

wide-shining

kiran millwood hargrave

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For my grandparents

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Wishing Well

To see me in the day,
come from the west.

Keep the sun at your back,
follow the hill's wide fold

to the final crease,
where the winds

turn ventriloquist
and I crouch,

the knit-and-purl
dropped stitches

of my stones
crumbling,

my mouth swilling
a year's worth of rain.

Lean in, show me
the moon of your face,

then drop the coin,
wait for the echo –

now, child, throw down
your dreams.

Pasiphaë I

in which Pasiphaë starts her story

My son lies split in the crouching dark of a maze.
His killer follows thread into light,
falls into the arms of my daughter –
there, you already know the ending.
But here's the start.

My mother was sea-bound, and my father
paced the sky, watching her as she teased,
stretching herself out to warm under his orb,
letting his enemy and opposite, the moon,
draw her close.

One day, he dropped like a stone,
she rose to him like a bubble,
and they riddled each other out
in a pool of steam among
the scent of frying fish.

To a god, sex is sport and family is sacred.
Dad took this to his scorching heart,
loving each of my aunties in turn,
pitting them with children –
a generation of star-fishes.

In Mum's belly I grew fire-hot and ocean-calm,
was born wide-shining and something in
between;
my toes trailed in water,
my face tipped up to the sun.

What was left to me was middle ground,
so I made the earth my home,
spent days with my father,
the nights with my mother,
passed love between them like a cup.

I found a forest to walk in,
and a riverbank where I'd lie,
watching the years swell and drop,
watching my stars turn through
the doming sky.

Tiberius

I was sent from the earth a king
and came back a fish.
I grew from grit and salt, blind as a pearl,
my gills tainted with bile
I gleaned from anemones,
and azure slugs bound to rock.
Through pure will I grew teeth
from my mouth and from my belly,
teeth that I dragged across
the ocean bed to spear crabs clean through.

When I fed, I fed well,
on the soft hearts of snails eked
from their shells and on
the sweetmeats of urchins.
I raised myself beautiful,
captured greens from the prisms of water
and purples from the poison of snakes,
sucked them entire through
my cheeks to stain my scales rainbow.

I was a prize, of course,
miracle-mimicking-god,
so I offered death,
ripping fishbone twine and
snapping men's fingers,
guiding boats through
triangle currents
that pulled only ever down.

Someone started a rumour
that I needed silver hooks –
got one through my lip once, liked the look –
but in the end it was a girl's red silk
that drew me in, trout-like,
when it caressed my serrated belly
as she swilled it at the shore.
Her hands were thin, spliced wires,
shocking at my throat.
She ran with me, until we were gasping both
as she poured me to the feet of her father.

I burned my insides bitter,
churned at their legs in hellish arcs
But he wrapped his wrists in leather
and lifted my bulk to the sun,
rubbed seawater into my flesh
and carried me through pathless rocks
to a king, to be his honour, a salty offering, rare.

What happened between was beyond my sight,
but soon I was in crueller hands
and the man was on the ground
trussed as a sow, squealing mercy, and I,
the mimicry-blessing, was salved to his skin,
rubbed 'til we bled each other out,
and lay milk-eyed on marble,
slabbed, as I was always wont to be.

When I come back,
I will come back as sickness,
sit nubbed into a sane man's brain,
and slowly rot him insane.

Salome

Forget the violence,
of blade versus shell and the blood
I sucked from your fingers.

You are bringing me the ocean
on a plate, shrouded and steaming with ice;
oyster-bedded. Now feel

the shuck of your tongue as it
swallows down the sweet-fleshed pearl.
Listen: you can taste the sea.

Benjie Gear

He died here, not far from
the slats of Wiltern Tor.
Palm flats layering
hand-over-hand;
his neck-snap whistling
through the gaps.

He was daft.
Bald, wide-shouldered,
soft and dribbling.
Had no trade,
made a life stealing:
bread, apples, sheep.

They caught him fleecing
two ewes fat with young,
lead him cat-called
through the village
to Cranmere Pool,
placed a sieve in his hand.

