

## Defection

That summer and much of the next      we were the methane flare      from the oil refineries  
burning always burning      driving with our feet out the window  
pinkie on the wheel    or not      Going faster than the speed of light      Burning rubber up and down I-70  
down and up    climbing    fences      to swim in the private pools of boredom to the AC hum  
backstroking to the music of heat and mosquitoes      and the people asleep through all of it  
And then suddenly snow in the quarry  
Fistsful of snow on the highway      Even before the leaves fell      Trucks barreling by  
jackknifing up the off ramps      the leaves after the fact      dive bombing the windshield  
gluing themselves in layers to the glass      wail twang on the FM dial      WAEY  
Afternoon skies gone wild      truck route the same as business  
night sometimes a comet      sometimes longer in the sky      and always the peril of imagination  
the weight of it like erotica      wipers gasping in the key of D  
stripes on the side of the road obscured  
and wheels dancing on wet leaves      Leaves spinning      the thread of road swerving into river  
the mines beneath us yawning deeper    blasts in the mountains      decapitated earth groaning  
And the flares flaring between quarries  
thump and thunder of gravel trucks in every lane      ping of on the windshields    sun in the spider cracks  
scorching the bucket seats      Sun a cigarette burn    sky dim as grey leather    and fog interiors  
new houses littering the leveled land      vacant eyes winking      oil rigs lit up like Christmas  
First the leaves defecting--little soviets in red jackets      highway swerve into river      fool's gold  
on your mother's side the drunks      swore fracking meant jobs      meant resurfacing  
coming back up      after you thought you'd drowned      just because your lungs  
filled up with water      your hair tangled into thick      brown water weeds  
and people on shore      called your name      until they were hoarse      couldn't cry anymore  
but they did  
but my people know better:      love, they say, death, get over it  
what were mountains anyway      but an accumulation      of comfort and habit  
change the lie      hold it underwater long enough and new is new  
might as well dance to it  
acceptance trumps sorrow      the abiding rain of it      rain dance to the thunder  
troublesome trucks      hip hop jive dance      swirl to new lies      tarred and feathered  
on top of the old--      when it gets you down dance      to the coloratura



Had Things Been Different

Had things been different  
I might have run off with him  
As was my first inclination  
But that would have meant  
Leaving the children behind  
And Spring was in full bloom  
The cottonwood spilling its seedlings  
(all that “cotton” flying with the bad company  
of the willows,  
the fluff sticking to our eyes)—

And maybe if the birch trees and alders  
Hadn't been shedding  
Or the oaks filling with staminate flowers  
For the second time and the grasses  
Releasing so much pollen  
We might not all have been  
so completely miserable

I could have simply disappeared  
Mid-morning or evening  
The dog in the yard, the children  
In the shadows, porch lights  
Just coming on  
And the seventeen-year cicadas  
Ratcheting up their relentless reveries.

Given the right circumstances  
I suppose I might have been happier  
The sunsets brighter  
The days more exotic—

But bring me the books again  
That I might reread them  
Might find myself on a different page,  
Find him somewhere in an adjacent chapter  
The corner turned over  
My name still emblazoned  
On the flyleaf of his heart.

## Little Etudes

### Rumor

another gang of self-important rain clouds huddled over the inlet trying to start something  
    chests puffed out—haughty in the dusk      wind gossiping about if we have the right  
to make some tongues wag                      grant ourselves a night of reckless abandon

### Just Temptation

    even if we used *Google Translate* and you said to me in French  
        what I long to say to you in English  
so here we are      we can never      because desire can wreak  
    because if we do say      we'll have to act as if we never did

### Old Loves Canon

These relationships  
    Like lava solidified  
        Such odd pieces left

### Slow-Blue, Cold Fire

where there used to be thousands, millions  
now maybe only a half dozen                      fireflies as faint as Pleiades  
on my evening walks, barely enough to place a little jar of dreams on my bedside table

### Whiskey, Neat

Somewhere Harlem      jazz-wailing saxophone slow dance,  
    bass strum arrhythmia    flashing neon and afterwards  
        talking Vegas  
    your handflame    up my spine  
but too soon              blues-morning backbeat—  
    frost lifting its skirt in the window  
   clarinets

Euphoria

O, Love, love  
Is an idea  
That comes and goes

A construct, creation myth  
Lust and lemon

Whisked and troubled  
    over  
Sweet concoction,  
A meringue  
Of longing—

so when a recent bridegroom  
Asks if I felt different

After I was married  
I tried to think  
A yes, but no,

Perhaps a reach, a grasp, a shrug  
but I confess

When first we waltzed  
Into that Garden  
There may have been

A tree, the fruit,  
Perhaps even a serpent  
Although the cake

Was sheer perfection  
The velvet gown  
The sky a frosting

Over all the earth  
But who can say for certain  
If I was giddy

With anticipation  
Or illusion  
Or merely fearful

Of the ordinary  
Always predestined  
To settle in.

