

A Light No More

Or, The Poetics

How can a Mind risk sleeping?
—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*

Eternity bores me,
I never wanted it.
—*Sylvia Plath*, “Years”

When you were a small girl, you dreamed you were another girl. To your own name you did not answer.

She came to you at night in a gown of white cotton. She was blonde, and when she leaned over you now you too were blonde. And you were blue-eyed, for she was blue-eyed, and rose-lipped, for she was rose-lipped. And you slept as she must have slept. Her own name she whispered in your ear to call you awake. And when you awoke this girl lingered yet, and so unto each other you gazed, reflections mutual.

How young you still were when the doctor first came to your house, the black leather satchel he carried, the instruments he did remove, devices for listening to and perceiving the movement of organs. Your brother confined to his bed—his pale face and blood bright lips—His rasping breath. The doctor seated beside his bed, instruments placed at the boy's breast. Yes, yes, now again. Yes.

Consume ladled from a silver tureen—roast lamb—candles flickering, dripping wax—your father in black coat—his black eyes—your mother in dark blue gown—her black hair tied-up—
From across the table the doctor to you alone spoke. None of this is here, he said, and now when his wrist flicked his hand, father and mother stilled, mouths yet opened, their voices lost in the air. You see?

At your brother's bedside, your mother is weeping and your father leans silently against the wall.

Your brother is a shadow; over his face the doctor pulls a sheet. They will attire him in black velvet and place him in a box; they will put him on display.

Your mother's face lost beneath her veil.

Your father will never again say your brother's name. His eyes will see you, and they will not.

Your brother's voice comes to you as you sleep, his breath cool to your ear,

Elizabeth, I

Some other year they found your father in his nightclothes, his mouth frozen unhinged, and his eyes too locked open. Your mother to see him beside her could not scream but some hoarse noise issued.

He would never again move. The doctor would bring his instruments, prod and listen. No indication of malady or affliction. The life removed from him as he slept, as if some fiend upon his breast pressed without relent.

From the doorway you watched. If they cut him open, something then might escape.

Elsewhere you were sent. Your mother did not kiss you through her veil.

Your girlhood in strict gray uniform, the other girls like-wise dressed. Their gossiping and plotting and giggling, sneaking Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre* until the old maids found and confiscated and burned those volumes, gray ash caught by gray New England winds. How the maids preferred the living language of the dead saints. How they prayed before eating and before sleeping and before the preacher at his pulpit, thundering about an “invisible species of menace.” How they demanded you gently incline your head and humbly clasp your hands.

O God you thought O God O God

They said you did not speak during your first year at the school although it is true you did scream in the night the names of those who were once your family.

Now the other girls: Sarah, pale and shy, and Rebecca, the lovely one even the maids doted on, and Ruth, the politician's daughter who seemed to study all in her silence, and Claire, who shared your room. Claire, who whispered to you from her bed, gossiped, impersonated the maids, her voice become gnarled and clucking and severe. Claire, black eyes and blacker hair, pale hands and long neck, and Claire in her nightgown, and Claire in her blue velvet gown on days of leisure. And you thought, what girl is under there? And while bathing, and while in bed drifting to sleep, you measured the lines and feel of your body—and you thought *is this how she is*, and you thought, *she must be something more*.

And summer days when you had not lessons you and Claire snuck away to the forest and then the pond, dragonflies dimpling the surface. Now perhaps Claire read from *Mansfield Park*, and her head on your shoulder and your arm on her arm, and softly her voice, your eyes drooping in the summer heat. Or perhaps you spoke of your families, your lives before this life. So Claire told stories about her father, the banker, and her mother, prim and haggard before her seven children. And you told her that your mother lived in mansion with all the slaves of her burden tending her gardens, while your father was a merchant ship's captain. Now you described his journeys to climes exotic and strange for, you said, he wrote you of lavish delights—the very air perfumed with cinnamon and the monkeys scampering on shoulders and the women in silk veils dancing and the ancient cities, the buildings of gold. But when she asked you to read to her from these letters you said you had them no longer.

