

lion

Shagged-gold, at rest the great haunches
as if axled, fur sleeked like a butter rug.
In the Serengeti sun, the male's harem

like a solar system, each lady kept
exclusive, her seasonal heat for him alone,
estrous belly pressed to the ground,

then the male's riding her musculature—
throughout evolution the cat's barbed penis
nicking his breached mate as he dismounts.

See the deliberate walk, cool as a criminal,
the multi-jointed forepaws placed consciously
even by the usurped king, his eye teeth blacked,

his tail rotted off, tired wag of a bloody stump
as he finally falls dying, the crucified face bedded
in its wheel of hair, the tawny miscegenated eyes

binocular in breadth. Shark in the long grasses.
Shark in the long grass. Smell everywhere, the gazelle
with its small-headed splendor gracing the plains

is ambushed, devoured, its horned bone rack
souvenired, the murderer's ripping muzzle crimsoned.
In the despot's sons' palace of pure gold

the three in the iron cage lazing like statues.
When the American unlocks the hinged door
our shackled hearts contract. Unhooded and naked

we are pushed into their presence,
and for a shining moment the animals study us,
these fabulous aliens.

Here in a desert captivity
snatched from the baobab's sour fruit,
their swagged bellies shifted, broken, and resignedly

the ancient drive rose up only in one—
its head wreathed beyond sorrow
as it slouched out of the habitual darkness,

the permanent rictus of its terrible mouth
pain-struck. The thing came toward me
with its ruined light, and I saw affliction in it.

Dream of mastery. Dream of being wholly consumed,
freed. I am the lion and the lion is me.
Then the American pulls us out.

learning the tones

Vietnamese has six tones . . . diacritical marks
used on certain vowels indicate their particular quality.

[ngang]

It's unmarked—neither high
nor low, but trust me

when I tell you to sing it,
to think of the young girl

next door, the soft oval
of her unfinished face.

It's what just skims the earth.
Hope. Flower. Afternoon. Ghost.

[sác]

Like one side of a hill with you
at the foot. From here everything rises—

the worn path, the moon
with its long bright ears.

Imagine water traveling back up
into the sky, the sound of it

climbing like a question. *Má?*
Who would I be if I had stayed?

[huyèn]

Then the descent, the hill's
other side. Consider Jill

tumbling after, consider
a week, a room, pants—

things which ground, give shape,
meaning. How like rain

even the sound of the word sad
slides down the face.

[hỏi]

Listen carefully: what goes down
must come up. This is the sound

of the grave, of inexact boundaries
& existences. This is the sound

of transplantation, how the young rice
is carried from field to field.

This is the most difficult sound of all.
This is the sound of begging.

[ngã]

Then literally to fall, as in
off a white horse, or the way

I fell out of the sky
with nothing

& found my whole life—
the ocean haunting as language.

How I was born & born again.
Figuratively to be lost & to recover.

[nặ̣ng]

Imagine how we might speak
in a world without light—each word

glottal & plugged, articulated
only in the throat. In reality

beautiful things also come from below—
rice seedlings, music, wine,

& yet we suffer. Even now somewhere
someone is digging a room in the dirt.

Galilee

All night the blood only
in our feet and heads, supine
the body motioning like an hourglass.

All night at dinner the wine
upright on the table;
the one of us without hair

known for what he was, the salt in our teeth
spindrift. All night the action
at 25°, the water twelve meters,

then all night Philip and his story
of destruction in a Category 4—the helicopter
coming loose in cargo, sailing

through the hull. Nine times out of ten
what sinks a ship is improper storage—
all night the grain audibly shifting in the hold.

All night three below deck
a black-and-white silent film
documenting an Edwardian rigger

as she rounded the Horn.
All night between intratitles
the sailor's unshaven face, his agony

as something muscles him overboard.
All night thoughts of salvation, entreaty,
as all night the blue growlers bash the stern,

the impact desolating—*ora pro nobis peccatoribus!*
All night the millennial ice, all night the dread,
all night the saving eminence that won't wake up
and the darker eminence that will.