

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 speak 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 the mystery.

From this place now the doctor took you although to him the maids warned your soul did need ministering far more than did your flesh. So to the house that was once his mother's and was now his alone.

Perhaps you travelled for days within this carriage. Perhaps not. Closely the doctor watched you. How he jots notes in his little book. How he must write *she seems this or that* and *this is how she appears*.

And then you are at his house—this house that was once his mother's—And before his mother—No, they are—A black house—many gabled—years now in disuse save those rooms occupied by the doctor's books, his instruments, his patients. These rooms do flicker with candle light—perhaps a hearth—while others—abandoned to dust—the furniture shrouded—

And where now white sheets the old woman did once drink her tea and reminisce to her servant girl—her husband and child—

And this room where once a cent-shop the old woman kept—And here—

I have not felt so well in months, you said.

And somewhere in this house does reside a young servant woman the doctor calls *Ruthie*. Her figure beneath the figureless form of her maid's attire. Her hair wrapped in a brown scarf, and when the doctor is in the room, her eyes avert, and when the doctor to her spoke she nods only, said yes sir and of course sir. Gathers what he said to gather and attends to those tasks that did now compel him. And when the doctor told Ruthie to lead you to your room now up the stairs she went and so you followed. And within the room a desk, and within the room a bed, quilted, and within the room a mirror, and within the mirror, something like the world.

She sets before you a plate of rice and greens and sausage. How fragrant. This you watch through the night. How you desire to desire this food. But from such appetites you are banned.

Somewhere you heard the ocean—Yes, there.

Here the bones of a heathen dancer. She was very beautiful the doctor tells you. You knew her? He nods distantly. Yes he says. Yes I did.

And in those first weeks the doctor—His hours away lecturing to undergraduates—The fawning puppy faces that did trot behind him—Cozy to him after class—quote his own papers back to him—and—

And in the house you hear him practicing his lectures—you and your condition—innovations and theories and methods—This other woman—This boy—How his voice comes and goes—

And when you look for him—his voice echoes elsewhere but you find him not—Only rooms—shadows—emptiness—And—

Some evenings he calls you before him—his pipe—brandy—fire light—and now he asks you of your functions and systems. And now he asks you to sit. And now he speaks of his studies—His students—His sacred responsibility—his patients—his oaths—Knowledge itself—

And some evenings he tells you of his boyhood in this house—How as a boy this doctor
did sometimes wake screaming—And so his mother's maid did feed him warm milk and
stroke his hand—until he again did sleep—hands from a universe other—

How some nights he ran from his bed until a blackness did drag him down—

And some nights while he speaks slugs and worms do crawl his face—with firelight—
shine—

The colleagues he brings to your room. Wool suits—watch chains—vests—How pale—
They smell of tobacco—Brandy—They note your dinner plates untouched—flies upon
food uneaten. She seems to have little appetite they say. When the doctor answers that
you claim to abstain from all food and drink for several weeks they suggest that you
sneak food, perhaps unknowing—Perhaps she walks in her sleep—I do not sleep you say.
Their faces in a row—Their smiles—lips and eyes—So you believe, my dear.

I do begin to think it is a dream, even if I don't ever wake. If I cut my arm the blade might pierce my flesh and the blood might flow, but it will have no true effect. And if I stand before a train as it collides with me, this will only continue.

And there are many locked doors in this house—You press your ears to them—peer
beneath—

In one room a woman silver haired—Her mourning gown—She paces—Silent—From
beneath this door you—The gray room—And then she begins to scream—

And in a different room Ruthie—Bronze, no—Nude—Her figure—pinkish scar between
her breasts—and where her kidneys—She turns and turns as if to catch sight of herself—
Perhaps she means to dance now—But—

And in a different room the doctor recites a lecture—The mirror he stands before—
wearing linen drawers alone—In his recitation he does now pause—and to the floor he
lowers—Beneath the door, his eyes—He whispers your name—Come here—

—jars of human infants—hearts and tumors and brains—skeletons—books bound with
human skin—

When the doctor—He checks what he called your pulse—lifts your arms and allows them drop—He looks into your eyes and nods deeply to himself—He looks into your mouth and what he sees there he never says—He sometimes asks now of your hours within his house—You ask him if he ever came to your room at night. Silently he regards you. How do you mean he asks finally. Tell me what have you seen he says and so you do. Intently he jots his notes.