Some nights you woke and where once Claire upon her bed now sat the doctor, elbows to his knees and his hat in hand, his features shifting into shadows and blurs. To him you could not

speaking nor could you move and when you tried now he pressed his hand to your breast so deeply
it seemed plunged within.

And summer days you and your schoolmates strolled about the meadows, uniforms and parasols, and along the wharfs when the ships came in, the commotion of sailors and crews, such languages and costumes and hues alien to this nation. And you girls gazed in wonder at tattooed men clad scantily, unloading casks of spice and sugar and silk and rum. And you stopped at cent-shops for ginger beers and ribbons and candies and little cakes, while outside farm boys leaned against posts, grass blades wagging from smiling lips. Now the maids ever in your company scowled and hurried you along while the boys winked and mouthed, "Meet me," and you girls giggled or blushed and averted your gaze, or returned the gaze with bold naive instinct, yearning in that moment for what you scarcely knew.

Evenings the maids reclined on a porch swing with needlework and darning in an approximation of leisure, while from across the yard you and Claire and others mocked their manner and age, the weariness of their flesh, their puritan severity, their pet phrases. So it seemed you would never grow so wearisome and old.

Such were the summers of your youth, when the world hummed and burned with life. The grasshoppers, their high mad song, and deer, poised in fear and then vanished into the long grasses. And those girls, holding hands and singing, and laughing, now long extinct and forgotten by all, save you, who must remember everything.

his lips

The girl who later joined your class, her blue eyes lost within black hollows that expanded and expanded for they said she never slept, and her blacker hair, curly and abundant until the maids forced her to tie it back. And when called upon in class she knew not the answers, nor the subject, and so was made to press her nose to the corner wall. When with the other girls she spoke not but regarded always her clasped hands, her shoes, yet when alone with you, knitting and darning, she muttered openly of how she hated the school. And when you said yes, you too abhorred the tedium, through gritted teeth she seethed, “No, I *hate* it.”

At night beneath her blankets she wept.

And then the morning she was not found in bed. Rebecca’s screams when they discovered the girl along the shore, wrapped green in weeds, and smothered with mud. Beneath this soil, dead pale and sodden was she. Bathed and gowned and laid in the parlor, over her the maids watched, for she again could wake.

They said she wandered in the night—her way lost—into the pond abruptly fallen—

She is on a table of slate—pale nude, water fat—and from shadows now the doctor

In his hand a scalpel—

what hum of flies

Eventually a cold breeze drifts even the hottest August days, and the trees burn into new colors. Where once the fireflies now the long shadow of night and the groaning of the wind alone. And there comes a certain musk in the autumn air a young girl might mistake for romance and she might long to walk the orchard isles with her beloved and there beneath apple laden boughs he will wrap her in his coat, his arms, for the coming chill; that autumn musk that she is too young to know is the decay of life and the coming of death, and she mistakes the melancholy and loss that instinct prepares in her as owed to this beau, who will forget her soon.

And then you are returned to your lectures and desks, mirthless and uniform. The old maids, unloved and withered and stiff, their droning instruction in watercolor and needlepoint and the violin. And literature, which was life itself when beheld in the secret of your room, now turned to dust when handled by the maids. And at this school the skinning of cats and the inspecting of the interior elements of frogs was hardly considered lady-like and so you took what they called “botany” and here you dissected flowers; and you took chirography and how supple and elegant Claire’s lines, while yours carried little accuracy or art; and you learned your grammar from the sternest of the old maids and no more of this dreary class shall be said; and from an ancient man, bald and ragged flesh on sticks, you learned Racine and Moliere, and so this fellow cracked at your feet with a fiddle bow when your pronunciation lapsed or your attention waned; and you took art, and there the young teacher, Charles, dark haired and blue eyed, pale and red lipped, who took you on sketching trips to the docks wild with sailors and the thrashing ocean and to the fields of grasses and flowers purple and yellow and red; and how almost feverish he became when watching a colony of gulls at flight or the imperious sun burning at noon, and you girls

swooned and giggled when he turned his back and called him “Charlie” and “Werther” and “Keats.” How he praised Claire’s refined accurate representations; his hand upon her shoulder as he said, “I do not even need to look upon the meadow to know the meadow,” and how Claire in her deprecation flushed. And for you he held no expectation so gently he admonished your artless blurs and smears, representing nothing, save, perhaps, that nature held within your mind.