Empty that.

Four weeks before he thought
to kill a lamb to line the base.
They'd been waiting, of course,
lead him back through the village
to Hangingstone Hill,
placed his tongue in his twitching hand.

Spirit caught in the pool,
he spins rope from sand,
and it flows through his fingers.
Always, his palms hang empty,
his eyes ache to catch
the double moon floating in his sieve.

Selkie

for Tom

On the emptied beach I turn from the waves,
from the smooth tug of the Yesnaby tide
towards you, backed by limestone caves,
then unstitch myself at the hip and step out.

I have come for you. Open your hands to me
in the rain, in the dark cloister of Skail bay.
Listen: how the sea shrugs itself up the beach
struggles to cast itself off, like a shadow at
midday.

After, I grope for my seal pelt in the darkness.
It is quiet now, the sea far out and closed,
a riddle I forgot I was meant to know.
A tithe of scum wrinkles my toes.

You sing me lullabies, wrap me in your history
until it feels almost-shared. You kiss me
until you're dizzy with sea-breath, and fling
your laugh out to the heaving black.

A whole night passes, then is gone.
The day drags the water back up to us
and I drape myself into form.
At the tide line I pause, turn again to you.

Let me
drop my skin. I never liked the sea.
Let me
lie down with you again.
Let me
stay. I could love you.

Pasiphaë II

in which Pasiphaë meets her husband

He found me by the silvering quick of a river,
bathing my small white feet in the icy rush.

Minnow-toes, he called me, and kissed my soles,
sucked with impunity each curling digit.

Minos. King. His fate was worn in his name.
Aloud it was a tease, and I enjoyed

the double-fold of it, the twice trick,
the cancelling: King Minos. King King.

I'd whisper it at his neck through a haze of sweat,
speak it louder to call him back to our bank,

used it to make him love me until he did,
and brought a band of gold to bind us.

I think we could have been happy,
this double-king and his almost-queen

on our river-bank of moss and snatched
moments, rulers

of naught but each other's unruly desires.
But then

he got what he truly wanted. No longer
a pet-name, but power, a truth, and,

worst of all:
god-given.

Diana and Acteon

I wear a hunter's tunic, my hips straight
beneath the pleated linen,

accordian-sprung, ready to run, to catch the dart
and flight of a deer. I live simply

in the hush and hustle of the forest,
ask only for peace, ask only for this listing
solitude.

Once, a man came this way, came across me
as I bathed in a stream's cool dash.

Any man would've met the same quick-eyed
turn, the same quick-tongued curse,

would blink to find himself changed,
his body rucking, his head branching horns,

his feet racing the chasing ground,
the sound of his hounds in his twitching ear.

Later, I found his hide on an oak,
and buried it beneath scab and briar,

spoke a blessing to his name,
spread swathes of leaves over the grave.

Then turned again to my wood, blood trilling,
my hunter's heart full, the smooth of bow

perfect in my hand, my arrow-tip
hanging fire.

Starver

Daisy did not eat to-
Day.
More for us.

Daisy did not eat this next day.
Nor this one
Even though to-day we had lamb.

It's been a week.
Two hard-boiled eggs left on her desk
Stink out the house.

Mam frets. Da shouts.

Daisy watches the hills from our window
And will not speak to me
Even when I ask what she sees.

I sit beside her and watch the shadow grow
And swallow our house.
Daisy's eyes are shadows, too.

Mam beats her with a wooden spoon
Across the face
Smack! Smack! Smack!

Her cheekbone swells
And her stomach does too,
Though it can only be full of air.

A month gone.
Daisy lies, the rack of her body
Stretched out.

Da charges 3 for a peek
5 for a touch, and I watch her with
Mam's wooden spoon

In case someone gets too close.
Priest says she's living on Holy Spirit.
I know she's rotting.

To-night Daisy spoke,
And asked me to take her to our window
And we talked a little.

I think to-night's the final night.

