

ONCE UPON A TIME

She let him peek inside
her fairy tale: the cottage
on Apple Orchard Lane,
its ivy-covered chimney
and kitchen garden, its
cricket-chirping hedges
under a half-moon cradle
ready to be rocked.

He asked if she had room
for one more character—
a troubadour, perhaps,
who wanders by and stays,
happily a while,
if not ever after.

THE TALK

Another one was in the news last night,
so Dad decides it's time we had the Talk,
the one about fitting the description
and how to survive a routine traffic stop.
It isn't fair, but that's the way it is—
I'd better learn to cope: tone down my voice,
my clothes, my posture; don't be in the wrong
neighborhoods, especially late at night.
He says he hates how good he's gotten at it,
the manner that's become second nature
through practice and stories shared by family
and friends at cookouts, weddings, funerals.
“But, Dad,” I finally said, “we're not black.”
“Oh,” he said. “Then never mind.”

ANOTHER ATLAS RELIEVED OF HIS DUTIES

At first I thought I'd have to hold the earth.
"A common misconception," they said. "The job
is actually to hold up the heavens."
Well, how hard could that be—right?
Aren't they made of air and light?
And so I signed on and the loading began,
shoulders strengthening passively,
getting used to the weight. You're proud to be
a pillar till you realize you're stuck—
you just have to stand there and take it,
keep on taking it, layer after layer
added on till, one way or another,
you find out how much is too much.
It's not like you can ask for help—right?

THE INCOMPLETENESS THEOREM

He sacrificed his life to make
his one and only masterpiece,
"Collision with Tree on Median Strip,"
which had just one brief installation
at a public space on Federal Highway—
the crumpled steel and hailstone glass
exquisitely embodying
excessive speed/abrupt halt.
The usual way is much slower—
marble dust builds up in the lungs;
a final piece, incomplete,
goes missing, its spirit half-stuck
inside the stone, left out
for wind and rain to finish.

WITH SILENT VOICE

Take the skater from the shelf, wipe off
her ice of silvered glass, then wind her up.
Unseen machinery unfreezes her—
she twirls the tune, filling the room with charm.
You've taken one apart, so you know how
it works: the score of metal pins arranged
around the side of a spinning drum is read
by a comb tuned like a tiny glockenspiel.
Be that comb for me—play this song
now scrolling by your eyes. With silent voice
and inner ear, unpack this box of music,
tumble and be whirled between these lines,
a little slower each time around, until
a final sound, then echoes softly winding
down.