

LAVISH DARKNESS

My mother raised me to take
what I need. From the wind,
I take hunger. From hunger, lust.
From the men who shed condoms
like molt, I take green. A plant I have trouble
keeping alive. A hammer from my father,
to build or dismantle. A cup of nails, glittered
with rust. From my sisters, I take
a milk-bright bone, architecture
of my dreams. From the men who have come
inside me, I take a muffled cry
deprived of tears. I bring bread to my mouth
without blessing it. I gaze at the sky without
falling to my knees. From the apple tree, I steal
a pale green apple. On its skin, I taste salt
from the nearby sea. From the air, I take
a painless breath—robbed from the clutches
of saplings and sun. For the men
who undress me with their eyes, I fashion a dress
dangling with knives. From blades of grass,
I make a bright green bed, its canopy sheer
and billowing. From water, I claim
a rippling portrait, torn from the background
of blurry pines. In all this taking, I managed,
somehow, to keep my wants obedient
and small. I need a want bigger
than my needs. My mother was raised
to take what she was given. She offers me
her empty hands. At first, I see nothing
but gaps between fingers, swirls and lines
crisscrossing her palms. What is my
inheritance? I begin to understand:
lavish darkness, driftwood on the beach,
emptiness between branches. Restless wind.

THE VALLEY

Walking from the subway
to the apartment we shared—you a usual
few strides ahead—we passed
another couple. Languid and intertwined,
dripping with dinner's slow-sipped
wine or with the icing savored
from a single fork. What passed
between them, back and forth,
was as open as it was secret.
This wasn't the first time I'd seen them.
Earlier, on the subway, they were
teenagers who swayed and closed
a glowing negative space,
and tomorrow they'd be thick-waisted
and grey-haired, holding hands
unconsciously as you and I
hurry past. We could not make
the shape of love. I laid down
on the sidewalk and tanned
beneath the couple's heat. I knelt to kiss
their dirty shoes. Like any worthy
supplicant, I worshipped
and resented them. They were
the lush valley I crossed
before climbing into our bed.

SINGING IN THE DARK

Aware of the middle-aged woman
sitting exactly opposite me,
perched on her porch, doing something
useful with her hands, I find
a memory of the last play I saw
before New York City went dark:
a chamber opera about a seamstress
who sews garments the texture of which
she can't find elsewhere in her life,
except maybe in the silk
of her own belly, buttocks, and thighs,
or in the kind speech that falls
on her ears from time to time,
like scraps from the sewing table.
I am trying to stitch together
the pieces of my life, I want
to confess to the woman
who is right now a mirror.
On the street between us, cars zip
or cruise by with their windows
and operas. Once, while waiting
at a train station, I overheard a man
on the phone with his lover. He paced,
cellphone charging, close enough
for me to hear both voices. Accusation,
pleading, resolve, acrimony—their passion
made me dizzy. I tried to focus
on the book in my lap, words of a page
I did not turn. The stranger continued
to cross the space between
what he wanted and who he was.
Some might say he begged
like a dog. It made me wince.
I envied him.
What is the softest thing
you've touched or let touch you,
I want to yell across the street.
Watching the woman dwell inside
her own drama—reveries, regrets,

“to do” lists, fantasies—reminds me
of how the stage spun and the actors
sang into a dark they didn’t know
would be replaced by another.
Tonight, as the sun exits, one of us
will turn from the porch and acquiesce
to the warmth and light inside.
The other will be so absorbed
by the memory retrieved
from a car stereo
or the thought of something soft
against her flesh, she will not realize
she’s in the dark, alone.

STRANGERING DISTINCTIONS

after Robert Hayden

Because you will take me this way,
I am waiting: naked on the fire
escape. I am told my genes remember being
kidnapped and sold as a rocking
horse is auctioned away. Somewhere
in the folds, I must also remember
how to fly. I read the notes you scribed
regarding my homeland [America]. I was born
here, and yet *homeland* seems imprecise
[see kidnapping above]. Though, to most,
my navy passport is a prize.

Your home sounds beautiful, absent
of barbarities. I'd forgotten—
there was another killing last week—
such a country could exist. Does this make me
the barbarian? Listening to the news
while sipping tea, I do not cry
into my cup. Sometimes, I march
and scream, moved by the moving crowd,
but our throng is a meager stream
compared to the ocean
one mother inhabits after losing
one son, compared to the machine
of beliefs that leaves people of my hue
unprotected, vulnerable.
Justice bends like a flock of birds
away from us. Still, we cry out—
we throw stones at the mountain.

The humid air swarms like languid bees.
My nipples feel stung by a rough
hand. I am always naked in America.
I scan the sky for curious lights, feel sweat
grow cold. Some might call me lunatic,
planted here on the fire escape, but I know
from your planet, so far off, you can see

the flames engulfing . . . I want you
to take me, without a rope, past the branches
of brutal trees, past the airplanes, sailing
like paper boats, past the fire we call *stars*—
to the home you described in comparison
to mine. Tell The Counselors I'm not
so naïve as to believe your land
is without flaw, but I wish to see it
for myself. This would be my rapture.

JOY DARK

My temporary joy belongs not just to me.
We three share it like bread passed in a basket
and torn with bare hands or like loneliness
can be shared through the walls of a house.
I'm in the backseat of a fast car. Wildflowers
blur the window. Driving toward
the ocean with two friends, we sing as if
we're alone. Song after song, we reach
for the high notes not caring if we fail.
My friends are alive and close enough
to touch. Within our abandon lies
the times we've stumbled, stunned,
bent in two, touching our swollen lips
and looking in disbelief at the blood
on our fingertips. Three parents dead,
a handful of failed relationships, a time
or two when we thought we'd lose
our blessed minds. We lose ourselves
and find each other. Our mouths open
like the mouth of the river. If I open
my eyes, I can see watercolor pines
and a sign that reads: *Welcome to Rhode Island
the Ocean State*, but my eyes are closed
because this is my favorite part of the song.
From the backseat, I speak softly now—
one of my friends has fallen asleep. I stare
at the backs of two precious heads,
as they stare at the lines on the road,
or at the hacked deer, or at the gentle wind
our voices made. I'm learning to use
speech again. I'm riding toward
the ocean. A silence stretches
like the miles between rest stops.
Soon, the window will be a mirror.
Soon, it will be too dark to see the sea.

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