

Painting the Dead

I measure the distance between your eyes,
compare it to the distance between my own

(in proportion to girth, weight, height,
and head circumference, of course).

I count tail feathers, note color
and symmetry, record locale. I hold you

upside down, like a bat on a pine bough.
I found you dead on the front walk,

painted you until the smell kept Lydia
from clearing the table. Then I broke

your bones, learned they were hollow.
You, little Swallow, little shape

for what I'm saying. How I wish
you could be alive and entirely still.

Dactyls in Maria's Book of Notes and Studies

translucent butterfly bordered in black
thistle with girdled abandoned cocoon

thorn-laden branch of the Mexican lime
wild and ungrafted pale sprig of a plum

juvenile lizard omnivorous ground dweller
melons that ripen on sand just like cucumbers

brown-breasted hummingbirds drink from bright shrubs
frogs float with fertilized eggs on their backs

sociable weevils lie next to each other in heaps
circle and separate nimble as mercury

**Ruby-Topaz Hummingbird
with Pinktoe Tarantula**

Why have you come?

Is it for color? My yellow
throat, red crown, purple wing?

Is it line? The still reach
of my beak, this grooved tongue?

Is it the rubbing together
of two unlike things?

I know you love
the small and the common.

Grub, dirt, fly, dung,
spider paralyzing its prey.

Did love bring you here?

Eggs in this nest will cool.

I will steal a last look
at a small triangle of blue.

The furry beast on my flank
will drink her fill, withdraw.

And you? You with the stone heart
and ready quill.

Wash my body. Make it new.

Figure 89:
Apricots in Agnes Block's Garden

I wanted the branch to ache
across the diagonal, lean, pitch,
inch toward light. I wanted leaves
open to memory and leaves curled
into small cups of longing. I wanted

the apricots small, freckled globes,
lemon yellow, horizon orange, cleft
like a baby's behind. I wanted you,
small yellow-breasted bird, still,
mid wobble, gymnast on high. I used

my finest tips to freckle the fruit,
vein leaves, feather the bird's belly.
So many conversations—cool blue
with white, red with orange,
dragonfly thin with opaque flat. This

was not the first time I'd entered
the scene. But it was the moment
I understood that thirst
for sugar, the bird's frenzied eye.

From the Swamp Cabbage

You think stench an accident,
though you trust God, never
assume waste. You
wander the bog in thick boots,
each step trampling my kin. We are
resilient, without hate. But I want
to discuss what's foul. I've watched
your companions following flies
well into the bruised marsh. They
knit their brows, utterly offended,
cover their noses with handkerchiefs.
I bristle. I'm proud. Good riddance.
But you—you step
as if smell were a bridge.
Is there nothing
you cannot cross? Even the gnats
lodging themselves in the sweat
at your hairline, even the leech,
skimming your stockings
have not kept you
on the far side of the mire.
But since you are here, lean down.
Whisper into my sturdy green.
Tell me what you want.