

## *The Difficult Music*

I started to write a song about you, then I decided, *No*.  
I've been trying to write about violence  
for so long. (You were my mother; I love you more  
dead. Not a day goes by when I'm not turning someone  
into you.) A week of traffic jams and fog  
filtered through glass, the country crumbling  
in my sleep; old men in plaid jackets on the corner  
drinking quart bottles of Old Milwaukee; the color black  
again and again.

My first summer in Boston  
a bum glanced up from tapping at the pavement with a hammer  
to whisper *Nigger*, laughing, when I walked by.  
I'd passed the age of consent, I suppose;  
my body was never clean again. In Buffalo, a billboard  
said, "In a dream you saw a way to survive and you woke up  
happy," justice talking to the sidewalk on Main Street;  
I thought it was talking to me, but it was just  
art. (I've wronged too many mornings hallucinating  
your voice, too drunk with sleep to understand  
the words.)

Some afternoons  
I can see through a history of heart attacks in two-room  
tenement apartments, writing your silted name  
on snow with which the lake effect shrouds  
a half-abandoned rust belt city. (I've compared you  
to snow's unlikely predicates, the moon's  
faceless occupation. Some drift  
always takes your place.) I was just  
scribbling again. *Take it from me*, my stereo claims, *some day*

*we'll all be free.* If anyone should ever write that song.  
The finely sifted light falls down.

## *The New World*

*This is the paradise of emptiness*, I said,  
and journeyed into faithless terra incognita,  
the muscles of his stomach on display  
when he wipes his face with his shirt.  
Or is that the charted territory,  
specular fiction foreign as luxury? The trade  
winds blow desultorily in this sargasso, the cargoes  
of surplus value rot: salt and sable and silver,  
slaves thrown overboard to reach the new world.  
Today I ply the unassuming artifice  
of streets and residences, walls  
against a wilderness that surmounts the bricks.  
His stomach, peaks of nipples  
briefly glimpsed before the cotton field unfolds,  
is the romantic, the failure of imagination.  
The given jungle overwhelms recent settlement  
after the slavers' raids; ships sink  
in sight of shore. The labors of the possible  
yield strict nourishment from harsh clay,  
surrounded by the semiotic underworld  
of palms and discontent, the rustled sibilance  
of babbled and luxuriant mockery: caught up  
in that extravagance, I am becoming  
him, blank-eyed temptation, my jungle.  
The cannibals descending on the cultivated fields  
with spears, the repetitions of the unforeseen catastrophe:  
that boy won't comprehend these lines. Who underwrites  
his blond and vacant beauty, hatted for the hunt?  
Setting out upon the voyage for the new, one comes upon

the well-mapped coast, Atlantis dripping in noon light  
after the flood, and orichalcum instead of gold.  
I have already misplaced his name:  
there is no new world.

## *Slaves*

These are the years of the empty hands. And what were those just past, swift with the flash of alloyed hulls but carrying no cargo? Outside our lives, my mythical America, dingy rollers fringed with soot deposit cracked syringes and used condoms on beaches tinted gray by previous waves, but when an hour waits just for a moment, everything begins again. All of it is yours, the longed-for mundane: men falling from a cloud-filled sky like flakes of snow onto the ocean, your mother immersed in ordinary misery and burning breakfast, still alive in the small tenement kitchen. You understand I use the second person only as a marker: beyond these sheltered bays are monsters, and tarnished treasures of lost galleons it's death to bring to light. The ships put out and they sink; before the final mast descends, the shadow of a single sailor is burned across the sun, then wrapped in strands of cirrus, his European skin a gift to the black and unknown ocean floor. Of the slaves thrown overboard to save the ship, no words remain. What memorials the public beach becomes in late October, scattered with Puerto Rican families on muddied sand still lighter than a black man's pound of flesh: it abrades my skin. I can't touch that perfected picture of myself, no white wave will wash either hand clean. There is a wind riding in on the tainted waves, and what it cannot make whole it destroys. You would say that all along I chose wrong, antonyms of my own face lined up like buoys, but there is another shore

on the far side of that wind. Everything is there,  
outside my unhealed history, outside my fears. I  
can see it now, and every third or fourth wave is clear.

## *Paradise*

I don't know the names of flowers, or the various songs of birds, what to call the water falling from the sky all week, sleet or hail, the histories of high achievement while my great-grandparents were hidden among the cotton, slaves. (I know what to call asphalt slick with rain, but not the parts of that plant that shredded their fingers.) *Thou bringest home all things day scattered*, but let the lost, this once, bury the lost. So much stolen that was free for the asking. . . . Let the mutilated days sort out their own. Swallow, swallow, when shall I be like the swallow, singing the rape of my voice, but singing past the rape, something my own to sing? And not to live by white men's myths (not to reject those too-clear eyes, but not to long for them, or see through their blue distances all colors but my own), or drown in that exhaustion of hyacinth and narcissus mown down. I don't know names of flowers, though I can mimic those who do, the open secret of a man who doesn't look like me, who looks like me if I could speak my name, if I could stop the repetitions of oppressive beauties not my own. (I don't trust beauty anymore, when will I stop believing it?) Skylark, I don't know if you can find that paradise, or lead me to the blackened ruins of my song.