You watch women walk the halls—what he calls his patients—You hear them in his
office—Sometimes they weep and sometimes they speak in voices distant—cold—They
do not seem afflicted—They walk just fine—

What is he doing to them you ask. He is helping them Ruthie answers.

When next you sit before the doctor—What is your estimation of my condition you do ask—He will not answer—I have heard you creeping about the house, he does tell you, at all hours. This is not—You are fragile yet—you will make yourself ill again—The windows are locked shut—the blinds lowered—Your door—Here a liquor—thick chalk—He insists you drink—the glass he tilts to your lips—you must rest, he tells you—How the room does bend and waver—you are lowered to your bed—

In the evenings the servant woman does bathe you—Does coax you from your gown and undergarments—How slow her sponge moves across—Her breath—And when you close your eyes the woman now does join you—Your fingers along her scars—many—I have long known the doctor she says.

Do you believe you can bear children? he asks you—I am no doctor.—That is unimportant... what do you believe?

Your mind commands Walk and you cannot walk. You lean into walls, the world bent—

What voices—

Your days within the darkness—This room stagnant—to locked windows you press your
hands—your nose—

Please, if I may not move—at least—a pen—paper—Books, I know you have many—
Please bring a lamp at least—Why must I sit within the darkness—Perhaps you believe I
would cast it against a wall—Perhaps you believe I would murder us all—Perhaps you
believe—Yes what flames—No, I simply want a light by which to see and a book to read
and pens and paper so I may—I have such ideas you know—I feel as if I am bursting—

Once—the door does seem to open—and the doctor no more than a shadow seems to stand in the doorway—and then he is gone—

The doctor calls you to him—a bottle of cognac—Sit with me—and so while he drinks—
He speaks of his mother and father—How they looked in their mutual caskets—the
flowers he placed on his mother's breast—the sallow hue of her skin—the eyelids
darkened—They killed them, you know—my parents—I found them in their bed—They
had been dead for some hours—

I am—I'm trying to hold myself—But the air does—

There are many voices in this house—and now they whisper to you of the world they
have known—

And as you no longer sleep and as you no longer dream, you know now this house in place of dreams—In the darkness—the moonlighted windows—voices in the halls—in the rooms—footfalls—laughter—music on a pianoforte played—violin—a woman's voice, expertly trained—

Tell me child have they informed you how my husband died?

It was—They came to him at night—smothered him—Their hands—They crouched upon
his chest until he—

A lighted room—oil—you ask the doctor of these voices—his legs crossed—He blinks—
Tell me what you have heard—and as you do—how furiously he writes in his ledger—
Yes, yes, continue—Now finally he—Did she tell you her name?

My husband—my husband was a discovered—his soul removed in his sleep, she said,
but you knew that—

How easy to break—to rip open—I close my eyes and the air seeps—A cold gust—

In a different room—the old woman sits on a mahogany chair—Her red velvet gown—a white Eurydice mask she holds over her face—Hello dear—How glad I am you came to our party—The fireplace behind her—what shadows flickering—A hand at your elbow, the woman does—Now another room—she—

—the woman sits on a chair of mahogany—she is there and she is not—for crows have covered her—a dozen stalking about her—ripping her garments—her jowls her eyes her arms—From her flesh opened a blackness does flee—a shadow born into the world—

Rooms once empty—now—Crows stalk about—screaming—What whirlwind—Thrash
against the windows—walls—They pile dead—They stalk about the piled dead—In their
eyes reflected I see—O god—I remember—

Where once the woman now—somewhere perhaps bones—and perhaps those too by
crows—consumed—

I hear them everywhere—wings—and shifting—Hearts minuscule—thrumming—When I
close my eyes they—like swirling smoke—