I let her kiss my cheek
Though she reeks stale water
And I told her that I loved her, too.

Next day,
When Mam asks God why?
Holding what's left of Daisy

I say
I think she saw sickness in the hills
And got out while she still had time.

Jonah

"Cast the cameras away!" "The evil eye brings the curse!"

Do you know yourself,
because I know The Jonah
and know The Jonah cannot see Itself
for the devil's smoke.
You may think It has no place in this,
a land without men and all his deceits,
but I know The Jonah
and saw It coming on the ship,
black even on Its outside
not hiding Itself from what It is.

It blew a gale to return Itself down
It drove the pack on us,
full of crush and grind.
It sent weakness to the dogs
and sent the ponies to their beds
It made seven days to unload the ship
in place of two
and It sends you to watch
and record each click
of our demise.

I know The Jonah by the pressing of my chest
by the fumbling of hands on a rope
when It is nearby
by the tricking of the ice
beneath the sledge It rides
and by the whales that rose to crack the ground
to snap at your heels and stop your heart
and take It down to speak with God again.

Persephone

Most mornings I can barely stand to look at this something-like-happiness misting our periphery, an epiphany spat out like pips from our tongues, all our half-sung songs stringing along behind us, and you, dark god, perfect weight above me, telling me you love me and me drop dropping droplets through your hand, my stolid body turning liquid as sand and running our fierce current fast as silver-quick fish, my flick-flecking lips biting like teeth as I shoal beneath you, held so tight I can barely breathe.

The shift of the seasons sinks us, and at my brink I tip through summer autumn winter spring – all the fast-spin of cold and heat – fells me as I fall back replete, my heart beating pomegranate red, jawing my mouthful of seeds.

Pasiphaë III

in which Pasiphaë becomes a queen and a mother

Palace. The word itself is full of air
gaseous and frilly. Wishful.
We do not belong, here.
The floors are marbled and cold
and my minnow-toes cringe against them
the way a fish slaps on a slab.

No, we do not belong, here
where the walls have ears and mouths
full of teeth suited to slit our throats.
It is a false throne I sit on,
and a cooling husband I lie with, bearing
child after child as he fucks chambermaids.

I've imagined revenge. A daughter
of sun and water is well-placed
to harm, from sun-blisters to a jelly-fish swarm
fit to burn his very bones. At least he'd be warm
and not frozen out in a house of rock
and pretence, a house full of not-belong.

Children, though:
they've hollowed me clean out
and pushed at the chambers of my heart,
filled me right up. At night
I circle myself around them like a shell
about its soft carrier. They are my home.

So I stay. I sew. I hold my children.
I have become what is expected.
But beneath each soft word,
undercutting each forgiveness
is a fire set to melt his skin
and an ocean ready to sink him.

Do not pity me.
Know that I do not stay
because I must,
but because of what
I must not
leave behind.

Hermaphroditus

for Iain Banks

She takes me up
hard and
 worryes my skin
drags nails across my chest
in imitation love

she practises
 cruelty with each stroke
and shouts for our union
our never-parting

parts me from myself
with her wish

splits me monstrous,
 halves me entire,
 smoothes out
 that last
 skitter
 of flesh

my nerves buzz
 as her body
burns into mine.

The Wild Bride

sometimes she would run the fields
the thin evenings riding her shoulders
gorsed soles packed on the grass
wetlands flooding the eyeline

she learned to stand for a while
so the earth would take her
a muddying bliss squeezed up
between each toe

and suckled at the heel
the wild bride would sink
burnished and beached
under the starveling sky

you catch her often
at the back of your throat
shattering cold shackling
the latch of your tongue

her fingers find your rhythm
sing it softer as her body
throbs white against yours
her mouth a plumbed scar

and most nights she leads you
laughing into some new light
spins you asleep then leaves you
waking into that same darkness

Rhea's Revenge

You have made a litany of our lives,
husband, worthy of any myth. How
did they taste, I wonder? Each
small boy slipped down your gullet.
I trembled beneath your body as you sweated
out their sweetness, sweated in the next.

