

## Afternoon Between Rains

I have seen October thin  
like a woman with leukemia.  
It's a flinty antique ivory of silence,  
the carcasses of sunflowers,  
moon on another channel and no ropes.

Leaves are a litany of kissed mouths  
in gutters. What rustle, what taffeta  
and in the sky fleshy stars.  
It's the early October shudder  
before skinning the trees.  
The valley lit in reverse.  
Illumination rises from the earth.  
Now the swaying of half-naked maples,  
bruised martyrs smelling of pumpkin and tea rose.

The air is fallen and reduced.  
Limbs are lanterns at eye level.  
Flawed silk kimonos drift,  
shawled autumn of the grievous rape.

Last night, returning from Boston  
the maples were insistent and inflamed,  
leaves fevered the roadsides  
like blistered hands stinging the dark.

We could navigate by smell  
and a pervasive ache like a version  
of a dream father once told me,  
tattooing my ears.  
It was like a slap on the face.  
It was a defining gesture.  
I wore my map on the outside.  
You don't want to know.  
You don't want to go home with me.

Sin is too small a concept.  
Noon turns brutal, feral,  
with a hint of chipped enamel.  
Maples flutter like stained gloves  
falling to the ground like dead weight.

There are coffins on the lawn  
the gold of bleached pine

and bedside tables, lamps burning out.

This is not an afternoon between rains  
but an initiation, a deceptive mime  
we pretend is an autopsy  
of the not yet dead.  
We think we understand this  
and the dialects trapped in stone.  
Analysis and quantum mechanics.  
The history of Europe, with its sequences  
of ridiculous wars, the obsession with marble.

I cook dinner, rake leaves, tap crystal  
with a nail painted rose petal pink.  
It's teatime and we can't help ourselves.

The Coliseum of Rome was once covered  
with acres of red and yellow silk,  
a celebratory canopy across the blood,  
a sort of festive emphasis.

Perhaps they had more imagination then.  
Augury and tarot were legitimate professions.  
Prophecy by entrails. Juggling.  
The Jew with predictions of love  
and drowning. Perhaps they possessed  
a more subtle anatomy, sensed networks  
between rivers and bridges connecting  
genius and catastrophe.

Could they intuit the interior monologues  
of bells searching the night for others  
like themselves, exiles with a taste  
for absinthe and amber?  
Did they trade in pretense?  
Was deceit another tool  
like lipstick and a compass?

You pour coffee and look at me  
as if you expect an answer.

I have a sore throat, refuse to talk, feel glassy  
and unusually receptive to bells  
and the fragrances of lamps, the stall  
of wind which is also a direction.

It's a static imperative, a way  
to drown standing up.

Outside, in gray light, trees  
are waxy, engraved.  
This is how air is stitched  
and hours forced into folds,  
into morphologies we name---

Annabeth. Megan. Emma.

It's an afternoon of burning women.  
Mother, daughter, my Gabrielle in Berkeley.  
Millicent, ashes lost in an unmarked urn  
in a back room warehouse in Los Angeles.

Syllables begin as visual signals.  
They grow in my mouth.  
I am stuffed with petals, soft fists,  
hybrids of burgundy, plum, flame.  
Branches are oxblood and cordovan,  
the obligatory sheen of libraries,  
the justification for leather and brick  
and the steady maroon of tapestry rugs on  
wooden floors deep and necessary as reeds and cellos.  
Such is the spine of this autumn world.  
The reds are optional but who  
could resist such anguish?

This roadside is a crayon shade  
we once called Indian.  
It's a promise of disaster and revelation.  
It's the mouth you'd go to jail for.  
Some yellows appear only after divorce,  
surgery and childbirth. You can't mix such  
colors on a palette. Autumn is revealing herself,  
no secrets, no whispers or clothes.  
These maples are conceptual,  
like a performance art piece, an opera  
or a daughter's first bracelet.

Puncture such bark and epics pour out.  
Saw it down and chronology stops.