Beneath this world there is—a silver river—along the shores—In their eyes reflected I
see—along the shores—drinking—bathing—men and women—children—Pale—
groaning—what cloaks they wear—robes—

How I long to drown there—

At night now he comes to you—the soaked cloth he does press to your face—Breathe, he whispers—But you do not breathe, and your blood does not flow—The rag is soaked anew—and onto your face he presses all the harder—

Now another night—he comes to you in the moonlight—clamoring—his pale skin like a fish’s belly. His gaping mouth and yellow eyes—He says not a word, even as you struggle beneath him. His low moans and breath of red wine—

He will deny this too—He will deny everything—These are dreams, he insists. More of your fantasies—

When you insist you are well enough he takes you on what he calls his evening constitutional—Your gloves—parasol—How you seem to drift along the walk in your long white gown—a carriage passes—the smell of the ocean—the gulls—rocks, jagged—the ocean itself—gray—What is it? the doctor says—Nothing—your throat clenched so you nearly cannot speak—for here men in white suits—hats—women in white gowns—frilly—servants lugging picnic baskets—lamb and catsup sandwiches—lemonade—

And this world shimmers—and this world disappears—returns—The picnickers pause in their lunching to observe you—black eyes—pursed lips—They are all staring at me, you whisper—Nonsense, he says. But perhaps this walk was too much—No please, you cry—
I am well—I am clear minded—

A flame in a dark room—There is something you must see—And then the flame swept
aside, although the glow—remains—

He leads you through streets blurred—your parasol—No—The world is there and—Not
the—Bent—warped—What were once shops—Now waver, pools of shadow—
Somewhere—sound—echoing—muffled—Perhaps the cries of men—a carriage—
marauders on horseback—

Here a room of porcelain—gaslight flame—A shadow moves—Here a mirror—your
body unclothed—alive and not alive—Every smooth line and imperfection—Is this what
I am? Is this me?

Behind you the wall begins to writhe—

Here a room of porcelain—tile—yellow flickering—Beside you—the doctor stands
wearing white drawers alone—How sickly his flesh does sag—and the black hair webs
his pallor—You have never before seen a man unclothed—He says nothing, his lips
parted slightly—In his hand, a straight razor, tiny flame—His eyes—gray trembling—
How he does groan—now a movement abrupt—the air—running wet—

In his office he sits—crosslegged—Please—tell me what you believe you remember—

His notes—What he must write—

You ask him for a pen—ink—paper—You are writing now, he insists—You have already filled these pages—He holds aloft a stack of paper, ink stiff—

There are many rooms in his house—In another—a woman stands by the window—to
you her back—a gray shawl—her hand—a ring ornate—a ruby shines—Claire?—You
speak without knowing how you know it is her—How slowly she turns—The lines—
How thin her skin—Her blue clouded eyes—She reaches for you—Her dead eyes wide—
She says your name, but it is not—

I have wondered—where do those women go—Into this house they come—into his office
they—Never again are they seen—But I have heard them—Chained—rattling—in rooms
locked—their shadows within—the stink—I have whispered to them—pressed my face to
the floorboards and told them my name—They do not respond—Some with voices—
muffled—

Yet I have found these same rooms open—emptied of all save—potted ferns—carpets—
marble men—

He must let them loose—I believe it is his idea of sport—I've seen them—yes—When they flee into the forest—he pursues them on horseback—with nets—How he must relish the chase—

Their screams—echoing—From the forest thick shadow men emerge—There is no sound
then—The earth opens and swallows them whole—

My world—this gray world—A bending of the light—My hand is outstretched—and it is
not—He is here—Somewhere his eyes—teeth—When he speaks my name he does—

You are in darkness absolute when to you they creep—Rag of ether to your mouth and nose yet it takes no effect—Now they carry you from your quarters—By arms and legs—and onto a slate table you are laid—You can only bulge your eyes—the tendons in your neck—The gray ceiling and only the ceiling—Now their faces—their eyes lean over you—The doctor—His men of shadow—His instruments glinting—How they set to work—

From you they pry a dead clump of muscle and blood—What the doctor calls your heart
—He holds it aloft—You see how it yet beats—No, you think—No it does not—

