

Chronology in Gray and Pewter

I have seen autumn 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 navigated by smell.

Once my father told me a dream
he recurrently had.
The moon bit while he slept.
Night fish took pieces.
His watch broke from radiation
He witnessed his extinction.
The radio was not loud enough.
Locusts tattooed my ears.
The remembered gesture is defining.
It's evidence, like worms captured
in amber for 400 million years.
What savage punishment.
What birth could incite such incarceration?
What circumstance, what violation?

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, stained gloves
fall like dead weight.

There are coffins on the lawn
the gold of bleached pine
and bedside table 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 and 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
by acres of silk, a celebratory canopy
across 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 nuanced 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.

My throat refuses to speak.
I'm glassy and unusually receptive to bells
and the fragrance 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, solid 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 carpets
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
or a daughter's first bracelet.

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