Before I died I—

he has seen the greater world, surely known the women there,

his lips, full and red

indecent

O

how I long for him

And evenings Claire did immerse in her studies; how you admired her diligence and easy memory. You at your own studies, and how there readings assigned wrapped and strangled your mind until your eyes glazed and your limbs burned. And then you saw those words no more, as you fell into worlds unseen.

And here you walked shores distant, and looked upon creatures brightly leathered—how their yellow eyes looked upon you and black tongues flicked. So they spoke to you, whispering not your name, but some others. And when Claire interrupted your reverie to ask some question of the text, you blinked, Oh, I'm not certain. What do you think? How Claire rolled her eyes, said your name in amused concern, but all knew you were no scholar, and none held it against you.

And on Sunday, the day of rest, you studied not but you read from books of celestial thought like “The Evidence of Prophecy” and sang hymns with the others. And while the others patched dresses and darned stockings and replaced buttons, you read aloud from the King James Bible and some now considered you almost maniacal in your devotion, for your eyes did widen and your voice did quiver. And nights now rather than dream you did whisper and hum to yourself the strange rhythms and thorny language, for here seemed the true flush of divinity. And you found Job in his anguish the finest and how your soul did roil with the cadences of his suffering. And when you were meant to write on the nature of beauty you instead wrote, “ _____ ” and “ _____ ” and “ _____ ” and when admonished you insisted you had not known such language from your pen did flow.

A mirror above you—your eyes, yet not your eyes.

And—

You see, he said, she was dreaming the entire time.

Where once autumn moltings now follows ice and snow and lashing wind. You girls crowded on a sleigh, jolting and gliding and jolting again. Bundled in scarves and mittens and hats, chattering mouths, white breath— girls either side of you, rubbing their mittens together, the warmth of bodies pressed to bodies—sleigh bells—tall dead grasses the snow banks swallow—Black lines of trees —Children laughing—scampering—shouting—

a top hat knocked from a banker's head

And early darkness— shrill winds malevolent—Needlework in the firelight, wood smoke and crackling. In the total dark, creaking board and shifting wall, some presence ventures to impose wickedness upon virgin flesh, young and crone alike.

And shivering in your separate beds—eyes wide—creaking and gusting and howling—

snow dense swirling night

—until Claire curled beside you, or you went to her, and now your warmth became mutual.

You—

down narrow cobbled streets you followed her, houses bent in shadow, girls laughing just beyond your sight, windows black, and yet they gave a light—into one of these buildings she went, a house whose door opened for her, but not for you.

above you a mirror and in the mirror

you called her name and again—and now her arms about you—tears smeared—“I’m here, Betty, Betty, I’m here.”

His lips his

His fingers, slender,

a brush, a pencil

His fingers on Claire's shoulder, her

my

There were birds, yet the world was gray,

Then a room, and there the doctor: his great black coat, his beard and hair, flecked with snow melting. Behind him the maids stood silently.

He told you of your mother's death, and when you said nothing in return, he continued. It was— it happened as with your father. You shook your head. I don't know what that means.

Yes you do, he said. His hand upon yours. You have seen it. Many times.

Before I—

No, not I

You

Your mother called you from another room. She on her sofa rigid—her black veil clinging to her tears—

Please, hurry. She placed your palm to her chest—There—Do you feel it move? Her fingers edged into your wrist. How it scurries, you see?

She spoke in a whisper. She spoke as if she did not know who you were.

There is—some animal is living inside of me—he scurried inside me as I slept—now he has—now he has made his nest.

Will you—

Please, get it out of me.

You saw now the letter opener upon her knees. The blood dried blade.

I tried, and I cannot.

Her eyes—her—already the flies—

a voice— shimmering static—

a

featureless face

leering

You stepped before your mother, recumbent in her box, black veiled and gowned as in life, her
sallow expressionless face. Perhaps they sewed her lips shut, so her voice could not struggle free.