You are in your quarters—Before a mirror you stand—Beneath your gown your breast
does burn—Through your gown you—How you claw and rip until finally you are
gowned no more—How you stand—pale, trembling—From navel to throat—a suture
enflamed—black, red—as if a sock, darned—

To what impossible limit now—the skin does stretch as if some furious motion captured within—There is no pain, I swear—But what a hell to unfurl—What sickness to hear my body tear apart—When this new voice does command LOOK I almost weep—He is a crow blood slick—from my cavern he has emerged—

Perhaps it is night and perhaps it is day—a hundred lesser birds whisper within your flesh
—muffled song—others thump against your windows closed—sprawl broken necked—
dying—From your desk the crow watches—blood gloomed—yet black as oil—

—how your body in those days did thrive with birds—

Crows watch from trees—eyes silver in the moonlight—They beat against the windows
—feathers blood glued to—Ever they watch you—What screams—Whispering—

Perhaps it is day—when the windows shatter—The ceiling removed from its moorings—
What drone of wings—and where once shadow and darkness now a silver light—

—how his face does drain to see your cavern—redgapping—and all the birds—perched
upon your shelves—squawking from your chest—You see, you say, I’ve found you out—
I know what you did.

Perhaps it is day and perhaps it is night—gray world—you lie upon your back and the
crow sits atop you, picking at your open wound—Yes yes I know, you say—

You procure needle and thread—Many stockings and dresses you had darned and now before the mirror you pull tight your flesh—First you call every bird into you—Now again movement and pulse within your breast—Now not one heart shriveled but a hundred hearts—vital red and glistening—Then the flesh is curtain drawn—and their confusion and horror becomes your own—while the crow in elegant black perches upon your shoulder—whispering to you of worlds to come—

There are many rooms in his house—Rooms once locked are now open—From chains—
steel hooks hang—bloodrusty—Swaying shadows—The ornate rugs—stained redbrown
—Within another room, furnaces—fragments of bone—blackened—ash—Before these
fireless furnaces now the crow's eyes did flare a flickering light—swirl with smoke—

Another room—Here men and women in—costumes ornate—faded—dusty—torn—
standing in silence—bodies of oncememen and oncewomen—exhumed—Yet they stand—
yet they do seem to regard you—even as they watch a vastness beyond—eyes glazed—
silver—To you one does say your name, yet he does not—

He is—He is dressed as a man dresses—in gray suit, polished black shoes—Through you
he stares—he tells you now of his studies—his lessons in grammar—mathematics—His
voice, an echo—Mechanical—

There is another room—a curtain opens and there a young man—perhaps fifteen—On a table before him—a poodledog eviscerated—In his hand, a scalpel—

I know you he says. I have seen you before. He says your name, but it is not.

He stands before a girlchild—laid out on a slate table—Nude—She is drained of color—
And now the scalpel he works from belly to—You cannot watch—you weaken so you
cannot stand—The crow upon your shoulder whispers how they found her—waterfat—
wrapped in mud and weed—You see, the doctors says, I have known you for many years.

He sips a glass of tea—You know it is poisoned for this tea you have made—Do his hands even now begin to tingle—Does his belly seize—His arms—legs—How he does groan—eyes bulge—Yes—And this room burns away to a forest—moonlit—and there the doctor walks freely—

He sits before you with pen and ledger—Tell me what you believe has happened—You tried to kill me, you say. But you cannot.

In the doctor's room a hundred crows where the doctor once sat—They watch you with
eyes—obsidian—and in their eyes you are shown back—

Did I? he smiles. And how did I attempt this deed? To him you smile back. How thin you stretch your lips.

Before you stands a man of shadow—In a hoarse voice—distant—he speaks—Last night

I dreamed your name and your husband's name written on a card, but like playing cards.

You try to say, I have no husband but your lips are fixed—numb—

Within your hand a scalpel held—and to the doctor you say—Across my breast you drew
this knife as such—And now where once your heart this knife you plunge—O Jesus, he
cries—What have you done?—How you smile. You fool. It means nothing to me.

