

O Bird Singing or Whatever

o bird singing or whatever
it is you are doing
to endure this frigid cold

please stay inside that cage
of prickly juniper where

nothing wants to stick its hand
inside to crush you o bird

forgive me for this news I bear
for this grim headline among
all others that I've chosen

to repeat but listen

sixty-four antelope
were hit by a train and

what was once inside them
came spilling out forgive me

for being gruesome I just want
someone to listen and also

while we're at it

forgive me for *forgive me*

for I have been trained
to say *I'm sorry*
when someone tells me

to not say that I am sorry
how many times
has it been confirmed

that my high-pitched voice

cannot be heard not even Alexa
answers until I fake

a somber bass so bird
what I am saying is

the antelope confirm for me
that beauty I mean like

real beauty not like
false eyelashes

cannot be displayed cannot
go on snuffling

the snowy tracks for some secret
scent of earth

cannot expect to go on

not being hit by a train

and of course bird we both know
that I am talking

about you my own small

heart so dismissible and always
punctuated

like a question so forgive me for
being ridiculous? but I am

sometimes moved to tears
by the way you keep

fluttering in my chest I mean

I can't always hear it but some
song is surely spilling out

because your beak keeps on
chattering and chattering

like that

Keepsake

In the mornings my ex-boyfriend would excavate his dreams, long and full of absurd details of only personal significance, his eyes shining in awe at what his brain unearthed when he was not fully in control. He had a nice smile but trouble holding down a job. Even pushing grocery carts back to their corrals became controversial because he wouldn't stop smoking long enough to do it with both hands. After a while I grew impatient when he read aloud to me his novel pretty much about himself but with a vaguely Italian name. Why are my memories of him so mean? Of that time I should recall the wildfire out by the drive-in that exposed the mountain's abandoned shafts. That it was someone's job to fill them before clueless hikers tumbled in. That on the other side of town sometimes cars would crash when fog from the phosphate plant hung too low. That birds taking off from the tailings pond burst into flame when the dried phosphate caught the wind. Did any of this vein into his dreams? I don't know, I wasn't listening. And somehow we didn't seem alarmed. Look, there were distractions. He liked good music and picked up litter. He had a jaw like Ben Affleck. He'd maybe name a cat Aaron Purr, if he had one. Now the drive-in movie screen's been torn down, but you can still see where the fire burned. I sleep so hard when I'm allowed that I recall only dark outlines of my dreams. My son screams for me at night and I stagger in to find his blankie, pull the covers to his chin. Half-asleep, I can see approximately one square inch of the mountain from my bedroom window. A car's headlights flash as it hairpins up the summit. And when I stumble into sleep's opening, I tunnel in, headlamp flickering

on strata that's been mined before. I can't keep track
of the larger mountain, what's collapsed
or is a moment from catching flame. In the slurry
every job I've had that I was shitty at:
wrong drinks brought at intermission, gift wrap cut
an inch too short, the sales pitch that this
special-production Christmas ornament—formed
of polymers made from the sludge of ancient bodies,
then shaped into a fragile dove to hang upon
your tree—was really something special, something
that should become a memory, something
we should all like to keep.

Magi

i

the nativity set is still packed away
in a storage tub I cannot find

and the tree it's almost too big
for the room

what were we thinking

we don't have enough
to fill those empty branches

my brother-in-law in the hospital bed
did not know

who I was and became

suddenly polite like I were just
some stranger visiting

after the biopsy his head was shaved
and swaddled in bandages

for a while he and my sister
thought there would be a different ending

a miraculous surgeon
if they could travel far enough

to find him there were holes

in his sentences backfilled with *I'm scared*

still he had an opinion
about what kind of mobile

I should buy my baby what colors
should spin above her in the dark

I got the one he said and feel
it is a gift now that he is gone
when I look up and all the birds
are tangled together
and they can't navigate either
still the baby points up at them
like a message

ii

I'd thought maybe I had lost it
but now wonder if I ever even bought
a tree topper so now there's no finale
to lift our child up above the branches for
no moment to say *there now it's just right*
now it's done when you look up
the lyrics to Little Drummer Boy
there's a whole lot of
pa rum pum pum pum
not much story there
but I guess that's the point
that just a melody can be a gift
my other brother-in-law
is still alive and has given us
the same lovely present two years
in a row a bluebird night light
a reference to a song he likes
I hope he gives us

