

A DOZEN SONS

Say you have a dozen sons.
In the nocturnal forest
a dozen animals sniff
a dozen lilies hammered shut
for the night like flat
little bells like smells
to go in perfume bottles.
There is no moral to this story.
When a dozen boys run
through the night trees
they disappear between branches.
One of the boys is mine.
One of the boys is yours.
A brook crooks its way
through the dead trees
slicked with moss and fungi
pointing its finger to the east
where the sun will rise
a loose head on a string
or on a pike. One boy holds
a puppet and one boy holds
another boy's hand.
Why are my hands so sweaty?
asks a third boy. Four boys hold
down the corners
of the forest which they snap
like a sheet sending pinecones
into the air like hailstones.
One hides in a hollow log
one hides in a small cave
and the twelfth boy turns
into a lily turns into an animal
turns into a dozen pine trees
turns and vanishes in the night
ringed with a dozen stars

that are not stars that are
loose sparks.
Wouldn't you like to hold them?
These twilight sons
collecting in the forest.

NIGHT ELEGY

What was the night like when you slipped
a noose around your neck and leapt?
Did mosquitos hover in the fog?
Or was it clear, only the crickets' dirge,
a faint breeze on your cheeks?
Did you find Cassiopeia first,
trace her snapped spine with your pointer finger?

And your neighbor, when he found you,
hanged outside, as the sun rose
greedy-fisted over the bay—what did he see?
Did you waver? Did you sway?

Remember the way you demanded sex
and I gave it? The way you liked
to watch yourself in a mirror.
Who was the double you saw there?

When you fucked someone else
in the bathroom at a wedding,
I dropped a beer bottle in shock
and the glass cut a bridesmaid's
bare foot wide open.

The fighting, small slaps and pinches,
playful at first, became more pointed,
until one day you threatened to kill me.
You held me, firm, against a wall,
left a handprint bruise. Your spit
wet on my face. Your eyes
wild animals. Ruinous. Ruinous.

Once, I rode on the back of your bicycle,
shoeless, as you pedaled down busy city streets,
faster and faster. I clung to your pound dog chest,
and you screamed my name into the wind

and it hung there like a fading tattoo,
and it hung there, like you.

THE SWEATING SICKNESS

And so, the leaf of morning, pressed between
the window and the screen, the wild leaf
of autumn, as autumn itself, pressed between
panting summer and wet faced winter,
whose mascara runs in rivulets down wind-
pinked cheeks. And the lore of a bewitched
day, bewildered, as some lady, maiden,
peasant, throat slit, tied to a pyre
and crackling. *The sun rose, slit-throated,*
I once mis-translated from French,
when really it was *The sun rose*
over the trenches. Where is the rosy-fingered
sun? Busy with Odysseus, busy in
antiquity, on an agéd vase. Imagine
Calais, sweating out a summer fever,
the sweating sickness. Imagine Anne Boleyn,
sweating in a country palace, bodice
loosed, her virginity moldering away
as she waits and sweats and waits
and fevers, plague banner hung above
the fine wooden door, to warn off,
to ward off. Hang a banner above
your door, hang a flag, hang a sign,
as in the old days, when illness was
communal, when illness was realized
as communal. *I'm sorry my project*
is late, writes my student. *Covid has*
hit my house. Outside, the wind
hits the window, hits the brick
facing of the wall, hits the plain
wooden bannerless door. I hung
no banner when I coughed
through the night, when I fevered,
when my lungs inflamed and pussied,
when I checked and checked

and checked the pulse oximeter
and watched my oxygen levels waver,
waver. I'm no werewolf, and if I was
I'd work to hunt the devil,
to chase him, weaving, through
the streetlamps planted along the river trail.
I'd bite his tail and wail. No, I'm
no wolf, no witch, no lady waiting,
one hand on enchanted wood.
And if you place a witch bottle
above a fire until it bursts, I will not
howl and burn, as I burned, I will not
splinter into a thousand shards
of glass and rusted metal,
as a hex whispered in the night,
as a protective object buried
upside down before a threshold.
Inside, a woman lies gasping
cold fingered and splintered with fever.

SPECTER

What specter? This baby's love?
An extinct animal? Keats's ghastly
prismatic ghost-hand reaching
beyond the grave? My stepmother's
grandmother, now blind, head throbbing
as she labors to breathe, mouths
commands to a voice recognition software.
She just wants to see her family,
and not through glass,
and maybe not ever again.

A nurse spoon feeds her supper,
helps her to the bathroom,
tries to practice kindness through
her mask and plastic visor,
through her taped-on gown and gloves.
What specter? What eidolon?
What phantom? At night we watch
an actress dressed up as a princess
dressed up as Christine singing
"All I Ask of You" to her ghoulish
menacing husband who hates her.
She'll be a ghost in the next season,
when her car phantoms into the wall
of a Parisian tunnel in the spectral night.

We watch the fog sink in the graveyard
behind our house. In October
I walk through the back part
where the oldest graves are,
along the river, crying and snapping
morbid pictures of all the stones
that read *Baby, Baby, Our Beloved Babies*,

*Mother & Baby, Our Beloved Infant Daughter,
Our Beloved Infant Son.* How many graves
are from 1919, 1920, the last pandemic?

I weep on a stone bench, go home
and carve pumpkins into glowing skulls
with my children who ooh and ahhh
over their luminescence. There,
in the corner of mine eye, a ghost
go-eth, curly-haired, noose around
his neck, shaking his fist in my direction,
whispering *Dumb bitch*. In November
the deaths top a quarter of a million.
In December we lose and lose.

I run through the graveyard. What loose
pebbles slide beneath my athletic shoes?
What pointed leafless boughs snag
the bitter wind? What ghost? What specter?
What phantom? What fog? What
creeping miasma, come to carry
us Lethe-wards, come to sink and sink?