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The Cage

My father was named for St. Francis of Assisi,
a man so pure he could speak with the animals.

But my father heard only the noise people make.

*I have come back
to the arms that held me in the old days.*

To the Big Horn Mountains, where there are
sheep at my window, deer on the path.

And a moon so full, the mountains seem to
lap against the sky—a moon so full—

*ooh, ooh, ooh, what a little moonlight can do
to you—*

A moon so full, the cage is visible.

Quietly, the animal spirits laugh.

My father is also here, cradled by the moon.

Can he see me now? Can he hear me at last?

The animal spirits announce an arabesque.

So it is written.

In the lexicon of coyote, eagle, bear, egret, bison,
it is written. *Ye who have ears, let him hear.*

Tomorrow, my son will be born.

In September, under a full moon,
he will put on his elegant skin.

His name, the skull of an animal, pulled down over his face.

Golden Gate

Who cares about words? We want explosions,
big ones, filling up the screen, blotting out,
for a thrilling moment, our lives, our deep
disappointment. We want the heaviest
of sweet drugs. Who needs the leisure of words?

Clematis. Clitoris. Eucalyptus.

Magnolia. I, too, should have praised more.
I should have lingered at the gate, feigned
exhaustion, before being tossed out, before
the drive of the flaming sword. I should have turned

to the magnolia tree, to the pink flesh
of its tiny fist, to the clitoris,
to the salted sky, to the fine, green pain
of the entire garden, and to its
frosted ghost, I should have saluted once.

Ordinary Sorrow

As far as you've come

can't be undone.

—*Wisława Szymborska*

Are they big white hamsters, there, in the trees?
Albino rabbits? Or could it be snow?

The light is dim
in the office I share with Elizabeth, who prefers it so.

We do not turn on the light, and that gives
the large evergreen outside the window

a chance to grow spectral
in the dying of this, another slow January afternoon,

and I have come to love
its luminous company

all through my first, long, hard Dakota winter.
It is the sister, I'm sure, of that other tree—

the same heavy, low branches
weighted with glory, the same flow

of euphoria through my veins
as I consider the sculpted, white wings

of snow—maternal
in their fullness, as once

I was, waiting for the one, deep inside, who would come
to mean more than anything, more than life

itself. This is a mother speaking.

It seems I have always

been waiting, as if my life were yet to begin, and now
that it's nearly done, I remain

much the same—except for a few, one or two
stupendous runs.

Of the stallions, I name no names. I give
only the character of the initial.

A hook. Half
of a circle, broken by a line.

New Year's

Rather than winter, let us consider
Jerome: was he a saint, a cowboy with
spurs, or a freckle-faced young hooligan?

The story is open-ended, it's up
for grabs. The scene can shift to lavender
shadows, to sequined lids, or to firm

thighs of snow. Outside the window, the scene
turns dull gold. Is he translating, good boy,
or is he inscribing his oversized

valentine to me? Is there a lion
sleeping at his feet? Did he inherit
the farm, then go broke, like the rest of them?

Does he dream, yet, of the desert, its grit,
that heat between the wide dazzle of sand?
Or does he dream of California, its

young, indistinguishable women, all
in a row, bent over, a crude letter
painted on each very rounded buttock?

Will the light shine through him one grievous day,
as if he were made of stained glass, as if
he were set into a window, just so?

With Ferns around Her Face

In my new place, pulling weeds, I found a fern
like your mother, the bright green heart

shaded by a far-flung bush (its berries, fat, red beads)
she would know the name of.

But you tell me she's died. Her little tree
off the balcony in Berkeley, its small, hard oranges

we could never eat. Her wisteria, her magnolia, her
transplanting the South to California

with those gnarled, arthritic hands. Madrone,
its red bark peeling off, stripping itself

for a reason (yes, always, a reason).

She could name them all

as we drove up the coast
each awkward holiday. And after, the regret

stuck in your throat, how you liked her better
when she smelled of smoke

and taught botany, back before *he*
spread his great weight over her, when she'd

come to your room and kiss you good night. *Honey,*
I'm going out. A Georgia softness to it.

Shall I describe her to you?

Leonardo's *Ginevra*, one of his many

exquisite portraits—the bright heart of a face
circled by juniper . . . *There are passages, such as*
the modeling of the eyelids, which Leonardo
never surpassed in delicacy . . .