In the crow's eyes the house drowns in a silver light—and candle flames cast pools—

Shadows murmur of lives dimly—recalled—

A hand wraps your face—and a moist rag smothers your nose—your mouth—as a voice commands, Breathe.

And the crow whispers, You are dead. And the crow whispers, You are alive. And the crow whispers, You were never born. And the crow whispers, You will never die—

And the crow whispers, There are worlds other than this world—

And the crow shows you a house.

And into this house the ocean air, brine and decay, is borne through an open window, and the red curtains drawn do tremble.

And in this house you sit before a great mahogany desk and at this desk you write _____ and you write _____.

In white gown of lace you write what sounds to you the crow does whisper.

And in the afternoon you stand before a dining room table set by someone you know not and there perhaps a bowl of vegetable soup steaming and a crust of bread and a glass of milk although you knew nothing of who procured and prepared this food. This person you did not see but perhaps she listened from the kitchen or peered from under a table or desk or hid behind a plant potted and to her now you called out, "You are only wasting food—I do not eat."

But each day you stood before this food. You never did not.

And in the afternoons neighbor women knocked at your door, and you heard their voices, and from the opposite length of the room you watched them press their faces to the windows, and into the shadows you stepped. And behind the furniture you squatted, and still you felt their eyes and you heard their comments on your strangeness. Sometimes they left on your doorstep little notes, cakes, invitations, and how you trembled to hear them approaching, the clacking feet, their exalted chatter, and how you stood now in distant rooms, and always they seemed to find a window, and always their voices followed.

And sometimes you entered the parlor and the curtains were pulled open and the room burned with light. And seated on the sofa was some woman who smiled and perhaps another woman beside her too sipped tea and often they now spoke to you of matters you understand not: social engagements, the lives of other women, their husbands and children, this obscure painter or that pianist they patronized.

And nights in the house the boards did creak and snap when a substanceless substance shaped as man ventured to leer from another universe. And nights you moved through the lightless halls carrying neither candle nor lamp for with ease your flesh wandereth the shade. And to you in the darkness the crow did whisper and now a flame kindled and in its glow you wrote _____ and you wrote _____.

And some nights a figure of shadow crouched upon your chest. It whispered to you in static and flies. And it filled with tar your beatless heart. O radiant fumes.

And you could not thrash and you could not kick and you could not scream; your eyes alone moved, bulged in their sockets.

O god, you thought. It will devour my soul.

And your nose, and your throat, and your stomach and lungs did fill with silver waters.

And your mind did fog and seethe with a voice that called you now mother, now daughter, and now husband, and father.

And your great mahogany desk before a window and this window did overlook a yard and garden and a shed and a carriage house and a row of quiet houses.

Before the carriage house stood a man in gray suit and hat and from his vest a golden chain did glint. For a face he wore a featureless smear of lips, blue eyes, pale bulging skin, and yet you did seem to know him.

In twilight now where once the carriage house and lined homes now loomed an ancient woods.

And from these woods came darkness. And from these woods came silence.

And from these woods ventured a deer no more than a shadow antlered, and beside the man the deer did stand and both did seem to observe you.

And then this deer to the woods returned.

And then this deer was no more.

The man alone remained and so he raised his hand as if toward you and his mouthless mouth did seem to open, for now darkness where once a pale smear. He is going to scream, you thought.

And you covered your ears for you could not bear this sound not yet born.

And to you the crow whispered this man's name, for the crow alone knew his movements within the movement of shadows within.

And to you the crow spoke in this man's voice, distant and crackling and thin as if heard through a tin funnel. And the man said: When I was a boy I saw you—I watched you from the window, the curtains pulled open.

And the man said: There were cards upon the table, but not playing cards. And upon these cards were written the names of your father and your husband and your daughter and you.

And the man said: My name is not my name. My name is my name no more.

And in the parlor you stood before a casket and within that casket a woman recumbent,
stiff and unmoving, and her eyelids, nearly black.

And in the parlor flies crept and darted. And in the parlor the ceiling did seem to drip
with tar.