Take in enough water
to layer your pain,
you'll need it on your lungs
to stop the sounds.
Imagine each son
weighting your gut.

When I finally release, I'll haul you home
to prop against the hearth,
still wet from the sea. I'll cook samphire
in tight shoals of butter and lime,
and offer it to your conched mouth, massage
'til swallowed and watch your belly swell.

Later,
I'll cut you
groin to teeth
bury our children's bones,
the one black stone,
then feast.

Pasiphaë IV

in which Pasiphaë laments

I cannot hold that steadiness I felt
in his arms by our river.
I cannot picture how I may have looked
framed in his gaze, though I knew
I felt like light.

I have lost the memory of that
steadfastness beside the
push and change of water,
the knowledge of how to bask
in each other.

He still comes to me, sometimes,
to lay his head at my soft chest
and weep his sins, a confession
at my breast. I know, then,
that I cannot un-love him,

even when he straightens,
and, like a child,
wipes his eyes on his sleeves.
Even when my husband, the king,
so easily dusts himself off, so easily leaves.

Three Rapes

Leda

Then the light opened and closed about her;
slumped angels onto the carpet,
trumpeting grotesquely, their shadows
angled into corners, into anywhere and
anything but that safe, squared certainty.

Then music grew monstrous;
grew larger and filled the air,
feathered and full-bellied,
web-toed as a demon and hot,
but white. Pure white. And soft.

Then the gilding nudges at her lap
a forgotten currency of head and tail
coins forged in the heat of lightening
and thunderclaps, her heart slaps in her chest,
throws up muddying blood to her head.

Then wings, leaving the darkness
no space, no place not to look
to be sure not to see as they pin her
in her chair and the last of the glare swells up
rears into the serpent neck that snips at her
throat.

Then she is absented from herself,
poured, rolled, molten,
gold as the light at her feet,
shot through with hardening gems,
mined roughly
as a coalface, as wholly,
until her thighs chaff with myth.

It leaves her opened, gift-like, on the stairwell
her lips bruised, her eyelids split as fruit,
wrists snapped back in greeting or farewell
as seeds aping love take root.

Danae

Your arrival?

Heraldic, triumphal, callous and cruel – you slap me onto all fours – I see you’ve done this before.

You form-shift as is your gift; swan, bat, bull (I shudder at that), a lily-flower, smoked ice and, finally, how nice, a golden shower. My jaw is a rictus, my legs skew under you and I know it is hopeless. *Try to enjoy it* you said, and I play dead. Slot box, slatted, mouse and cat, unhinged at the rim of me, pelted, melded, bone-tired and blood-sore, and still there is more.

Outside my father kneels at your stone feet and prays for you to bless him. Your coining eyes turn away. You pluck yourself out of me, fast and loose-changing into light. My eyes clenched tight, I am left beast-panting and baby-fat, and call for my family. They tell me I was fated by the act that damns me. No more, Jove. Now, will you be sated?

Europa

After a slow melting winter, and after
a squalling dawn, apparitions spirited
her down to walk the beach at morning.
She finds him, fawning in a cherubic breeze,
pinkens as the bull nuzzles her neck,
bends for her to ride, and, thralling on his back,
she throws her head high to laugh and
fill her face with sunrise.

The rise stalls, sets. Night blackens the beach
and the bull turns at a trot to the sea.
Her laugh catches, turns ash in her throat,
a glottal stop. The first wave shocks her,
and the second locks her grip.
She clings to him as they plunge on, in her heart
the wrench of relinquish, choice gone,
flung over her shoulder with the tide.

On land, the harvest thaws
and the people wake into black,
track the toes and hooves to the coast.
Far out, in the gentle gloaming,
the ocean is foaming to a darting white,
and something screams
with the gulls, heightens, then dulls.
It is silent as the grave. Cut-throat legs trailing,
Europa turns lily-pad on the bobbing waves.

Pasiphaë V

in which Pasiphaë is bewitched by Poseidon to love a bull

The way we loved felt underhand.

