

Oak Leaf

Holding an oak leaf over the campfire
in Muir Woods, I see its limits. A crude veil
of tendrils and veins stretches toward bright edges.

Along the surface a spider's misty circuit
crosses what already meets. Below, the shadows
of my fingers grow stout and narrow in turn.

I think they are my father's fingers:
a coarser nature, a worried popping of the joints.
Never still, his sculptor's tendency

to put every substance into form.
Wire sculptures he names *Spirit* and *Cosmic Fire*.
Each a chaotic relic of the path thought takes.

Its concave mending in lines never sure
of destination. A difficult mesh woven
into tunneling arms of copper and brass.

My art might amount to this: the meaning
inherited. My vision whittled from his, repeating
the same blind passage from stem to split light

in the captive shell. It's a Monday in August.
I can smell the ocean seven miles southwest.
My back itches from cold. My pant legs burn

against my knees. I'm thirty and worry
I'm too late for something. I surrender
the woods, the red sticks flaking coals

in the fire, and the universe of the leaf
where black spots open to pinholes of orange light.

The Handless Maiden

To emerge from the woods
with my arms full of kindling sticks.

To enter your sight as one red patch lit
by a green world. To let you keep your hands
from me, and not seek out a pine needle

poking from my braid. A hazardous world
has changed me. And it's just this one chore:

to gather for our fire. Newspaper shreds
in a rock pit crackle not with flame, but wind.
Your hatchet cleaves a log to splinter.

To unfold the hands that make a child's fists,
grown in that dark wood. To see you seeing me

in this terror of return. I bring a black feather
and no other worldly prize. My maiden touch
is your rough cheek. I have waded through nights
to be remembered by that warmth.

Vultures

September's an encumbrance of wings
and silver points of beaks below restless eyes,
which find me in the yellow grass.

Those connoisseurs of death know
to anticipate demise as a punctual process.
My mouth draws a blank, lips caught
on the brink, caught with all the body tells
and no way to spill.

Late-afternoon clouds continue northward
on edges of orange. Backyard noises
intrude, habitual to my ears:
rabbits tongue their water spigot,
my horse rubs her neck on a fence post.

The orbiter's circle tightens. Do not blink.
Do not scratch the bite. Do not feel an ant
making haste across your arm.

Mind continues to register complaint
from its stupor of stone. Those black kites
gather breath-slip and will touch last
all the touching my skin knows.

A Bird in Hand

I've memorized its heart pounding into my thumb.
Breath buoys out. My fingers know how to kill,
closing on the bird's slippery head.

I don't remember. Was it that beak bit my chin?
Was it a claw cut my wrist? I blow feathers
away from its chest, smelling pennies and rain.

Skin like granite, a real white-blue, flecked
by knots of new growth. I found my need,
cold in cupped palms, just the way I was taught.

I return to account for whose neck falls around
backwards. Eyes that go cataract bring clouds.

That fat pearl with wings looks like water disappearing in me.