And beside you stood the man. He wore no face but he smelled of tobacco and whisky.
He wore no face but he held his hat against his chest, and blue veins bulged from his
hands and wrists.

She is upstairs now, he said.

You turned to him. No, she's there, and you pointed to the casket.

Oh yes, he said and now he seemed to nod. Oh yes, for many years now.

The heavens are crows and so too the land and all the regions in-between—black eyes
shimmering—whispering—and all the machines and temples and towns—

And from this whirlwind comes—And in this whirlwind—

But in this room there is no more mother, no.

[The crow whispers] No, here there are only crows.

And now a room and yet not a room. This room you were within and yet you were not. And within this room you sat upon a sofa listening to a young woman play the pianoforte, her stiff posture and nimble ivory hands. And within this room you drank tea and chatted with the ladies of the neighborhood and perhaps you feigned interest and perhaps in this room you did enjoy their company. In this room you wore immense colorful garments and your hair bundled atop your head. And in this room you spoke to a boychild at play with his blocks and a girlchild in dress and ribbon as she sang for you a melancholy song of her own composition. And in this room these children you did embrace and their names you did know. And in this room they called you “mother” though their voices did seem to echo through tin horns.

A room and yet not a room. And here tar did drip from the ceiling and seethe upon the carpet. This room did smolder with fume and yet none did cough or weep. And through this room a river of silver did flow and jostle the furniture and carry off the boy’s blocks but none did notice. And within this room you sipped tea though the windows glowed with fire. And within this room you stood, and yet you did not, for from a universe other you did observe, while the crow did whisper to you the nature of these events.

And then another room. And here there is a man and yet not a man. And from your window you did observe him at labor in the yard. The garden he did tend. The slow growth of a green world. These stalks bending and swaying and these roots flowering and these fruits bulging red and purple from the soil. This man and yet not a man. His soft voice from somewhere in your house. He is speaking to someone; perhaps he is speaking to you. His hands upon your arms and his breath at your neck and how strange the heat and yet you seemed to know it well.

He says your name as if he has known it for years.

And perhaps he has.

You sometimes called him "Little Bird." Little bird, slender and frail. If you cupped your hands there your bird might sit. If you opened again your chest and sealed him within now his plaintive heart where once your own might beat forever.

A man and yet not a man tangled nude in the sheets of a bed—perhaps your bed—And here the muscled curve of his buttocks and his thick calves and his heels calloused and here his shoulder blades and the lines of his ribs and here the white puckered line of a scar and here the concentric puckering of another and when this man does roll onto his back here the scar above his knee and here upon his belly and here above his collar and here again the lines of his ribs and the plunge of his belly. To him in dream you whisper how he is too slender and how he must eat and now these lines you grace with your fingers and now these scars with your lips even as he stirs and even as he murmurs your name.

How still he lies. Your ear near his nose, breathing, yes, and now your hand to his breast, his heart's slow thrum, and now he stirs. "What?" he murmurs. "Nothing," you whisper.

And in the morning you ask him of his dreams, and quietly now he tells you—

A woman wanders his garden wearing only black. A black veil obscures her face.

How curious.

She leans to the stalks, her pale hands—

And here his slight breasts, much as yours. How he murmurs, when along those breasts
your fingertips and then your lips. And between his legs, this tuft alone, and now your
fingers to opening flesh, and then to flesh within—His breath now—

And you knew his name and you knew his days in the war and you knew his years at sea and you knew his life removed from others and you knew his hours in the lightless brush and the stench of alleyways and slumbering in caves and laboring in factories and shops until he saw that they knew, they knew, and then to some other place he went.

He stood in his garden, amid the growing things, and the ebbing sunlight on his face, and to you he smiled, and perhaps you knew of his life because he had told you, and perhaps not.

His name was Albert, and yet it was not.

She is in the corners—She has wandered into the corners and walls and there she stands.

—is she lost—she answers me not.