The way I fell with an uncapped velocity
and with some impossible urgency
commenced my search for your mouth
and lipped gum-ringed teeth bigger
than my palm. And palmed you,
bigger still, with hands I grew to fit your
bulk, made myself a swelling ocean
fit to swim, to dive, to fill, clinging to
the mast of your horns – the static fizzed
off your fur, fizzed between us,
and your sweat sloughed down
my legs, my breasts, poured into my ears
with the rushing of your whinnying moans.

You turned me animal that day
(and night, and day again),
made me question
the very archaeology of our bones.

Circe

Daily I watch my men.

Their suffering is
carefully curated –
a pinkening for each time
they denied me,

a trotter for each time
they forced me,
and finally –
that tassel of a tail.

I end the day with a meal,
(predictably porcine),
after an hour scrubbing
shit from under my nails.

I'd go mad,
but I cannot forget my name,
a dying fall
fat in their mouths.

Dancing Plague

I could not make myself clean
So I danced
I could not read books or psalms
So I danced
I could not make you feel my hurt
So I danced
I could not make you listen
So I danced
I could not see God
So I danced
I could not hear God
So I danced
I could not feel God
So I danced
I could not tear myself apart
So I danced
I could not make an art of living: my life art
So I danced

I danced until
My body forgot how to be still
I danced until
Others came to me and danced too
I danced until
The priest was called
I danced until
You stopped laughing
I danced until
You beat me over the head
I danced until
You dropped your fists and joined me
I danced until
My toenails blackened and my feet bled
I danced until
My heart gave out

And the whole world was music.
In the dust I died,
And the whole world was music.

Kitsunetsuki

The borrowing starts at birth.

Her first cry snaps across her mother's ear
like a slap. The village wakes and prays.
The stars strike out.

Next, cradle cap that seethes with ticks,
and in certain lights, her scalp burns auburn,
her skin furs, her mouth muzzles, her lobes
twitch.

It brings her new language – cry and screech –
strings her along the streets in search of scraps,
wets her mouth on sight of rats.

At fifteen she leaves for the trees,
burrows beneath corpse mushrooms
and suckles at her wrist for a taste of home.

Her spine curves, and her shoulders firm
to better bear the four-quarter lurch,
the stark absurdity of her form.

It leaves her sudden as a shower,
in her eighteenth year, cracks out
through her ribs, crests her breasts.

They find her bent beneath blossom
wound-and-mouth-agape, trailing blood,
claw roots empty on her knuckles,

fox-tang stalking the ground.

Web

It is a peculiar cold that they arrive in,
The suitors. Like marbles
They roll into the crevices of our stalled home,
Bounce off the walls
(and each other) with drink.
Feasts and contests keep them at bay
While I watch the low curve of the sea
From my window in my widow's weeds,
Waiting for the sail-break in the horizon
That means you are home. At further insistence
I distract them with dancers from the north,
Their hips coiling like snakes, or smoke.
This holds them for a month at least,
But after that it is time to go for broke.
I begin a wedding dress
On my spinning wheel
Strung with silk. I order dyes from Galilee,
That open place spaced out by a pearling sea.
When it is finished, I will wed one of them,
These un-fine men.
I work the thread, feeding it fast
And the bodice blooms beneath my fingers.
The suitors are pleased.
They drink themselves dreamless
And that night I sneak to the spinning-room,
Pluck out a string
At the heart of the dress,
Unspool it from the chest.
I will continue to unpick these threads that bind
Until I have lost sight of you, my love,
Or until I have lost my mind.

Pasiphaë VI

in which Pasiphaë is ashamed

Shatter me, Wind. Let me break, or
burn me Sun, to flake, rack and ruin.
Down me, River. Let me drown,
or clean me, fill my body with
no thing but water.

Fell me, Horse, as I ride across
my husband's fields, my legs
bandaged as, side-saddle,
I hobble across our land.

Take me, Sky. I'll shine for you
and with it be no thing but light.

