

Afterbirth Abecedarian

After I shoved him into the scrubbed world
before the split his leaving rent was laced,
cicatrix blooming a beaded frown, they lay the body

dead center on mine, writhing its red
evidence on my breasts, unleashing its
fury of molecules. The face

gripping onto its first feeling, a protest,
horrible misunderstanding.
I held him, spent, and knew then there are no truths,

just lungs that labor to form a breath, each one
knocking into the next, until
long trains of them

move a body along, which seems to
need explaining.
Oh, sweetness—I've looked for you so long. Body of my body, my

play at mattering. I swelled at his sight, his
querulous pout, the slick
reason. He

shunned my hopeful pink
tits, as he would keep doing,
unleashing the elegy he'd brought from such

vacancy inside me.

What did we hope to make alive here, among these
xerophytes, this crumbling? At night he cries,

yearns for the wordless to fill him, but I have
zeroes for eyes, a drawing of a heart for a heart.

In the Black Forest

Even the birds, stained black by the thumb
of morning. If not love, then at least a thing

that is not love's undoing, that is not
a lung with nothing to do. When I dream

of loving another man it is only
a muscle remembering the joy

of work. Recall our middle
fingers' calluses, toughed up

from the gripping of pens. I thought mine
would keep crusting, that I'd die with a claw

like a fruit-heavy crone, open in mid-temptation—
instead there is only bone and over it

nothing to note. Not all sentences end
in a way that sounds like knowing anything.

I have this son who tumbled out
of a Boy Scouts manual, a Little Rascal

inked to pink starring in an opera
of dirt—but he's afraid

of mean faces, stepmothers and queens
green with memories of milk skin murmurs

through lace at the nape.
It's okay, I say, they'll end up alone

dancing to death in red-hot shoes.
One day it is your finger on the spindle,

the next you are cursing the bobbin,
giving it two jobs to do. Some weeks

no one says my first name, no one's
tongue flicks the last letter out.

Tell me what sounds I look like,
what your lips do upon remembering

me, how I was last century, when I was only
practicing, when I changed the locks

because I thought there were more keys to come.

Portrait of the Mother: 1985

First there was the word and the word was *okay*.

Okay the apartment's rented floor, new child
laid over eyelashes and skin's salt on shag.

Okay the sleeplessness, *okay* the mash-mouthed hunger
and greed, crust of milk and blood,
pink lips peeling cooed chimes. *Okay, okay*

old house on dirt acre *okay*. Next child fat and broken,
okay the strong arms to pull his chunk behind. *Okay* Disneyland
every decade, *okay* man his job his money his dinner on-time

England a ghost ship on a map accent fading *okay*,
R's emerging, *okay* the desert's branding
the palimpsest of skin. The *okay* coupon shoebox,

chicken dragged through saltines/hamburger meat in milk,
cable in the bedroom, community college class at night that once
where is the dinner *okay*, him at church a deacon of backslaps,

surprise child who does not rest but foghorns through the night as if always
on the edge of the shore's jagged crotch though this place is waterless,
aspirational book list on the fridge, Ephesians 5:22,

broom handle's yellow paint flaking leaving a scattered golden trail,
Piggly Wiggly cart's broken wheel unlatching its throat to warble out
its weary song of lamentation, I Can't Get No Satisfaction

Muzaked from above over cans of meat and soup with noodles spun
into letters you will offer your children with both hands saying
take it, okay, this is all there is, is all that is left.