

Music for Ghosts

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The Arsonist

This morning, I am naked under
cotton sheets, satiated and pleading
with no one, all the breaking sunrise
falling pink in the doorway like a Japan's
worth of blossom. It is this turmoil
of easy living, my life exempt from
the ruin I once prized, once felt
sweeping through me like the midnight
hands of a clock. How I sometimes
long for those days again; so much
blind rejoicing: stoned on oxys,
my hands on the steering wheel
and driving into the maw of some
luxurious nowhere, shirt pocket
blessed with twenty more, enough
to get me to Tuesday, as my daughters
waited for me back home, obediently
stacking themselves atop a pyre
I built, their love no match for fire.

Birds Without Music

5,000 red-winged blackbirds
rain unbidden from an Arkansas
sky like trench coats shot to pieces,
streets and lawns ankle-deep in little
bodies. A white-crested laughing
thrush bloated under a scrim of waste
water at the Miami Zoo, its black
streak across the eyes like an homage
to Annie Lenox until I reconsider,
sure God isn't a fan. The Baltimore
oriole with its head blown out, my brother
trembling as he tossed the pellet gun
into the rosebush and ran. The barn
swallow practicing his cursive until
my picture window, thud knocking
my attention away from the television
where a U shaped throng of republicans
ruffled themselves with speeches
on terror. And you, silent
on the long flight home
to America, news of your brother's
death only hours old, and how the night
before you said you wished to be
a starling, because starlings sing
for hours, sometimes longer.

Looking Out A Window, I Am Reminded There Are Two Ways To See A Mountain

I like how Whiteface Mountain shoulders a raincloud; it makes me happy enough to forgive you. But then the clapping of a large Japanese family in the dining room reminds me dreams have no place at work, so I open more bottles of wine as the family tip their heads like sunflowers for the guest of honor: a 90-year-old who survived Guadalcanal. He smiles and raises his hand and his wife cries across the table. They all sing a song in Japanese and everyone claps again and I feel more foreign than usual even though I hear my chef yelling he's sick of watching his food die beneath the heat lamps. The bartender's drunk again and I smile as his clumsy olives teeter into fogged glasses and drink straws sliver the mahogany, wet and abandoned. The old man stands up and recites a poem by Basho, the one about great soldiers and how summer grasses are all that remain of their dreams, and I understand, and want him to reveal what that last night was like: the mud and the stench, the blood a river in search of a name, but know better than to interrupt, to embrace a man lost in what it was that saved him.

Counting

My daughter Grace has a weakness
for crows, points to one hopping the lid
of the café dumpster, its shoulders oiled
black as Elvis' pomp. And when we drive
home, two crows tightrope the highway's
yellow line, tap a squirrel pressed dry
as a flower. Even as I speed past they
are fearless, pompous struts like federal
judges before they sentence you to life.
I will release my crows on an unsuspecting
world and they will do my bidding, Grace
says. And I laugh, imagine a wide cape
of darkening sky as they fan out behind
her in a staccato of barks and cries. Home,
the car ticks in the driveway as I stand
in the yard, spy three adjourned in a sugar
maple: silent, disapproving, their languorous
stares unsure if they've noticed my face before.
Grace startles me from behind, places a silver
necklace in my hand. Leave it on the stump,
she says, so they'll know it's theirs. And
when I look back up, there are now four.

Autobiography Of The Table & The Kitchen

There have been meals I've loathed and meals I've despised. Most recent, a rubbered patty oozing beneath its own greased shambles at a truck stop in Buffalo, the steam of plate-clatter and diesel smoke the only things divine. Meals eaten in silence when I was seven and the air between my parents suffocated the table; doom's easy smolder ready to fill our lives with smoke. Meals joyous at drive-ins slicked in ketchup and glazed napkins. Meals of befuddlement slung mornings after childhood sleepovers, words like *bagel* and *omelet* birthing a new lexicon to mouth water. Meals of *Out! Out!* wooden spoon cracking the pot's rim as children scattered from the kitchen—giggling snipes. Meals of despair before college, one room tenement as I jawed microwave burritos stoned in my conviction the mattress bloomed a Rorschach of clues. Meals of first dates palpitated by whicker Chianti and the shedding of garments, laughing about too much garlic as the sheets roiled in our new the hunger. Meals tilled from farmers markets and roadside stands, Swiss chard a study in rare plumage; waxy peppers shined like the tongues of small fires. Solo meals of comfort after personal disasters, the counter serving as respite for the maligned. Meals of regret and meals of plenty. Meals of family faces ensconced around a tablecloth saved crisp just for meals like that. And meals

with you, simple across the table, all those years of
what we've said and what we couldn't. Meals best
enjoyed with our eyes instead of our stomachs, meals
when we couldn't fill our mouths fast enough. The meal
we had at a busted kitchen table in our new apartment
25 years ago, surprising you first with purple irises,
bottle of *Cote du Rhone* hollowed dry, the way you
stared at me, and me at your working mouth, your hair
swooning against your collarbones with a rhythm
I had grown to love, and me finally putting down
the fork and the knife, and lifting the napkin from
my lap, and coming over to you and raising us up
to the many-toothed stars and all their crying out.