Hollow eyes—mouth stuffed with black—

Now pull aside her veil—what will her eyes wear—

And sometimes war time songs he sang in his cracked soft voice, and sometimes for him the pianoforte you played. And sometimes he listened from the sofa, and sometimes he sang to your accompaniment. And sometimes he hummed a sweet melody to you while you in gentle circles he did dance. And sometimes you read aloud from your poems while he smoked his pipe, and sometimes you read aloud from your poems while he fell to dozing.

Evenings in the parlor before the fire Albert built and from a universe other you watched yourself and this man, their splendid life together.

It is all too much, you thought.

And you thought: I'm going to scream.

And you did clench your hands fast over your mouth— O god O god O god—

And when the crow stands upon his chest and picks at his soft flesh and eyes you scream
and beat at the air with papers folded until the crow does pause to regard you.

And now all is darkness and static. You see the flies, the crow does whisper.

A shoreline—now—rocks green with weeds—dead fish, crabs, shells emptied, scattered
—muck gulping—Carriages rattling past, the road behind you—There is a cool breeze—
There beside you—his evening coat—tall hat—is the doctor—He is telling you how your
color has returned—your energy—Distant ships pock the waters—How silent they seem
—Yes, you say. I feel much better now.

Afternoon light—before a desk of mahogany—into the evening—a tallow candle
flickering—The letters you write to Claire—once a day—sometimes twice—How many
pages—Your soul in these lines—I am hale and healthy now, you write—Doctor _____
has done wonders for my condition—You send her pencil drawings of the garden—the
house—the doctor in reflection tranquil—You tell her of evenings in the library, playing
chess with the doctor—the fire light—His quiet frustration when you check him—Other
evenings—What dinners now—duck with orange glaze—the doctor's friends—their
daughter in green velvet who does sing to your piano accompaniment—

You write of the employment the doctor finds you—Your easy labor—the tabulating of sales and the adjusting of merchandise—Sweets and fabrics—casks of ginger beer—The young boys who sit out front crunching apples—slink indoors to filch sweets—dirty faces—They roam the streets like loose dogs—You watch them with cold eyes—The aged women who browse the fabrics and ribbons—pins—But want mostly to chat of their ailments—rheumatism—coughing ragged—the husband now dead who had cared only for his plow, his ale—the daughter whose husband is himself a disappointment, his abysmal ventures and failed schemes—The country itself fallen into ruin—To Claire you write, giggling, You should see them! How you would laugh—

The silent hours—when you are free again—How exhausted you are—My nerves—You probably cannot dream your sweet quiet Betty chattering with the public can you?—It does exhaust me—I cannot understand why my sleep is not more sound—

I smell the ocean in the morning. I believe I hear it at night.

Yet I have—I have the most terrible dreams—There's a room—what must be a room—
Yet I see only darkness, as if my eyes are sewn shut—And all around me—men talking—
their voices, muffled—whisky, cigars, baseball—

Other nights—There is a crow who perches upon my desk, and speaks to me in my brother's voice—He calls me Elizabeth, and asks me where our mother has gone—He wonders why he cannot see—He begs me to hold him, for he is so cold—I can hear his teeth chattering although there is only this crow, its beak—In my dreams I know it is his voice, but I don't even remember what he looked like—

Other nights—I—

—O Claire—please—come to me—

Before a mirror—you stand ungowned—your fingers do run from navel to collar—what
smoothness—line of sensation alone—I am—there is something missing—

You are in a carriage—fashionable hat and lace gloves—and the world outside passes—
circling shadows, gulls, the ocean, a gray line—The doctor beside you—his hat upon his
lap—Thank you for this, you say—You are ready, he smiles—Then you are at a house—
white—Claire emerges, behind her the family she stays with—How calm she seems as
she nears you, and now her embrace and you weep against her. When you pull back from
each other—It is her, yet it is not—Her posture confident—Her voice—fuller—O Betty
you haven't changed at all, have you?

You are in the kitchen—the father, his hat removed, shirt sleeves to his elbows rolled—
his arms, brown, weathered—the mother in her bonnet and apron—the quiet way she
offers you a slice of apple pie—a glass of milk—and the child, a boy, Claire's pupil, his
overalls and freckles. The doctor is there, and then he is not—Claire's furtive smile—
Then—alone at the kitchen table—You begin to cry and Claire smiles, her hand squeezes
yours, You look wonderful Betty. Truly recovered.

