

Listless

I went to the grocery store.
where I found the cart to be in charge,
wobbly wheel and all. Suddenly in a world
where avocados next to plastic
yo-yos made sense, we trailed a lady
in a smart cardigan, thinking she must
know what she's doing, but ended up with
no butter and too much lettuce. Head,

shoulders, knees, and toes. Back
at home, unpacking things in neat rows
on black stone countertop: paper products,
produce, pantry, freezer, dairy, lined up
like they're wirebound. I note all that I have
forgotten: tissues, cilantro, to tell my kids I love them
much more than I hate them. I need
more post-it notes. Sons, daughter,

mother, mother's mother.
My grandmother had her list,
her bubble gum manicured thumb the keeper,
watched over critically by her fog
eyes as it tapped the pads of disturbingly-
angled Catholic school fingers. Index, middle,
ring, pinky, pinky, ring, middle, index. Quick
peeking yellow from below the nails like rot.

My mother had her list too, whenever
she was high strung. Clench: left jaw, right jaw,
left jaw, right jaw. Until time ends or a check comes.
This list had its price: now, left
are only smoke-stained jaw holes and resin
teeth rows in a cloudy bedside glass.
The check still in the mail; what's left to clench
but the last bits of bitterness? Fingertips, head, roof,

sky. I gaze at a star through the window, so suddenly
the outside is charcoal-counter dark. No name,
no constellational affiliation. Just a star.

What do you care about lists?

The only list you have is: burn and burn out.

And don't tell anyone about it for at least
a million years. I stare with jealousy that is ill-placed;
a petty stand-off with a light that's long gone.

Mars and Back

A rover met me in the kitchen, just back from Mars.
I wasn't entirely surprised to see it given
the summons I issued in my dream last night,
as I lay crossways in the dark,
splayed and unaware.

How was it? I ask.

It tilts its head like a curious puppy.
Of course it's not a head at all, I remind myself.
A receipt spits out from its breast,
(which is, of course, not a breast.)

Receipt in hand, I hesitate to look.
IT WAS COLD.
Predictable, I suppose.
A cocktail party sort of answer.

How was it really? I press.

COLD AND BRIGHT AND
LOVELY LONELY.
I sense an impatience with me, and
tell the rover it can go out to the yard
to unload the rocks from its not-belly.

Over the next week there are spots of whimsy.
Maybe it brought some Mars dust back?
A tiny white feather at the bottom
of the endlessly refilling laundry basket.

A flower, perfect and purpley,
sprouting in the junky crack of the driveway.
A daughter's easy giggle
reappeared like a glorious echo.

And dreams turned pale and cool,
summoning nothing at all but padded
silence, Lovely lonely,
no betrayals on the horizon.

The Bone

And here we are: me holding a
thick mammal bone, retrieved
from a puddle on the sidewalk.

The puddle is because
the irrigation system is automatic
and knows nothing of the heavy rain
that fell this morning.

The bone, cut clean on both ends.
marrow long since drained,
is because the dog,
in his innards, is a wild beast
despite the 6 foot synthetic tether,
and has found treasure
that clearly needs claiming.

This mammal, whose bone
I'm grasping in my small hand,
knuckles taut in its weight,
would have loved the well-irrigated grass,
green and thick, traced with delicious chemicals.
I think of her tongue dipping in,
the wads forming in her cheeks.

Instead, the electric mower
will have its fill tomorrow,
drawing perfect diagonal lines,
a plan view of a barbed cage,
and the mammal will die
a second death,
under the bed by next week.

Unparallel

One lane bulges out to the right and I get a little extra room to speed up in this imaginary race across the page. We racers are aphids like the ones I squish with my thumb on the leaves of lemon trees that are so far surviving the New England winter in their southeast facing ledge in the living room. They have no business inside in winter, but they are the right size for these imaginary lanes.

Me aphid pulls ahead. How good it feels to pull ahead and get the lane with the fattest swath of space, my lane line closing in on the next aphid's. Who does he think he is? I reach the end, triumphant, ecstatic, and keep going, straight off the page into an infinity of dangerous almost-crossings and thumbs pressing down on fragile translucent legs and guts. All we need now is a good leaf to celebrate.

The person who drew these race lines was the daughter of an impressive artist. (She's the one with the thumbs.) One who won the Rome Prize. Who, legend had it, would start his collegiate lectures by sitting on his desk and silently eating an apple, core, stem, and all while his new students would look on in silent befuddlement. They would never step out of line after that, he said.

This artist promised his daughter to teach her to draw as wonderfully as he did and the first lesson was to learn to control the hand by pulling it across the page while spinning the graphite tip as it went both marking the line and sharpening the pencil. No one should need a pencil sharpener, he said. Draw 100 parallel lines on a sheet, lines that don't touch, never will, and then on to the next. Thirty years later, he long

ago dead, she's still pulling pencils across the page, gripped between fingers and thumb, marking the lanes. There is no ecstatic finish line, no quarterfinal to this race. Just a spinning tip, sharpened to an impossible point.