How old you became without Father, you whispered into what was once her ear. Perhaps it was
best you sent me away.

And behind you: breathing and shifting. And behind you: eyes hushed, and eyes moving. Surely
they thought: she is a strange child.

They could not bury her for the ground frozen so her box they hammered shut and into a drawer
she went until in the churchyard beside your father they could plant her. And then Mother would
mold and warp with roots. And then Mother would disintegrate. And then perhaps Mother would
venture to you no more.

Then tar did rain down until this robin tar-deformed watched from hands no more. You see, the doctor said, she was dreaming the entire time.

When came the Christmas holidays the other girls journeyed home. You alone with the maids did remain. How you wept and embraced Claire. How she said she would think of you. Write me, you cried. O Claire I will write you daily. The train she disappeared into. The sun blurred windows you watched for some motion of her shadow.

I will I will of course Betty

Gifts you were given for Christmases past: a gold locket, a silver hand mirror, a gown of green velvet, a gown of red velvet, a doll whose haunted eyes tormented Claire no matter where in the room she stood. This Christmas holiday you were given no gift but the continuous company of the maids, as they consumed quantities vast of “healthful” and “curative” Hot Toddies, while in careful pious ways they gossiped and impugned their neighbors. And when to you they did speak you nodded only in return, your eyes glazed, your mind often—

I will write you of

And then the snow blue in the moon light—windows yellow lit with candles—somewhere carolers—And then the vastness of a church—a quiet immense—rows of pews, and coughing sniffling shifting children—the long drone of a sermon and prayers and hymns. And Christmas Eve dinner—there the minister and the minister’s son—there the servant girl and the bounty she brought—a goose crinkled brown, yams, cranberries—somewhere the cook—and then near a fire

glowing you the piano played as the minister “___” and “___” and then his son “___” and
“___.” And the maids—their rapt pious attention—

Betty, Betty, Betty, Betty,

Then nights listening to silence alone, save for what blood through your veins did thrum and what nerves did whistle and spark, your heart's rough pulse, your lungs, what breath they did expunge.

When you closed your eyes what universe did there burst open.

And even this house emptied of life save your own did heave and groan. For within the boards of floors and plaster and paint of walls those who had in these rooms lived yet persisted in its ancient imagination, phantasms fleshless and without breath, wandering and chattering within the perpetual dream of a thing undreaming.

And perhaps there are those these centuries hence that eavesdrop on your youthful confessions, and hear in the cracking of walls and the whispering of floors the desires and dreams of girls long dead.

And no letter from Claire—And all the hours of your waiting--

And you thought tomorrow yes and no letter the next day did arrive—nor the next or any after—

Sounds of the maids—loud voices to each other—The slow scrapping shuffle of feet—creaking
the floor above you—the hacking noises in the mornings—the coughing—

The ceiling—how slowly the gray light--

The pastor's voice—His son—Slender—His black eyes—when your hand he did clasp

The silence—The clatter of a carriage—a child--

Your throat tightened

Before a mirror you stood and what face resembling yours in everyway was now reflected. And if you smiled now she smiled and if you pulled at the corners of your mouth now hands much like your own pulled at the corners of her mouth and if you did blink or if you did stare or if you did loll your tongue or if you did cover your eyes save for the slightest peep in vision now she did the same.

In all ways she did seem to be you, yet her eyes held some spark not your own.

And nights in this house a whisper of static did call you. Your body from bed made to rise although you did not command it rise. What smell of dust and—silver light—what motion of shadows—limbs of trees and—Now into the open night wearing gown and wool stockings alone. You felt not the frozen air, the hard merciless ground, stiff dead grass, ice and snow—even as your body trembled and your feet numbed and bled—Then a frozen shore—brutal rocks frosted and fallen trees moonlight glimmering—Here a pond sheathed in ice—and onto this pond you clamored on palms and knees—And now the voice said DIG—and as you scrapped you saw now yourself, or some version of yourself, as if reflected upward, drifting beneath the surface, your mouth opened in permanent cry, your frozen hair thrown outward and clinging to the ice—

Mornings you returned to your room—The pre-dawn glow—Somewhere in the great house a stirring—Mornings you returned to your room, dripping and numb with cold, until you did not—

And when you woke all the world seemed to burn and drip. You were in a bed in a room of white empty walls you recognized not and in the room stood the maids and so too a servant girl. You had been awake and you had been asleep in both conditions you had raved incoherently. For three days, they said, your condition so sustained. Now you tried to speak but you could not. And no more would they say of the condition they discovered you in, but observed you silently while the servant girl spooned broth between your lips, and placed upon your brow a cool damp cloth.