Open, Earth, quickly, rot me to dust
before I'm re-written
as just another woman cowed by lust.

Scylla

I

His weapon-sprung hand sets loose
all my blazing heated blood.
Were it mine, I would
have given him the earth.

But I had only a blade
and a glinting will
and a dark, dark night
and a traitor's gait

stealing into the room
of my father:
an impassioned Delilah
for want of a lover.

Beneath my hands
the purple strands
quivered alive,
lithe as hyacinth.

With each chop
I imagine
ecstasy: the skin's
fresh shimmer...

II

They fetch him from
a tent of blue,
he skys the hairs with
his brute touch.

His cloudy anger
plucks out my breath
and I have lost a father
for a lover I had not yet won

I should have known him
for what he was.
That that golden arrogance
comes at cost.

Rage branches from my brow
and sends men scurrying.
I am a beast in unbridled skin,
leathered-black with scorn.

The ill-given victory
spills from my fingers
and my father's bruised locks
fall into dirt.

III

Their flight was swift
and unrecompensed.
I hang at their tails
like rot.

I will not die at the hands
I had once sought to burn under
I will not die at the hands
that once filled my mother with flame

I will die under my own compass,
bring myself new fame.
At this new crossroads
I seize the ship and my chance.

The rudder is uncoursed
between my palms,
and I ride them from
my descendent city.

An eagle pecks the latches
of my fingers, and the air
feels full as a gift as I fall.
At this rate, I shall outstrip gravity.

Jan Coo

for Anthony

It was a light night; lacking dark
and over the hills came a calling,
tumbling on the winds from Dart.

The boy leans in to it; this strange current,
hears something pushing, pushing through
the sprawling Devon green.

Jan Coo Jan Coo Jan Coo
calls the bedded river and he answers
with his slow walk to the bank

his foot naked in the rush,
then his body, pimpling,
and last his pale, stark head.

The river is full and quiet.
The night has no song left.

Blind Father

I digressed into the dark/made a cup of my heart
/and saw that it was filled and
emptied/according to the scrip.

I loved who I should love/and slept with silent
women/ with silent stars in their eyes/that were
constantly dimming.

Walked to work each day/and talked along the
way/with any kind of man/who had anything to
say.

I worked with my hands/danced to swing-jazz
bands/beneath a shattered light display/until I
felt my mind go astray.

Now I work at my words/my sentences/my
verbs/and fly towards life/ as my life flies away.

Pasiphaë VII

in which Pasiphaë speaks to her son, the Minotaur

Afterwards, they ask me if I knew
and when

and how did I feel about it?
and I say no

but, really, when was it? Because
yes, I knew and

yes, I always loved you.

Was it when I woke torn and bleeding
from the bull?

Or when I felt the kick in my abdomen
signalling life?

Or when I felt you churning my insides
like cud?

Or shook with the strength of your heartbeat
at night?

Or was it only when I sensed you ready to come
into the world

and called for the midwife to bring blankets
as I felt

the burr of horn caught in the hinge
of my pelvis

then the soft split as you eased yourself through
and I spilled you

into the waiting room, into a deep and
terrible silence?

Medusa

Days when I needed to slough my skin
stitch the wounds with fish bone twine
so I could suffer as I meant to; my statement
of intent. Days filled with stone, spent with only
me, days spent alone. Days I was a dissenter of
my own

cause, days when I'd think to drop glasses
and shuffle across the floor on my hands and
knees just to bleed. Days spent watching the
unravelling and catching the threads just in time,
stuffing the secret into my head, fistfuls of
hissing, black-eyed rot.

Days when I forgot. Days when I could not.
Days when days turned faster than a cricket
chirruping their victory on green legs that
I pulled off, clawed off until I caught the sun
and stared until my eyes were scarred with
daytime stars. Most days though, follow on.
It's a case of taking them, one by one.

Ceyx addresses Halcyon

I never asked you to follow me.
Hysterics were always my least loved part of you.
The way you'd throw yourself into a wintry rage,
full of hot air, pace for hours before cooling.

