

Stranded in Gray

1.

Noah's Wife – Thoughts during the Pandemic

Awestruck, she brooked the deluge:
sky desquamating into water
rain's timpani-become-torrent-become-nagging
monotone-become-keening blades of weep
thrumming a dirge to depopulation, vexing
as a wounded perineum after stillbirth.

Bone thin, chilled and macerated, shrouded
in a threadbare woolen shawl, hair a plait
of filth, she scrubs planks by the cubit,
forks hay to ravenous elephants, shuffles
through fetid carceral chambers collecting
feathers—crimson, rust, lemon, teal, cyan,
indigo—to sate an ache for color. Primates shriek,
rats copulate, lions pace, cattle urinate buckets,
her sons shovel shit, God's fury drowns her people,
chokes her in nightmares waking her thrashing
like a fish to swells lapping the ark, a rhythm
cradling catastrophe: grime under her toenails
is all that remains of her village.

Detached on a vista of water in a box
of gopher wood, adrift in liminal space
beneath a starless sky. Mortality salience.
Grief. Claustrophobia. Stranded in gray.
Afloat on God's somber whisker,
nameless mate to His favorite, stowed
in a tabernacle of bleak and perilous discomfort.

This is how you save your life while all else perishes:
feed the animals, count the chickens, pray, scour,
cook, breath. Time is a scant test of finitude
colorless and undulating, a gap you ghost
until the dove returns.

2.

Dreams after Lip Surgery

After the minor surgical procedure
a needlework of dissolvable
filaments darned my bottom lip
like a practice stitch on a sampler
scrap deftly knotted and trimmed
stringing me into a watery dream

of a Rapunzel hair or Rip Van Winkle
whisker unspooling from my mouth
until I woke flailing at an imagined
wisp of mulberry silk. In the mirror
on the wall my lip was a puff quilt
embellished by a snippet of embroidery

that wove a tale of sunnies snagged
outside my grandfather's cabin
in the woods, hooked through the lip
wriggling, gimlet eyed, then finally
freed with my father's surgeon's
twist, only to pause in ripples
and refracted rays, stunned
kissing life before threading,
upon the tail of escape, a jewel-heist
of baubles from pierced jaws.

Stranded in Gray

3. For S

Some things I like to keep private, like how
your hasty retreat—deep stain on your soul
scrubbed by tender hug to looming shadow—
left a church parking lot, post-communion

flavor on my tongue that lingered stale,
unleavened, awaiting spiritualization
a little too long past the exit.
Or how smarmy sadness settled over

me and now lays haunting as a Latin
phrase in a Gregorian chant, composed
for a cathedral, but whispered in chapel:
a minor loss triggering a small-scale

dustbowl of dejection that coats my skin,
fine as crematory ash, or gunpowder
ground from such trivial explosives as
leaves from fall's firecracker foliage,

blown to particle by a solemn wind
that shoves my lips straight, singing as it palls
like the last note of a recessional hymn
a cantor can't stop holding.

4.

Trip to the Cemetery/Rock, Paper, Scissors

Asphalt road, gravel drive, crushed stone
parking lot. Gate.
Masonry wall, stucco church, leaded
windows. Steel grate.
Chipped columns, terracotta pot, brick
foundation. Rail.
Concrete steps, pebbled path, chiseled
monuments. Bell.
Weathered limestone, plaster saints, cement
angel. Grotto.
Cinderblock fog, disturbed clods, polished
granite. You.
Papery weeds, planked box, rectangle plot.
You—
Tidy as a hymnal tucked in a pew. You.
Not even a vapor I can scissor my fingers through.

5.

Thirteen Ways of looking at a Dash

I.

Space between words—accentuated.

II.

—hush—

splitting two swift drumbeats.

III.

Matrimony of silence and pause—
their delicate offspring: frail pause
aborted silence

IV

Quiet gasp—or, not
quite gasp but fluttery moment preceding
it—dividing whole from splintered crash—.

V

Breezy familiarity—“hold
on a sec I have to go to the bathroom!”

VI

Subtraction or—protraction.
Division? Sure!
Multiplication? Never—well, maybe sometimes.
Really, though, it’s a word problem—right?

VII

It’s a clarification
--straight-shot William Tell arrow
striding toward legend
precise as a scalpel slit
—Or not—

VIII

Fluidity unbuttoned by a rude interruption—(yawn):
a chink in the mortar of the tower of Babble.

IX

Pencil thin diving platform of
language—“I think what you meant to say was...”

X

Lips faltering at the brink of parting—.

“Oh, never mind.”
A mid-sentence about-face.
The exposed rosary string
earmark to prayerlessness.

XI

Tomb for the Unknown word.

XII

That measured line—
shorter than the short half of a wishbone—
spanning two dates.
Never before – never again

XIII

Frivolity of speech
left hanging.
Word problem
unsaid—