How dead it lay—how it seethed

And then Claire sat beside your bed—dampened the cloth—how quickly it warmed against your brow—and to your lips she ladled fatty broth while talking pleasantly of her holiday, her family—while you shivered—while the broth ran down your chin and now with the cloth she dabbed—

while you pleaded *please hold me* for your body burned and ached and you were so cold

The doctor was said to visit you often. Occasionally you woke and beside you he sat already asking you questions—and so your lips did move for those questions you were already answering—the tin horn to your chest he pressed—your chest to the air exposed—his breath upon you as he worked—his absent murmuring—yes, yes—the movement of mechanisms unseen, their language mysterious, and yet—from his satchel a dull shine of razor—and now the vein he did——arc of blood—the porcelain basin red streaked, a black puddle growing—

And the doctor said: They told me you were walking in the night—

[Blank]

Do you remember anything?

No

Nothing of what you said to Mrs. _____ when she found you?

No. . . . What did I say?

[But he would not answer.]

And the doctor said: Are you certain you remember nothing?

I—

Was it this?

and now flies from his mouth droned free—

How does he creep to you? What does he whisper and in what noise?

Your classmates visited only to the doorway's edge, bodiless voices, their shadows alone across the floor did you see. Often you fell asleep as they spoke and often they did not notice. Only Claire did brave the sickroom, and often now she stood at your bed's edge, speaking to you of her classes, her ambitions, her failures, her secret dreams. And when you could not speak she stroked your hair, moistened your lips cracked with a cloth wetted, cleaned away what blood and phlegm and fluid there collected. How you burned and ached and how you still did smile for her. How wide her eyes and flushed her cheeks the day she told you she had been hired to teach. And you thought of the emptiness of this world with her no more beside your bed. And you thought, I should smile now, so you smiled. And you thought, I should be glad for her, and so you said what you meant to sound like: I'm so happy for you. Her hand upon yours— how gentle the pressure.

It rained the day she left and still they carried you in a chair of wicker to watch her depart. How the feet of the chair sank into the mud and rain thrummed off the lavender skins of umbrellas held over you. Her pale face dripping rain, she is crying under there. Her mouth moved, but you could scarcely hear her words, only the rain lashing and dripping, the wind and gulls, write me please don't forget me. And then Claire enclosed in the carriage, the window rain smeared and now you saw her not, grayblack skies and fecund earth, and then Claire was no more.

I was in the sun when she came to me. I was calling to a calico kitten crouched in the tall grasses when she said Come and walked away. She wore my mother's black gown and veil and she wore the gold ring my father gave my mother. She led me to the pond's edge and although it was a summer's day she bundled me in a wool coat. I said Momma Momma Momma. Why are you crying she said in a flat voice There is no reason to cry she said and piled rocks into my pockets This will be better. Momma please I said and she smeared my face with her fingers. She closed my lips and would not let me open them. How gray her hands with mud. Go she said and to the blackgreen water she pushed me until my skirt clotted with peat and pooled around my hips. Yellow eyes watched me from all over. Go she said and waved me venture still deeper. I can take no more of you.

your wasting face, sallow and cavernous,

How your throat and lips did burn.

You reached for him but through his hand your own did pass.

Another day then perhaps. Against the doctor you leaned while he led you around the snowless lawn. The overcast sky and your eyes watering and when you did cough your bright blood did spatter the brown grasses. What was once your body was not your body. And what was once your body did now seethe against you—And to your room the doctor did carry you—your blood lips

—

You were in your bed and here the maids and here the shadows of the walls. To you the doctor spoke yet he had no face.

