

Learning the plum

Now I know what a plum
truly is. I have seen its heart.
Gnawed down to the naked core
of seed, I am poised with a knife
to break this thing open and know
its atoms, its lifeforce, its tiny strings
of being. I hold

the thing in my palm and wonder at its
strangeness, this spiny nut like a dragon's
bone. It is my own curiosity, the child-scientist
who holds the blade like a scalpel, ready to learn.

Dead cats have taught me curb.
This could be a box named for chaos:
I could unravel my world by knowing
this fruit.

I decide
not to cut. It is enough perhaps
to hold this piece of the secret.
It is enough to know, perhaps,
that it grows.

poem for Trayvon Martin and other dead brown boys

The delight of the airplane
is what sticks in my eye:

ground-bound, but the sky
is a butterfly you're cupping
in your palms.

Just a few more beats
of heart and wing
and you could have been
in the blue, arms or engine
pumping.

I want us all to live
in your eyes:

to see how
in one breath
a boy can be
dreaming
and in the next
be a leaf

fluttering
carried away

red,

then gray,

then gone.

For my lover, leaving

The lid is on:
your cipher is kept,
my name is safe and secret.

I who have lurked in Egyptian
cotton and warm water,
my nylon ghost
your busy burial

I have sewn in the stitch
to shut my mouth,
I won't screech
a sound.

My name is a quiet thing
you have only expressed
in Garamond, it is wet
skin wrapped in canvas.
You put it on your plate
with the drapes drawn.

This is not a war where lovers
carry likenesses in lapels.
Anyhow, there is only one to speak
of, and you guard it
from eyes and air. I fold
my hands and forget.

I am a girl who is sarcastic
about promises. I am a girl
who rolls her eyes at oaths
but dreads their not
being made. When the parts
don't come together,
the laughter drains from lips.
Worse, when they do,
the eggshell is held gently
underfoot, waiting
for pressure.

Welcome. I sang you a song
about this long ago; your mind
may have been on something
else when I read you the lyrics.

I am a girl with a round

name who despises circles.

Let this at least be a square,
angular and abiding
by ancient rules.

The circle has no law.
It may go around
as many times as it wishes,
the eyes spinning along
its endless track.

Let this at least be a box.
Heavy, at least I know
what it contains.

Extinctathon

Let's collect dead white things.
I cherish all evidence
that proves black
is not the only thing dying:

check: the white seal
and his ghostly impotence

check: the white wolf
and his icy violence

check: the white swan
the evil fellow of stork

check: the white horse
who has carried death for centuries.

Keep counting. Bless
the black things that are
sweet
and dark, and deep
not with ash
but with ask
palms stretched out
and smiling

Last lament

I have picked my way through a patch
of blackberries and come out
stained and scratched. This is the wild
kind; not the neat bush of agriculture
but a free-spilling mess of deep
juice in jungle. I can't tell my skin
if she is black or if she is purple.

My fingers have found a knot
in my neck. I rub it out tonight
and find a walnut under my flesh
in the morning. This is love:
a problem solved in the dark,
and rerooted overnight into a skyward
beanstalk towering,
not tame.

Its trunk is thick and its branches
blot out the light. I am transformed
into a tunnel-creature. I am mole
and mother; murderer.

But I emerge. Through the bramble
at my back I have broken
a narrow path. I watch
for awhile and soon
a rabbit comes through,
small and brown.

I could smash his skull.
He has a delicate nose,
a twitching face, a body
made for escape.

He passes by, gently
crushing berries underfoot.
I let him go. The path closes
behind.