

Bolus of Flame in the Sistine Chapel

The moment after Michelangelo
finished
the Sistine ceiling,

cleaned his brushes,
snuffed
his lights, turned and walked away

for a drink or a lover,
stunned
by his total vacancy, emptied beyond filling,

leaving night, leaving God
swaddled
by a cloak red as sunrise,

by pink cloud-rounded cherubim
lifted,
with his finger almost touching Adam's,

as if that moment could be
suspended
forever and our desire

for flesh and flavor had never
dragged
us into time's soiled crawl,

but in the linseed-rich night that
reeked
of snuffed candles and cooling lanterns

life's blue unruly spark
leaped
from God's finger to Adam's,

and like sunstruck water
filled
his palm, returned to God

who rose, bright, into the night and
floated
away, indifferent, leaving his orphaned child

reclining on bare rock, and animal Adam
waited,
watched the red glow climb and shrink,

closed his burning hand,
raised
the rippling light to his mouth,

swallowed the bolus of flame,
stood
alone in the first weight of conscious flesh,

found his fiery tongue, and
spoke
himself and all his get into time.

Hyena

I have a hernia,
a mortal bulge
on the right side
of my groin.
When I ease it in
with the flat of my hand
I can feel
my guts
shift leftward
like thick liquid.

My children call it
my hyena.

Right.

I have a carrion eater
tracking me,
bad news,
stalker of wounded meat,
skulker in the dark.
He has all the time he needs,
waiting for the falter
or the failure
of eyes or ears,
one lapse of vigilance,

or the moment when muscles go slack,
and tendons stretch and tear.
The failing animal
hears rustling in the weeds,
gets desperate,
picks up his pace,
then slows
limps,
staggers,
head bobbing with each step,
dribbling piss
in his terror,
leaving a trail
for the hunched,
rough-pelted,
night-coated
big-shouldered beast.

Hyenas can wait.
They know they'll win,
that their blunt jaws
can crush bone, crack it,
lap up deep red marrow and fat.
All they need
do is follow
the animal
who must
eventually
lie down.

This mortal bubble
in my gut, just west
of my life, impinging,
I cup my hand against it
and feel its pulse and slide--
this hot load of viscera,
pouch of offal,
wad of time,
merely meat.

Fast Car on a Dark Night

At dawn
the sun drowns
the shadows' mercy
and we see
each other
beyond
night's braille.
The choice
to swerve
seems slippery
as blues on a slide guitar.
Dawn catches
in wet branches,
pours into our room,
tangles in
our raveled clothing
scattered across the bed
and snarls
around our feet.
I turn to you,
sprawled, naked
next to me,
slip my hand
between your thighs.
You close them,
hold me bedded
for the moment.

Seagull in a Snowstorm

When you pray, move your feet.
African proverb

From my high window
above city streets
muffled in white side-to-side,
lined with cars wind-won
into pale lenticular dreams
I saw a gull riding the gusts,
banking into sudden swirls
in and out of my sight
as the gale-pummeled snow spun or
sank straight down in the lulls

as the wind scored or stroked the sky.
Feathered gray and white,
the bird was
made of snow and clouds
veering counter to their whirl
or tilting into turns with
the wind's torrents,
an instant's wheeling away,
it gave itself to the cataract,
dagger-tipped wings in their bent, broad W
banking back again and hovering,
balking the wind with subtle banks
like a totem of stubborn life blurred
where my breath fogged the glass,
snagging my soul through
with the red-tipped hook of his beak
and his terrible blank golden eye.

Elizabeth Grace

Well, you died by inches,
surgeons carving this or that —oma
from you, one step behind;
each seemed to breed
the next like a daisy-chain
of corruption. And when you lay
together with your lover,
though desire had become
no more than a faint echo,
and when you let him
ease the sheet down
and reveal the gnarled landscape
of hummocks and valleys
your body had become,
did you turn your head away
in the slant lamp-shadows,
like a child believing
not to see him meant
you were free
of his gaze while he
read the chart
of scars, some red and purple and new,
some tallow-yellow and settled-in—
that odyssey of agony—
could he squint through the map
and regain the territory,

and navigating by dead reckoning,
did he lay his cheek by your tender navel
and breathe you in,
honey-sweet as an infant?