Many nights you woke gasping and trembling—Many nights you felt yourself slipping from your body—And you flailed and called out meekly to the vastness—Many nights your heart in revolt— your breath—Many nights your throat—your lungs—your limbs—no more your own. Many nights what was once yours sought to murder you. And then—O your mind alone—from prison flesh cleaved—And then—O your mind—and then the shadows—and then static, whispering—

O God my soul my soul

She was weeping on the sofa and beside her you sat. She held a framed portrait, a red-cheeked boy in red gown— he held in his palm a yellow bird. Who is that, your voice small beneath her weeping. She dabbed a handkerchief to her eyes. He was your brother. You were born together. Slowly you shook your head. You do remember him, Elizabeth, she said. He was your great playmate and companion. You closed your eyes to darkness alone, although perhaps in greater depths still someone much like you wandereth there with her brother.

You died in the early dawn. You will not remember this time. Your stricken face glistening, your frozen eyes, your blood crusted lips. There is the doctor and the servant who brought damp cloths and a basin cleaned of blood and vomit. There is pain you will not remember. There is the sound of the end, straining and rattling. There is a light. There is the thrashing of wings. There is a silver river. And there is nothing.

The servant girl covered your body with a sheet—so classmates red-eyed observed you from the doorway, a mass shrouded—while some in their rooms remained, weeping or quiet in the strangeness. And then by the servant girl and another you were stripped of your shroud and nightgown—and there nude your body did lie—while a basin of water—a cloth. The unhurried unremarkable way they worked—the surety of their motions over cold pale skin—and so you were divested of sweat, piss, excrement. The lines of your body their hands grazed—this childhood scar—that twisting birthmark—these hairs—moles—Dimpled. The lines of your experience. The lines of what you were, yet no more, somehow heavier now—lumpish—into meat transfigured. As many of your generation already—a door opened and they were made to enter—cholera—pox—typhus—diphtheria—yellow fever—a servant, her gown—they found her screaming in flame—Bodies emptied of blood—of—and few of those dead girls dressed for exhibition as the servants dressed you now in your Christmas gown of green velvet.

And so these servants cast about you brittle flowers and blossoms—throbbing glow of candlelight. And so these servants in shifts by your casket sat for four days and nights. Many hours by your body dead now they dozed, murmuring from dreams they would not remember.

And it has been said the good will return from the grave, and they will march along the land without the burdens they knew in life; they will walk amongst wolves and no wolf will attack, and they will find their way lighted by heavenly fires portending doom and the blazing fires living men lit in the streets, and by the candles the living light to guide the dead home. So the anguished dead will return to the homes of the living. And they will sit before those they once loved with flesh bloated and eyes glazed white. No hand will reach toward the other through the light of the candle. And in this hour what living man or woman will not look away, and who will bear to hear the voice of their dead, returned at this hour?

I was dead. I remember nothing of that time.

You were dead but your body suffered no affliction common to the condition. No fly to you was drawn by sickly-sweet musk of decay, for there was none. And though your heart did still and your blood no more flowed your body did not stiffen nor did the unseen atoms of your flesh wilt and revolt against your greater organism. And your body did not discolor, nor malform and bloat, tongue distend and eyes bulge. No your body which did expel your consciousness and soul into the greater void now did cease its transgressions. Now it did seem only to wait.

You wear green weeds like hair, tangled through. And when fish pass, gulping and pecking,
sudden and sleek—And no sound save

There was nothing and then there was darkness. There was nothing and then there was a voice, muffled and distant. A fly, erratic hum.

Into the insect din you spoke, and your voice was heard not in the burning streets—

She pushes me under and I cannot swim. She pushes me under and I drink green water—How it fills my neck and throat—How—She pushes me under and I am weighed down with stones—I am—She pushes me under and I cannot scream—Mother don't Mother please it's me it's—No, I cannot—

You were in the darkness, and then you were not. The light bent the corners of windows
shrouded—Dust—shadows of the dead in the candle light—

You woke with a gasp—your sounds echoed the room—

And when the servant girl heard your voice she woke startled and perhaps now in the wavering
light she believed herself yet in dream. And when she saw your body postured upright the
servant girl began to scream.