That's why I took that cruise,
though the oracle prophesied *storm*.
Not to spite you, but yes, to get away –
I mean, you'd been angry for three straight days.

So when death came in a swirl
of salt water and wind I used my last breath
to get me home to you, died happy,
knowing I would not be far from your arms.

But, no.

I was plucked from Hades,
dragged unceremoniously across the Styx,
while the gods pick'n'mixed my new form,
gave me a sparrow's heart, a fisherman's art.

Bird-brained, I know only to stay with you,
can eat only sprats, must learn to love
your feathered shape, your sharp peck
of a kiss. How did it come to this?

Us, stuck in this perjury
of an ill-made nest,
and every day finding
we love each other a little less.

Marie Laveau

One day, at the border of nighttime,
you'll find a new magic to cup at your veins.
Snake-sure in your new skin, slat-eye, suckled to
a soot-breasted Mama, who will grow you
white and strong
to scoop the ashes still hot from your tongue
onto your precise hook. Your look

is something debridled, and the hit is swift
as a bullet shot into dark,
arced surely into flesh. And blood
is extinction in your body of utter light –
not needed, not nearly so much
as this exact annulment. It is genetic,
bleak as it is and bleak am I all;

all of us rolling in darkness, exactly away.

Pasiphaë VIII

*in which Pasiphaë helps Daedalus and Icarus to escape
Crete*

Come Daedalus,
I'll lend you the right wind to drive you
before my husband's ships.
Stretch those skins across the wood ribs
to catch it,
they'll net you a gale to take you safely.

I'll make a story so fantastic
They'll never look to follow.
I'll say I saw you fly on
feather-wax wings
and say you flew too close to the sun.

One thing before you go: that boy of yours.
The way he swings about in the bow
makes my knees weak.
Lash him to the mast
so he cannot hear the siren call of the sea.

He must not lean too close to the waves.

Golem

These streets shelter me,
Hold my moulding in their cornices,
Eye me through their stuttering,
Rain-flecked panes,
Draw the darkness about me with their shadows.

In showers I rise from the gutters,
Stretching out from the aching pavements,
Pushing my fingers through
The shit that sits heavy
Over everything in this city.

Always, under the dirt-dish of my tongue,
The taste of this alley, stalked by cats, children,
Souls each full of their element,
My own shifts somewhere behind me:
half-seamed.

Underfoot I melt through the ages,
My doubling lives daily multiply,
But always my mouth full of dirt,
My chest buckled by a star.

Cassandra Syndrome

tongue flick and finger click

neck crick and hand break

arm twist and leg wrench

exact smiles and exquisite pain
over and over and over again

thumb snap and elbow crack

eyes roll and bells toll

at funerals and weddings and

one two three o'clock
counting down and counting up

don't trust a mouth

it writhes and kisses

it soothes and smothers

tells old wives' tales
and warnings of mothers

toe pinch and nail winch

pistol slap and ear trap

hold down tight and then bite

insides writhe insides rage
insides discombobulate

Coronation

a love letter

It was to be a simple thing – like

Drowning a cat or downing a dog
With a swift kick to the neck, or
Nicking a wrist with a razor blade –
Yet I was not prepared
For my sometime friend splayed
Naked in his bath.

Afterwards, I observed from my enamelled
throne
His body in its death throes
And felt a calm befitting a man
Watching his sometime friend
Fit his life
Down a bath drain
In a squelching, scarlet gracelessness.

Took a moment to remember him
Felt, in these hands, the weight of a life wiped
clear
A sepulchre handed across
In a room tiled with the blue-white chatter
Of an effervescent crowd of bath salts.

Then drew a line four full and a quarter inches
Along his hip
And felt my way up – clawed
Out his mortal clutter
To leave him clean.

I shall be king if you shall be queen.

Pasiphaë IX

in which Pasiphaë finds her son slain

When I heard
I felled the messenger with a tidal wave,
burned through the gates to reach the entrance of
the maze.

