

DOUBLE THE DIGITS

we called the game Jenny made up driving
back roads through West Virginia

at twice the posted speed. Foot on
the gas, foot on the brake, she'd take

a 25-mile-an-hour curve at 50, triumphant
until something thudded under the hood,

then hissed as we drifted to the berm;
engine block cracked, her dad's Peugeot

left for the wrecker, sold for scrap.
She never could tell him how girls,

16 and 18, could get so bent on speed
they'd ignore an oil light's warning.

When my dad's Plymouth Fury hit 78,
weightless, on a crested curve of Route 136

and nearly flew into the grill
of a soda delivery truck, we swerved

toward a pole on Donna's side, then
were gone before the guy hit his horn.

We never said it, but close calls
like that made us see state troopers

on front porches, hats in hand, moments
before our mothers open the door. Yet

we played that game every chance
we got until college separated us

from our fathers' cars. Jenny divorced,
then married a canoe guide up north.

Because Donna married a black man,
she can't set foot on her home farm.

And now, I can barely stay in the lines,
so I keep going back, as if those times,

half a life ago, could explain why some women
get driven by a dumb desire for flight.

LANDSCAPE WITH DESIRE

Next month maples along this lake will rage
orange and scarlet. Firs we barely discern
on that far shore will state their dark shapes,
so we are torn between taking it all in
from the porch and taking a swim. At night
we pull on sweatshirts, lie down on the dock,
heads nestled in life preservers, and wait
for meteors to streak the August sky
like runs in the blackest stocking against
the whitest thigh. With each plummeting light,
our voices rise like love cries, more urgent
and louder than any solitary loon or coyote
calling to its mate. Only we conflate
longing and loss like this; only we wait.

BAT BOY, BREAK A LEG

The student with two studs in his nose
and a dragon tattoo crawling from his collar,
 who seems always ready to swoon
 from bliss or despair, now flits
at my office door. I will look at his poem
drawn onto a music score and find nothing
 to say about chance or HIV.
 Only later I'll think to tell him
the night before I left home, I slept
sadly in our old house until a wing
 touched my cheek, tenderly as a breeze.
 I woke to black fluttering at my feet,
and a mind fresh from the other side
said don't turn on the light, don't
 wake the man, don't scream or speak.
 Go back to sleep. The next morning
I remembered that people upstate
whack them with tennis rackets, that
 the Chinese character for good luck
 resembles the character for bat—
both so unsettling and erratic—
but it's bad luck to say good luck
 in China, as on stage where they say
 Break a leg, so delicate bats
must be woven into silk brocade
and glazed onto porcelain plates.
 Next morning, I found a big-eared mouse
 with leather folded over his shoulders
hanging from claws stuck in a screen.
All day, my work made me forget, but
 then I'd remember, passing the window
 where he slept, shaded under the eaves.

He was fine. I was fine. Then at dusk,
he was gone, suddenly. Pale boy dressed in black,
 maybe the best that can be said for any of us is that
 once we were angelic enough to sleep with strangers.
He touched my cheek. I opened the screen.
He flew in his time. We did no harm.

WILD

He once waited hours alone in the Arctic
for a musk ox to forget his presence, drop
its split helmet of horn and lie down onto stone

and sleep. *The secret is never to move*, he told me
as we watched a flock of wild turkeys cluck softly
into view, their dark, iridescent necks trembling.

When he rested his head against my stomach
and heard my blood rush like a bird's, how could
he think my heart would hush if he stayed there?

Now open your chest, the yoga teacher says,
breathe deep, find your heart, feel it beat.
I have yet to find my heart, though I try each week.

Then she says, *tell your heart to slow down.*
Tell it to rest. Once I grew so still against
the man's chest, I almost slept.

Another time he reached across a table,
grazed my hand—tracing veins, touching knuckles
and nails—until my fingers slowly opened.

The most beautiful thing he had seen in the Arctic
was a ring of stones hunters arranged
on the beach thousands of years ago

to hold fire. How far we will go to find
wild things. Some days I can't keep
my shoulders from curling forward

or trust my own bones to hold up my flesh.
People once lived inside the bleached ribs
of whales draped with animal skins.

I love to imagine these things, but beyond words
is a silence that quiets wild creatures: one
turkey turned, looked at us, and did not run.

ON AN OREGON MOUNTAIN I REMEMBER THE HEBREW MYSTICS

The shine on these long pine needles reminds me
of driving one brilliant morning last winter

when rows of corn stubble, wet or glazed with ice,
glowed like golden text in the mud. The mystics said,

If you focus hard enough on the power of words,
you will begin to see light spark inside letters.

When I arrived at Lebanon Valley, the sons and daughters
of Pennsylvania farmers told me they find Walt and Emily

both kind of strange. One said she just wished poets
weren't so alone and unhappy seeming. I had to agree.

But that evening, reading for them, I described the field
of luminous letters just outside their town. Granted,

a man who'd offered to scrape the frost
from my windshield tried to kiss me awkwardly

in the parking lot. I drove home shaken, the shimmer
knocked off the day, but the mystics said,

If joy comes when two bodies touch, how much greater
the joy of bringing many letters together!

Trying to write on this mountain, I stop to gaze
at sun flashing on a spider's thread, a blade of grass,

my own tanned skin. Words cannot ascend to heaven
if they are not driven by desire, the mystics said,

and with all of our longing for fire and light,
we grasp after stubble and mud.

GARLIC

Whenever there is garlic, there is Annelise
who taught me to whack it with the flat side
of a soup can or cleaver. You'll mince or press
later, she said, so what does it matter?

She learned that trick from cooking shows the years
she was married to a dean. How could she know
how to throw dinner parties, growing up behind
a deli after the war? So she watched TV.

The summer I was 16, learning to drive,
she learned to swim, enduring the dean's divorce.
They'd met in the '50s, literature students
at Washington Square. The Village was not as fun

in those days as you'd think, she said, mostly unsafe.
M. L. Rosenthal hit on her after class, harmless enough
with his club foot and just then unable to guess
where he'd left his car.

Oh, think of the time a person can waste
all her life, she said, trying to peel off
impossible paper skins when you can just
strike the thing with whatever's at hand.