lavender?  
I searched for it under  
my fingernails, shoved  
my nose into the shrubs  
outside. The sun was not  
as I had remembered—it was  
infinite and odorless,  
and I was afraid  
to get lost on its hills. I thought  
if I made a new sack of mountain  
laurel, I'd be protected  
from its vast stare,  
but summer came anyway,  
relentless, smelling  
of the last sweet  
stages of death, of asphalt  
pulsing up and up.

The first day of fall  
brought a cloud  
that did not leave  
for six weeks. It took distant,  
purple shapes each day,  
and I liked to guess animal,  
vegetable, or mineral. Finally,  
it reached down and  
stitched its rain  
around my waist  
and over my head  
and said: You are the gift now.  
And so I waited to meet my lover.

*We walked through the cemetery*

on the day he lost half his tooth; it was raining.  
When we ducked under a balding branch,  
he divined the lives of Work, William and Theresa.  
They died on the same day—car wreck or hurricane;  
their name a cruel prophesy of the rent  
that remained unpaid no matter how many  
hours they gave. Their children could afford only  
flat grey slabs. When he spoke, the tiny partial tooth  
hovered above his bottom lip, dust  
roiled into mud in the indecisive wind, and for once  
I didn't wonder what it was like to be beautiful.  
Instead I wiped drops from my earlobes,  
began to walk again. Ralieggh, Johanna—five white  
irises on black marble. Dodd, Brett—mausoleum  
in the style of melodrama's vilest vampire.  
Winthrop, John—three-foot cross engraved  
over his name that would have rolled his puritan  
ancestors in their graves. These ways we think  
we honor them, assumptions we make for our own sake.  
He said a blank slab would suffice, that a name  
could never capture a life. All he needed was a new tooth.  
I said if I could choose my tomb, it would be a song  
that never failed to change—me, the melody  
blooming inside—but what I wanted to tell you  
is that he got on his knees and tried to quiet  
that chorus of the dead long enough to explain,  
to pray for an explanation, why he hadn't joined them.  
And he hadn't, not yet, though we both knew  
the fall had not failed to change him.

## *A Wedding*

If I had believed this was the moment  
I'd stop casting desire into a barren  
lake, then I would have seen  
the birds strung on the power  
line like live garland—hundreds, exactly  
evenly spaced. I would have heard  
the strange wind stagnate at our feet  
as the grass turned another  
degree. I'd have noticed the sun toss its  
most indulgent pinks into clouds when time  
came to give up the day to birds and flies  
and ghosts of fish preying on flies, the flies  
playing with birds, the birds praying  
for dark and wet and all of us  
vowing to stay forever.