another one this year

I would like a whole flock

and on the top of the tree I would like
a star or angel but not if

they are going to be making any
more promises wasn't there

supposed to be a hand that
stayed the knife

before it plunged into the beloved wasn't
there supposed to be

a reprieve what are these angels doing

freaking everyone out and then telling them

not to be afraid telling them
that a hole has opened in the sky

and heaven has poured in

iii

how do you go on
with the sheep etc

after that sort of news

when he fretted in the hospital bed
my sister soothed him

she was expecting

I tried to help *what if I don't*
live to see my girls he said

shush I told him *of course you will*

and hoped at that moment
I was a stranger to him

with some good
tidings from a distant place

not his sister-in-law who would
say anything

to make it better

for my own baby this year
I bought a kaleidoscope

not thinking how she is too little
to hold it up to the light

too little to look through it
and discover all of those beautiful

stars that twist and shift
into other beautiful stars

that don't guide us
anywhere but for a moment

take the place
of the empty sky

Blueprint and Ruin

When we moved with our first newborn into this '70s raised ranch house, I pretended some benevolent ghost could soothe him. Clearly, even someone dead could be a better mother. I paced the wailing baby, envisioning a different place. Busted out some doorways. Imagined the popcorn ceiling scraped. I was convinced under the shag carpeting I could hear some hardwood creak. I was still freaked out about holding something human that felt so thoroughly untame. In high school I liked being afraid, snuck into the old pioneer houses outside of town or the mid-century A-frame languishing on the market, where one night my friend ditched her weed in the half-broke kitchen drawer when the cops showed up and we ran. We had to go back the next day in cold daylight to retrieve it. Well, we didn't have to, but it felt like it then. It was scarier in sunlight when anyone might see us slinking in. Those razed houses are now a rehab center, sprawling outdoor mall—exact location maybe PF Chang's or Lowes? And here I am in Aisle 12 considering cabinet pulls and maybe someone's foot is buried beneath. Once I was a girl who loved a skeleton, who wanted to see a body down to its bones, to see into the next room through the hole punched in the first. To swallow something whole, then spit out its seeds. To answer to no one. Or maybe to answer to a different name, like *Persephone*—that lucky girl was wild because at any moment she could go back home, find her mother waiting there. In flipped houses on tv, ripped out walls always equal added value. But that's not really what I'm after. I'm pissed off my wardrobes

never open up like portals no matter what
new hardware I install. Where's the ghost
who can replace my mother? If only I were
a house. Then wreck me—whosoever, either
architect or vandal—bust these useless walls
and let in the ragged morning light.

Dear Highways of Our Nation, I Am Sorry

I did not stop at all of your points of interest. I am sure they were very interesting. Kind regards. I'm sorry I found your truck stop t-shirts so stupid I had to get one. Your airbrushed cougars. Thanks again. I'm sorry I never found the right sign-off for my postcards. With best wishes. Warmly. The coal cars chugging parallel and then divergent from your side: somewhere a dark seam is being dismantled and I just watched them haul it in, haul it in. Fondly. Talk soon. I might complain that the interstates lack imagination, but they were built when we imagined we'd have to evacuate our nuclear ruins. Cheers. Ciao. I've lost track by now of how many gas tanks I've burned right through. Dear highways of our nation, I'm sorry I did not stop by the cornfields to watch the solstice pour its light through those half-buried Buicks arranged to mimic Stonehenge. I'm sorry I drove through your rust-belt cities just to see the fossilized factories. Staged my bleak photos to leave out all the people. Never spread a blanket on your shoulder or pulled it off and shook it clean. Sincerely. How have I come so far yet missed your slow-leaking tanks of drifting mermaids? I want my heart uncomplicated by their beauty. For that I'd pay and pay. Their hair made interesting in water. My hand held against the webbing glass. Nothing funny about it. How long can they keep on swimming. Respectfully. Yours truly. So long.

Orchestra Playing as the Ship Goes Down

It's been diagrammed: First, the ship's stern rose into the air. Then the liner broke in two and slipped beneath the water. My college friend saw the movie thirteen times and belted out the love theme while we waited in lines for crowded bars. Over an iceberg she could weep after enough tequila. My mom had the book from 1955, *A Night to Remember*, which was also the slogan for my senior prom, where my minidress and combat boots revealed our differing expectations for my social life. In the movie, the heroine slips below decks and then climbs back up again still in her elaborate, waterlogged dress. My mom's favorite part was when the orchestra assembled at the grand staircase's top to keep the first-class passengers calm. Their supposed final song: her favorite hymn. The book highlighted the nobler instincts of those aboard. A mother climbs in bed beside her children and reads to them, resigned. Yet some waiting below the decks expected to be saved. My mother, in the story my dad has told, just turned her face to the side and died. At the hospital, they'd warned my dad the odds to resuscitate were slim and at eighty pounds she would be a shipwreck even if she did: broken sternum and splintered ribs and no one left at helm. Still I'm grateful he said go ahead. Some parts of this story I didn't hear or I've forgotten and I won't ask again. The orchestra was really playing. Just a different song, a waltz that when heard across the water from the distance of a lifeboat could be mistaken for a hymn.