Please you said and your voice was not your voice. Please I'm so cold you said, although you felt nothing at all.

They were there—breathing and hurried footsteps—ointments and creams—Their smells—black
ovals—Their eyes—Some were weeping—others—O God a maid gasped.

and now their arms about you—your body against their bodies—How *soft* they were—breathing
and voices and eyes—They carried you to a bed—the windows in this room yet shrouded—And
no sound of birds here—The door and windows—shut tight as a—and no stove in this room
burned and so in the freezing dark you lay while they moved about—while they—Whispered—

You shivered although you felt no cold. They blanketed you although you were dead. Your
chattering teeth—limbs—might you again slip away—a thread shimmered and then gone—
swallowed—

And you did not sleep and you did not dream and so the shadow that is the self in dream did spread over your waking days. You pulled shrouds from mirrors and there you stood reflected, and yet you were not.

The flies—I can feel them growing.

And although you did not eat, and although you did not drink, the servants brought you tea,
butter milk, little cakes. And when they found your arms and legs and breast clawed now they
tied your wrists to the bedposts with sheets. You fought them not, but pleaded for them to rip the
flies from within your body. I have tried—they are too cunning for me. The dumb movements of
the servants mouths against the hum of your flesh in decay, vibrations unheard save by those
within the earth.

And the doctor was there. He asked if he could inspect you and you indicated it mattered little. You held out your arm and he observed it for long seconds before letting it fall. You see? He nodded slowly. Now he exposed your breast and you said It does not beat. His long look into your eyes and then he said I believe you. He pressed his tin horn to you anyway and listened and slowly then he set the instrument aside. How then does your blood circulate? and he wondered how the oxygen was transferred throughout your body and you said you did not breathe and he raised his eyebrows. What of the other nutrients necessary to life? And you said you ingested nothing and now a maid said this was not true. Doctor, we have fed her and I have sat with her as she eats. You shook your head. Only because you made me, you said. It tasted like ash. And I require it not. Then how are you alive, said the doctor, and then he corrected himself, Then how are you conscious? You said you had wondered this as well. And you said perhaps this was all a dream and you hoped it so, although as the days progressed the hope lessened. Perhaps this is purgatory you mused. Do the maggots feed upon you in purgatory? Perhaps this is hell. I don't not know.

you on the porch—the rocking chair you do not rock while above you a yellow parasol—
lemonade you do not drink—a fly struggling—

And the doctor brought others of his species to inspect you, their elegant suits, whiskers and hats, the masculine rush of tobacco smoke and bourbon fumes. And little did they acknowledge you but to grab and pull, investigate and inspect; they did not ask your name, but they felt your limbs and looked into your mouth and they opened wide your eyes and described what there they saw and they felt about your neck and they spoke to each other of men believed dead who had moved again upon the dissection table and they spoke of those believed dead who had fought against the grave and moved within their tomb only again often to starve or suffocate and when exhumed the signs of their struggle upon the boards.

And then they felt for your pulse their hands large around your wrist and then they felt the other wrist and then they pressed fingers to your throat and then they coughed uncomfortably and they shifted in place and they flushed and they said, Is this a joke? and they commanded you expose your breast and the doctor standing sentient at the far corner nodded gravely and so you did and now they pressed tin horns coolly to your flesh and they pressed deeper and deeper and finally you cried out and they admitted, It is no good.

So it was they registered no pulse nor beat of the heart and so the organ neither moved nor did the blood flow with any discernable pace. And so when they felt to measure your breath they discovered no such motion and a feather placed upon your nose did not flutter and your chest did not move in the living manner. Yet the doctors did pace and theorize and pace and in their infallible logic they decreed your heart did beat and your blood did flow. And now they believed that feather did move by air expelled and if they had a microscope they could with that

microscope observe this motion. And they believed if they did open your chest they would witness a heart in subtlest throb. And some argued that under influence of ether you would scarcely know they did gaze within, but the doctor forbade it.

And the days did—

In truth you sometimes saw these doctors as men, and you sometimes saw them as shadows or wisps of smoke, coalesced into the shapes of men.

