

MUSIC AT AN EXHUMATION

This spring they dug up Pablo Neruda to see if he was poisoned.
A guitar, a violin, played beside the grave overlooking the sea,
though what good is a grave that overlooks the sea. Still,
the desert blooms a thousand golds and yellows, summoning
every possible memory. Still, the moth like a dusty ghost
tries to unbutton the window at night. And I can tell you
on the same night in the east Antares burns like a rose that has seen hell.
It is the night of my fifty-ninth birthday, the resinous scent
from sweet acacias drifts the cool dark, and I am asking what happened.
What happened to the Bulgarian who gave me ten dollars once
when I was young and desperate for bus fare home. What happened
to Mrs. Biggs in the fourth grade who'd warn me before she read
the sad part of a story. What happened to the first boy who kissed me.
What happened to my father. It is a time of wonder—
Neruda has flown to Santiago. They have X-rayed his body
and studied the images. A wine jug hung from a tree. The sacra's
eaten face. What happened to Kathleen—the girl I discussed my first
kiss with, the girl I smoked my first dope with and the girl who called
years later when her marriage was unraveling but by then I was bound by
my own misery and could help no one. What happened to
my friend "South Carolina" who I met in jail. What happened to everyone?
All day the wind has blown and I'm tired of it. It blew
a dead bird onto my patio. A flicker. One day you're driving
home from work and it comes to you, you haven't seen that cashier
with the thick spectacles at the supermarket in a while. Maybe he

got fired. Maybe he got a better job than ringing up
canned goods all day long. Me? I'm just trying get a dead bird
up with a shovel and then I don't know where to carry him. Tonight,
the air is heavy with pollen. Everything swollen with resurrection.
The sad part of the story when I was nine was the part where
the dog died and since I already knew the story I told Mrs. Biggs
it was OK and braced myself. Still, I covered my ears until
she looked up and nodded. Still, I remember the name of the dog
was Jack, that they buried him in the prairie and later
moved away. Some things kill you every time. When you look up
it is spring again and some tough Camaro, woofers booming
from the trunk, vibrates in your breastbone with its stronger heartbeat.
There are no lights along the road until the city limits. I listen
as the throb goes soft with distance and the desert's flat quiet again.
It is late; nothing can happen now. No one ever dreams
they will be fifty-nine, that spring has come fifty-nine times
and fifty-nine blossoms in the acacia, sweet as laundered sheets,
tannic as tobacco, perfume the blind air where they have lost track.
It was just last week the Venezuelan government announced
plans to exhume Hugo Chávez to see if he'd been deliberately
infected with cancer. This same man who had them bring up
the bones of Simón Bolívar so he could converse with them.
Is the whole of South America crazy? Is it crazier than North America
where no one mentions death except those who don't believe in it,
the body a mere burden to be discarded, gently, in the brush of the arroyo

by someone with a shovel—is it crazier than heaven? What happened to the crazy kid from the halfway house who kept sending me his paintings because I'd been nice to him when I taught night school English.

They were a gibberish of color on cheap canvas board. Most of them looked like they were on fire though sometimes there were pencil figures with round heads and sometimes buildings with windows behind the paint. I kept them in the closet mainly as evidence for I was positive he was going to murder me. But after five years the paintings stopped coming, and he has let me live at least to fifty-nine which somehow seems as ancient to me as it did when I was sixteen. Night still smells of creosote. The first stars smart from the blue blackness. Say

the painter of those paintings came back and murdered me, don't come back years later and raise me from the ground to prove it. There comes a time when the body no longer desires to be seen, it is done being, unrecognizable even to itself had it an eye left. It's purpose was always beauty, not justice. All that is left of Neruda is bone.

Doctors extract some marrow and send it to North Carolina for tests. I have died fifty-nine times of spring. I have fifty-nine times rehearsed myself as ghost. I have been a figure drawn in pencil behind the flames. What happened to me? What happened to the night that drove past fields of blind sugar beets, past the electric castle of the power station, into the desert, did it ever stop? What happened to Edgar Poe? I once climbed over the churchyard's iron fence to leave a bud on his grave, and also

a tube of lipstick, deep cerise, should he rise some evening and haunt
the misty docks of Baltimore with the need to feel desire, with
the need for a mouth. In truth, we die of nothing else. In truth
we die the moment we love. In truth, you kill me with your face.
Not so long ago, the Italians opened Petrarch's tomb to take his skull
and reconstruct his face but they found in it a man's body
and the shattered skull of a woman. Someone had stolen the left arm.
Perhaps his eyes were deep set and dark as spring night,
miro pensoso le crudeli stelle, che m'anno facto di sensibil terra—
I gaze pensively at cruel stars that have created me of sentient earth.
This night smelling of incense and iron, blind with thought. This *not*.
Neruda is not Neruda. The night drags its violet hair. Your face is not
your face. Think of the man who stole Petrarch's head, was he not
like us—raising an empty lantern as if what was once there
still flamed. It is spring. The orange moon arrives like a painting.
Why did you die? Why did you die and leave me shapeless
with fifty-nine holes, with fifty-nine letters in the alphabet. And Pablo Neruda
poisoned. Pablo, I knew that crazy kid was in love with me
and I could not stop it. I could not stop my body from appearing
in his mind. From lighting fifty-nine fires. *Miro pensoso le crudeli stelle . . .*
In his last painting I thought I saw a window far in the orange yellow,
the flames shaped like golden hysterical women, the soft green-hackled
sprites of space, and understood why he might pour gasoline
around an empty house one night and light a match, why when
the cops came he might still be standing outside with his gas can

watching form eat form. It was felony transcendence. That far gold window
extinguished in the back of the closet behind the sad-sleeved coat I never wore.
These nights, half-cool, I stand outside the house—as if I’m waiting
but for what I couldn’t say. When they dug up Allende, two springs ago,
they examined the hole left by the AK47 he’d held under his chin
and confirmed the cause of death was suicide. All the arms in the earth,
all the teeth, hips, ears and knees in the earth, yield us nothing. The body
has told us all it knows which first and last is separation. Between
hunger, heat, habit, heavenly touch, helplessness, beauty and
more beauty, and more hurt—like music at an exhumation
it is the difference between a silence, and a violin, and then a silence.
Still, the desert blooms a thousand golds and yellows which are steeped in night
and exude memory. Still, the ashy moth falls open to the same page with
its mysterious watermark. And spring rises from the underworld alone
and dies of nothing.