## Whiskey, Neat

Somewhere Harlem and jazz-wailing  
Saxophone-trumpet slow dance,  
bass strum arrhythmia

And afterwards we on the bed  
Talking about all the places  
We'd go—maybe Belize,

Neon flashing outside our hotel window  
Or Vegas, hand flame on my hip

up my spine  
as if there were anywhere else  
we'd need to go...ever

then morning back beat to Penn Station.  
overnight frost lifting its skirt  
In all the shop windows

Jazz riff of linger,  
concentric circles of light  
On the floor of the terminal—

Terminal skylight sun  
announcing the last train:

last kiss of lovers  
leaning into concentric  
last of the last. Obligato.

Your lips on mine Linger-rush vibrato  
loudspeakers, last train,

Funny how these things

turn inside out  
Flash Ironic

how I was the one

hated to leave. Left  
Only later  
Realized the Truth  
in your eyes

—skylight improv

Neon

Concentric

Your eyes  
Your hand on my waist  
That Flame  
Flatted fifth....

A last train

Clarinet

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All of It

How we memorized the patterns on wallpaper  
and pictures in their frames

But there were secrets  
The ancestors tried to hide  
Crossed the oceans for

answers so heavy the frames tilted even after  
We straightened them

And Nocturnes in F Minor  
Played behind closed doors  
A baby someone left on church steps

And a bride in a basket  
Laid in a garden among roses and purslane

no one remembers her name  
But she was all of us,  
Abandoned children

Left to the wisteria  
Of orphanages, the vine of foster care

The serpent in the nest  
Little birds unknowing  
Still Unknown.



## Angelus

He says the world is new with her in it holds her hair to his face and breathes deeply and outside the window the hay newly mown the old people praying in the field as if in a famous portrait he is so thankful he celebrates the sun in the kitchen, on the walls, drinks his water with sugar pours sugar into the milk every drop so sweet the sky like spun sugar The baby in the cradle a little sugar doll he could lick until she disappears and the woman he loves so perfect for babies he could faint with thanksgiving and desire and the raspberries so heavy on the bushes the fields abundant with early potatoes this time of year. He knows She was made for the garden, created for the fields, the first time he saw her she disappeared into the corn, her braids the color of sun he was afraid he'd lost her that she would never know his desire So he ran to find her, panicked when he couldn't, got down on his knees, when he finally did, breathless and apologizing for no ring but she'd already bought one for herself and he fainted with joy didn't care if the world knew his weakness and in the end for lack of pride pounded on the door of the upstairs bedroom all morning cursing for her to let him out but she was in the barn for the milking, hurrying through the chores anxious he'd hurt the child so fierce was his love And only after she took him the cup of new milk, sloshing over while she ran, watched while he filled it with sugar, drank as if his thirst would never be quenched drank until he held the empty cup out to her and begged for More and more before he calmed down, smiled at her so sweetly she didn't know what to think. The doctor said sugar would kill him the sore on his foot would not heal he could no longer stand it, no longer stand on it, the stench when he took off his boot like that of rendered hog, summer swamp, there was no answer to their prayers the child younger than three when it happened, when she came out from the barn, found him in the yard, lying on the moss-covered flagstone on his back like an angel smiling up at her so sweetly she thought he was dreaming, the grass shimmering with emeralds and rhinestones the flagstone a bed of stars from the upstairs window, glass all around him sparking like the little chips in her ring and somewhere the squall of a new baby she knew she had to get to but first she couldn't leave him all alone out here in the grass, the fields drenched in sun, the sky an ocean ripe for spilling, about to burst with so much blue.

Armistice

Not a surrender--  
one of us eager  
To leave  
The other inclined  
To tough it out  
But life  
Like a grenade  
With the pin missing  
And neither of us  
willing  
to get near enough  
To examine it.