And although you did not sleep, many nights now you did close your eyes and allow a darkness incomplete to wash over you. No true annihilation could you find, but a world within unfurled in this place lightless. And when you opened again your eyes now worms fat as slugs—slid along your body. The maids wept to see them and the servants peeled them off—And still the residue—black soil—slick—your arms and lips and throat—your torso—your breasts. And still their noise—ever—a cacophony, heard by no one other.

And other nights the shadows did come shaped as men to crouch upon your breast. And your body did seem to sink and your eyelids against your will did seem to fall. Now darkness gathered you violently. How you gasped for air as if drowning. And you thought I don't need to breathe and you thought I don't need to breathe and though you strained to scream now alone came a horrid sucking sound.

O god you thought how long must I endure this world?

And at night you crept from the house to the edge of the pond yet in your nightclothes. The chill squelch of mud and stiff grass between your toes that you felt not. Frogs watched you from the outer edges— inflated throats—poised cautious eyes. And your toes now into the murk, your gown pooled and drawn up around you. If you continued soon your eyes would gape like a fish's and your mouth widen to a black haunted O. And there your bobbing self, and there the peat gathering, your hair spread like green weeds. Perhaps then you would return to the mystery. But from the pond slowly you stepped away. No no you thought it would do no good.

And other mornings you lay on cemetery lawns tracing your fingers over epigraphs and names,
weather worn and moldy blue—How cold the dew—How—the worms—And you whispered to
the once persons interned beneath—the names—what had been their age—And mother you said
or father or brother or husband or sister or wife—And angelic and gentle and loving and godly
and kind— And how you prayed no sound did reach them, and no consciousness survived—
carried upon silver waters far below—cataracts—or dissolved into mineral and earth and tree—

The servants cleaned the muck and grass from your feet in silence.

I have been dead many years now you thought.

And one night through your window Claire did enter—The white gown she wore—How in the moonlight— I had to see you she said and into your bed she crawled. And her feet cold with the night and her hair that smelled of the open air. Don't cry she whispered, and her hand to your breast above where your heart once did beat. You did not tell her you could no longer cry. And into your ear now she whispered a world you had once known but could no longer remember.

to your mouth and nose the doctor pressed a cone of paper—breathe he said—

Now a stirring in the dark. A breath—A voice—She sleeps in your bed and eats at your place at the table. How slight she is. Frail. As if some affliction did once—Yet she smiles—laughter unblemished—How she watches you from around corners when she believes you know not. How her voice quivers when she asks you a question or bids you good morning. And through her you ever look and to her you never respond.

And this girl one night did scream until the servants and maids to her rushed. Now she claimed you had entered her room as she slept. And she claimed you had pressed a pillow over her face. She thrashed and fought until finally she was free. It was not I you said—there is a man who comes. I have seen him too. But they could not hear you for this girl's weeping.

Now the other girls watched you from corners of rooms—From the far edges of the library—
hallways—To you they would go no nearer than the nearest they must go. The sounds of their
breathing—their silence—what they must think, what they must—

You remembered nothing—a hand upon your throat—a silver river—reflected in the eyes of
crows—

And then I thought perhaps the shadow is real. And then I thought perhaps the flesh is the disguise.

You sagged back into the water. Yes perhaps that is so you said.

From them I secreted a letter opener. They did not know—never would they suspect—Beneath my pillow—And now when the servant girl did attempt to fill my mouth I brought the blade across her palm. How she cried out and howled. No more of your ruses I thought.

I said you do not fool me. I said you are not so cunning.

Now the servants watched you coldly—And when you spoke to them they only whispered to themselves.

And some nights you sat in the darkness listening to the servants creep about your room like gnomes in the forest.

And one night the servants set fire to your room. The smoke rose about you and the burning glow within the smoke. Perhaps a lantern cast onto the floor, and the blue flame spread. Perhaps they brought cinders from the stove and set those upon the rug. Their hunched shadows scampering in the firelight, their chattering whispers and the droning flames.

Now it will come I thought. Now finally I thought again into the mystery.