Claire—I—am I here?—

Her smile perplexed—Where else would you be?

The school—single roomed—a meadow, a woods, a stream.

I know it is . . . it is very small. You shake your head, No, no, Claire—it's beautiful—Just as I imagined it—

You see her at the blackboard. How she lords over them all, even the older boys. How cruel she is with her hickory; the one boy she makes cry, so the others see their strongest broken—

—the room—desks—slate—Recite one of your lessons—where are they in their grammars?—

Her smile—What did you think of John—She corrects herself—Mr. Thompson—He is very fine, isn't he? How you both laugh—Your slightest blush—

How serious she is now—What bitter tone—His wife though—You should see how she treats him—Boy she put on a show for you—that pie—God—She is such a hypocrite—

Do you remember—God—How old were we—Remember that boy who would—He was just a boy though we thought he was—His whiskers, as if a man—Remember the notes he left us—under rocks—Remember the poems—Remember—

No—I—

Remember he asked for us both—He didn't know our names—He just—He called me the tall one—He called you—He—told us to meet him by the stream—Remember how—we giggled—to think of it I still—

—was he—was his name—No—I—

Remember how we dangled from our window—First me—How we landed—we thought too loudly—God how my heart—I was trembling—We thought we would be caught for certain—

You put your hand before you—There is only darkness—Claire please I—Somewhere she is telling you the story—How you hid in the brush near the stream—Watched this young man with—How he did wait, cursing—Somewhere she is—Claire!—I can't—

There is a voice—and there is not—

From the ceiling—What drip of tar—What—fumes—

I don't know any longer—I am there and I am not there—He leads me on walks and the
ocean is—and the ocean is blue and the ocean is gray—the ocean is—What light of fire
—cooking tar—

For so long I thought—Now this light broke through—

What I mean to say is I am always climbing—Fog—Waters—I am always—

Her voices does come—Put on a shawl she says—a coat—the walk is frosted—Mother—

I—

No, I don't think so—I never thought so—Yet she had a home—and children—She had a little girl—Why they all adored her—you see—I went to her home—It was night by then and all the windows—

But she did not—It was not she who opened the door—There was a room—There were
stairs winding and then a hallway of white—There were fires in every room—You could
hear them—How the house did groan—the air did seep—

There is a room—How it does smell—Urine—Age—The dead skin floating—The
shrunk woman before me—Her dead stare—Her white hair—The chair she moves
from only when they lift her—So she may—So they may bathe her—dress her—The
spoons they shove into her mouth—The porridge they wipe from her chin—white hairs
curling—

Her clouded eyes—Claire—Claire—When she moans—yes—perhaps it is your name—

I will cary you from here—You are not so much anymore—Skin hanging—bone—What remains—You won't even struggle—perhaps some whisper—I will bring you to the waters—From the shore I will gather stones—and these will fill you pockets—I will tell you to walk—and if you cannot walk I will tell you to crawl and if you cannot crawl I will bring you myself—The water will carry you out—and the rocks will pull you down—The water—will fill your eyes—your mouth—your nose—It will expand your throat—your breast—

And then this—This will be over—I promise you—

Whatever you are—You will be gone—Dispersed—

The doctor's study—What fire light—fixtures glow—The doctor—his pipe—I have spent my life—the majority—I have followed him—This is how I came to you, you see—I have looked into the mouths of his dead—I believe this is where he reaches—We cannot see his marks for he leaves nothing—What he pries from them, I do not know—But I promise you what he leaves behind is not what he found—Perhaps, I don't know, perhaps there are many—

There is a room—The doctor upon his bed—atop him crouches a man of shadow—
substantial—Now his hands wrap the doctor's throat—Sinks his fingers—deep—meat
bruised—How the doctor adream does—gasp—The shadow's grin—teeth—what dying
groan—

There are many rooms within the doctor's house—The floors extend to the sky and
through the soil—The rooms—Shadows of rooms—The roots, puncture—Within these
rooms, shadows alone—