

PILGRIM

I'll have to ask to be named
Felicity or Charity
if I want to be
a Puritan girl—the girls
are always with the virtues
in that way. I'll have
to be a Constance
or a Mercy. I'll have to work
double. I'll be a Thankful.
I'll drive my hands
endlessly for a corn mash.
I'll lay a thousand
tallows for our winter
candles. I'll tuck my hair
into a bonnet and forget
its color. I'll spin
the wheel throughout
the night.

I'll keep my fevers
from my masters. I'll spin
the corn mash.
I'll drive my hands
endlessly into the candle.
I'll make my wedding
linens and hide them
in a great leather box. I'll tuck
myself into a great leather
bonnet. I'll be a Chastity
until I'll be a Goody. I'll stitch my hair
into the corner of my wedding
linens. I'll name my daughter
Hope. She'll be a Temperance

or a Grace—I'll have to work
double. I'll have to spin
my own womb. I'll have
forty daughters and forty virtues running
at my ankles. I'll run
out of names for them. I'll make
my own virtues.

COMFORT SONG

Comfort is not a name, but Mother needed it—
and so I appeared out of her body

as a linen cloth, the darning needle
already sheathed. Even the cold wind

soothed my hungry cry. I smelled of fresh wheat.
My hair never knotted unless I made it to. I shucked

enough corn for three families. I made fire
from my own hands. I never knew

the word *sigh*. She gave me my sister,
Content. She never wished

for elegant windows in the gathering
room. She broke our mirrors, covered

the spoons with cheesecloth. Her waistcoat
went unwashed, and when made clean, shriveled

and fell gray. No man would have us. They passed
by our houses, and we never knew.

We didn't dream of babies or more sheep. We didn't
dream at all unless the cold had us. We said our prayers

from memory, said them into jars polished after the jam,
our voices carrying through the house

to Mother's bed, squalid and overgrown.

BOY NAMED CLAMOR

Father, I have found that in each dive, I am
breaking into a new sea—I keep

my suspenders on as you've taught me. They keep
my pants at my hips, the knife in my pocket. I've found

that when I am under, I lose
a year to my thoughts—each day,

I am ten years older. I sink
easier, and the boys call me

the Great Weight. They blaze it
on my back when I sleep

on my stomach on the wide benches—
I've stopped sleeping in such obvious places.

The boys here have these raised cheeks, easier
to be roughed by the salt. There is so much

space for them to make noises of themselves
when they call out a whale song and break

into the water—it's like they must announce
themselves if they want to arrive anywhere.

The pearls are quiet—I've had
only three this summer. I keep them

in a pouch around my neck
like you've said to. Even in the water,

no one can touch them without
my knowing. I wake every morning to a dove

flying into the clear window
and falling into the wire chicken coop.

I do not always move quickly
to let it out, and not every dove

is quick to leave. I think sometimes
that I will feed the visitor the pearl

and climb into the wire myself.

SEVEN HUSBANDS

first

Porcelain is our currency, it opens
us from our mouths and asks the smallest question

that exists after dressing the table for the next meal--
how to get into our wedding bed.

Mostly, we sit quietly on the linens
and polish our cups, handle by handle.

It breaks me up to do it. I make streaks of wax
on the faces and lip prints on the rims

of plates you've just returned to their place.

second

We keep horses in the stable on the hill where we've buried
our first lives. The stable is solid built, no matter how the horses bend.

Sometimes we make a bed of it, sleep fitfully, and groan
in the afternoon that our clothing was made too tight.

We grow large shadows in the evening and make them touch
the corners of ceilings. The smallest shadows we make from ripping

sections of our curtains into makeshift animal dances. Our clothes

begin to itch, and I spend afternoons beating them out on the line.

third

There are four of us now, what with the birth
of the twin calves neighboring us. They rattle softly

from bells I make in the spring. Next week,
there will be seven of us—I continue to grow.

No bell will fit their wrists, and so I make a collection
of twine and dried gourds to circle about

their ankles. The doors will be left open,
and I will make dances of their alarms,

the once fat fruit beating about the ground.

fourth

Our girls wait until we are asleep to crawl
into the kitchen to drop a cracked egg

into a glass of water, so that it might tell them
their husbands' names. They settle on a John or a Seth,

and look precariously to our door when they find
their beds where they divine the last names they will take.

They fall asleep, accustoming themselves to the letting go

of their father's family. They sleep easily.

fifth

We settle arguments like dogs, wrecking into each other's necks before we make a savage kind of love. Our faces settle

into a snarling, but our dishes are made. Habit is the wall I build between our beds. I keep everything

a secret, reclaiming my time, and I do not budge.

We do not want for anything in this way.

sixth

He cuts my hair when I ask. I sit in the chair where we read, my back to the window so he can see in the early morning.

He takes every bit of it with the scissors he uses for his face. They are silver fingers when I sprawl my legs

open, calves resting on his shoulders, for the monthly trim.

If he looks out the window, following the fawns traipsing

about the river, he slips and nicks me. We make a game of his apology. He acts out the animal that has distracted him,

wood creaking as he hooves around like a great beast. At dinner, we feed each other directly from the pan and laugh like birds.

seventh

The girls think I have gone blind now. The linens hit me
on the face when I walk into the line. I make pieces

of the family pottery. They do not like my being alone.
They search the town for a willing man. I beat them

to a new life. The moose left behind years ago
as a child is now a great thing breaking barns

by leaning on their frames. I swatted at him with the last clay pot,
and it broke against his back. There were wings there, stifled

and muddy, and too weak to lift up even his hair. I have learned
not to question anything. They taught me this, the six of them,

with their groaning and their games. The beast visits every day,
as they do. He bends to me each morning, a thick knot of a knee

hitting the earth with the weight of its chest reigning down,
the wisp of feathers too small for even my hands.