

Late December

The lab technician is so gentle, his name is Dan,
he punctuates my arm with question marks
trying to find a vein. He is gentle and forgiving.

I am swooning with a calm that he brings:

We have sixty patients today and I have no time to talk to any of them.

That his words are comforting confound me. Why talk when your life

hangs in the balance of a test result, when your life is more than
half over? Why bother, but why not? I ask him if he likes his job. *No.*

That is it. I can quote T. S. Elliot, you see, I tell him as he draws my blood:

An aged man is but a paltry thing a tattered coat upon a stick.

He is amazed at my dexterity, my memory for verse. I laugh and tell him
my college education was good for this I guess. He takes the needle out

and I am calm. I imagine what it is like outside. Does it rain this late December?

Sunday in Havana

From the window a woman crosses
cobblestone, her uniform tight and pressed.
Dogs curl up in groups in between puddles
from last night's rain.

Belgium is shut down you tell me
Be careful when you run.

The Malecón is a beacon I am drawn to
like the artist of "Los Ninjos"
with the white paint of sounds unspoken.

Last night's revelers dance by
the longest bench in the world
as the lighthouse beacon curls
around the rising tide. The refinery
fire burns steady; the morning light
gleams as it breaks through a
palette of clouds. *Oh Havanna!*

You tell me to remember the steps
of the salsa, your hand on my hip;
your gaze never meeting mine. I am patient,
like the iguana shedding his skin,
The beggar boys who shark
through the streets like a hungry tribe
in search of T-shirts they say, as a
man whistles at me from across the way.

Against a gray crumbling wall
of Calle Obispo, I see her:
a Santeria novitiate in pressed white,
starched cotton still so fresh in this heat;
her stern advice to seeking tourists,
No Fotos! She stops at the corner;
we speak the body language
of lost souls, as bats flutter about;
shopkeepers shut their doors.

This morning, a man on the Malecón,
a street cleaner, crushes cans
with a rock over and over;

I hear the staccato tapping,
steady, growing louder.
I run in time to it, until
I come close, and see his
flexed arm raised high.

The Cataract Surgeon

At first my vision becomes blurry in the left eye
and I don't even notice it. My sharper eye compensates
with the ability to see, sharp like ice glare on a river.

But then, a funny thing happens: I begin to see, to really see:
the futility of the world, the banality of existence,
the loss of love so great it reaches the full mark

on a test tube, the note on the door the gas man
delivered, what is yours, fuel to heat the house, and left
the doorknob sign trembling in the winter wind.

The cold, once so great it filled the marrow of your bones,
piles up snow in some white but earthen grave, to bury
the bodies, to bring the bodies up to the surface of memory.

There are so many it is hard to keep track: this killer, that gun.
But there are the other tiny tragedies that only in my life I have known:
the father, the friend. I do not want to lose them but I have already.

Like a cataract surgeon, I look in through the looking glass,
dull lights spin around until I lock the lens. The world is
my prism; I can change the channel and watch Paris burn.

Etching I

for Sierra

The snowshoe hare tracks
Have no trouble telling us
The way. Our breath is hard and fast
Startling even the gnarled branches
From their slumber. The etched
Mountain does not beckon from afar
Rather it's seat of glory defies gravity

On a trail such as this, we edge carefully
Over the ice as our grippers secure the way.
Never fearing to fall, the urge
To tell this child my story
Comes hard and fast, a claw mark
On a beech tree with the delicate
Leaves still and lined.

~

A dried apple on the ground
Still retains its color,
A burnt fern blackened,
Its fronds turned inward,
Weeping toward the frozen ground.

A sudden snap in the canopy—
A barred owl is stirred from
Its great slumber—all the
Clamoring in the world can't
Stop its flight.

A moment later the puff
of branch snow is all that remains.

I haven't been back in this town for a long time

I haven't been back in this town for a long time.

Driving down Main Street, I'm stopped at a red light.

The shops all look the same, their brightly-lit façades cry out in garish colors, and I remember the first word my son ever read on a black and white sign in one of these windows that said *Sale*.

I'm driving down the street now, the home place.

I glance at my phone, daring myself to pick it up.

A summer spent going from hospital, to rented apartment, and back again, driving in strange Über cars with men who say they will pray for my daughter, and for me. I'm watching prostitutes on the corner of my block glance my way; I'm floating by, a white Madonna with my brown-skinned driver as the car slows.

~

In the line at the red light now, exhaust fumes curl upward, swift tendrils invisible to the eye. I see a man walking, his long grey hair unkempt, against a white-starched shirt, faded jeans; he's leaning forward like a cartoon cutout, carrying something—a stiff bouquet of flowers, as if he races toward that bright palette like he's going somewhere.