A ball of wool crouched at the place
where the walls grew tall and monstrous.
I smashed through each coiling turn to find the
core.

There he lay, my best-loved-boy:
the gloam of his eyes like oyster shells above his
muzzle,
leaking blood, the coronet of his horns alabaster
in the dark.

I made a boat of my body and cradled him,
smoothing out his pelt, cupping his wound,
grief capsizing my voice until I keened in the well
of the maze.

I waited until he covered me once more with
blood,
until I again forgot where my body stopped and
his began,
then laid my beast-son down, sat back
Cassandra-red

as he lay soaking the soft Crete sand.

Baba Yaga

In these woods all seems lost and unkind,
the sacrament of rhododendrons
nestle bloody in the limbs.

Lend me a different weather,
a new heat, changing light.
Lead me from these trees.

Imagine I stayed soft in a place like this,
imagine my curled, naked form,
tiny in your grasp.

Now tell me, what would you do? Well,
you'd want to see if I'd bleed
so you'd lower your mortar thumb

to the pestle of your palm,
and grind me like a seed.

Manything

We called her Manything because she was.
Stitched up and together by something other
than what we knew, here, in this world.

Her skin was scales and needed salt.
She'd roll about
at the salting yards like a pig in muck,
happy as larry.
Freshwater, though burned her bad as fire.
So she stank.

A fish *out* of water, then, one club-foot,
the other dog.
Her eyes were round and fearful as fox's, lashes
feathered as a dove. Her hands we never saw,
except in gloves.

Her voice seemed riven with nails, chords fused
to a guttural ooze
and her breasts the heavy dugs of cows
(the rest a scaly deceit)
but her hair was soft as catkin, yellowing as corn.

A gypsy passed through town once,
thought her at least a blessing, or a god. Said
her hair was magic,
would bring children to us all.

We saw them beneath the ash tree; they danced
as beings possessed.
Some called them drunk, some called them
demons,
but mainly we knew it may be closer to love.

When he left, Manything pined, mewled her
agony through the nights,
while women came with offerings of brine – she
sent them away each time.
She lived to ten and ten again. We left her be,
mostly. Then –

Could've been witchers – or travelling men –
but she was hanged
on Coley Ring, found
swinging against an elm,
creaky and half-rotted with rain.
Her hair was gone.

Nine months on the women cramped,
their bellies swelled with damp.
Out they came crawling,
ready-formed, golden their scalps.

We were kept inside, that night, but saw the
torches through the trees
heard the prayers and mewling, as Manything's
children met the sea.

Yidak

At night the graves open,
my corpse bloats with rain.

The stones shine, obsidian-black,
my mouth shrivels, my stomach growls,

my eyelids snap back.

Echo

In between your visits, I live in this tree,
taking in the whole wide stretch
& weight of the sky.
When you begin your morning walk,
in botched copy I follow –
we cross the obsolete stream,
where narcissi hang their bell-heads,
bending in long dissent towards the shallows.
You break them at the stem
& we set off between the narrows,
me dancing your steps off the shadows
in perfect half rhyme.
Here you whistle, and I join in,
a quarter-beat behind your beat.
I throw you, so you try to shrug me off
like a heavy-shouldered coat,
but I cross-stitch behind you,
trailing like a loyal dog. Hounding.
I do enjoy these jaunts,
& miss you when you leave
the kiln of our forest
for your open field-walk home,
your five-year-empty house.
I hope it won't be long till your return,
till next you carry me
like prayer beads in your pocket,
& go through the wood whistling,
& like little starlings, I fly your music back.

Pasiphaë X

in which Pasiphaë curses her husband

Minos,
have your girls

and as you take them
I will spite you

with each
little death

I will send you
scorpions.

I held
my tongue

but cannot hold
my curse

– after all –

I am not
only human.

Pandora

My back to the room
I hear them buzz
and let my hands
lift and drop
and they pour
their million wings
beating into the world
fear cruelty avarice
all the many names
for pain
and I have made man
complete and entire
with the simple
hinge of a lid
at my fingertip.