Passages, such as your mother's
kindness, her way of treating me as your wife

when, in fact, I wasn't, when you had one
elsewhere. Her wildest of leaps

over the Baptist roots,
those hard, black seeds

peppering the soul. But look—here she is now,
come back to the very heart of it, her hands,

like those of the *Ginevra* portrait, cut off
by persons unknown. Shall I

describe her to you? The hands, such
painful claws, dropped off, camouflaged

in this scattering of pruned twigs
all around me. Her leafy face,

like an infant, no, like *my* infant, asleep
in the smooth, green heart of the world.

I lift my hands—*you see?*—they are
the missing ones, those of the silverpoint drawing,

Study of Hands, and I arrange
the ferns around her face—*like that, just so—*

then I cross the hands
over her bosom, its exploding, green
streamers, and I hold them there. I don't
even breathe. I just hold them.

The Spirit of William Speaking to the Spirit of His Wife

The wild deer wandring here & there

Keeps the Human Soul from Care.

—*William Blake*

What I like about this town, Catherine,
are the deer which appear
so suddenly out of nowhere, like a vision:

strolling down the alley of Beverly,
supper time, or trotting fast
past Hilda as I open the door to call my dog—*Lola*,

loyal as you were to me, Catherine,
rising to sit at my side, those long nights
of frenzy, as I entered the vortex,

disturbed by my wild
illuminations. Now I am finally
calmed down, dear, and here I linger,

at the door of this poor creature, hoping
to prolong the tableau, for *her*
sake—there, do you hear?

The sound of sweet hooves—do not
pity me—there, beyond the tamaracks—
departing departing departing.

The Occasional Mystic

My voices have not deceived me.

—*Joan of Arc*

I never wanted to be
a load-bearing structure. I wanted the light
to shine straight through me.
But the call came, the king had dire need of me, and I fell
for it. I fell hard for the flattery.
Now they tell me
it's merely a neurological quirk—a series
of minor seizures in the temporal lobe.

And Hildegard, they wrote her off
as migraine. But I believe
in their vast limitation. I believe in a cosmic gear,
in choirs of angels flipping the levers. I cannot bear
the slow, whiny grind of neurosis, the fog
of the toxic. And you, O doctor of my soul, can you imagine
how real it was, how hyperreal, when, one ordinary
summer afternoon, an arrow of light
pierced the form, and that veil fell, finally, away?

I have not been so happy since.

Women at Fifty

I watch them walking around in circles.
No, not walking, but hurrying. Always
in a hurry, from long force of habit.
But no soft-faced children cling to their skirts
or pants, now. These days, it is death they flee.

As the fierce snow beats against the windows,
as the spindly trees stir in the cold, then
crack, as the steam from the pool fogs the glass
like breath, they keep walking, moving, pushing
the milk-drained breasts, the hips like shelves, forward.

Easy to slip into the third person,
the metaphor. But this is literal.

I'm at the gym, rowing my pseudoboat,
trying to push past the anger, to glide.
There was a long-coated figure outside,
this morning, on the road, leading a horse
blanketed against the snow and the cold.

I think it must be more like that: we merge,
most of us, with the ones we love. We step
lightly into landscape: horse, figure, sky,
all white, a morning in January.
We don't rage. We turn ever so quiet.

On Crazy Woman Creek

If your man is at the border, and peacocks
lose their color, what then, dark sister, what
else? If you sit on the bank, watch the white
mist rise, and long for what is gone, you will
be enveloped, completely, by white fog,
by the absence of those tiny blue eggs
you dropped into the Iowa River
so long ago. Your hands are empty now,
so give them to me, drop them here, and we
will dance out over the water, and we
will be murmuring also, as vaguely
as the water, rushing along, must speak
to the ruined moon. See? I will begin—
here, in front of you, I slip my silken
garments off, I drop my pants, and I ask
you only for mercy. See? My right breast
owns a half moon and my navel is scarred
by a tiny line crossing it—a bridge
going nowhere, the eggs stopped in their wild
descent. And look—there are a few silver
hairs in my darkest of trees, but the smoke
is rising from my fingers now, so warm

against the cold night, the stern, cratered moon—
when they burst into flame, do not draw back.

And if heads are rolling on the frontier,
if they are busy hacking each other

to pieces, it's not our concern. I am
showing you, under the nasty moon, how

I work. If I glimmer, do not step back.
If I begin to waver a little,

my outline gone slack, please, do not be so
afraid. The mansion you see before you

is not only haunted, it is also
enlarged, engorged. What I am showing you

is the briefest of clearings, is this place
between the white fog and her pasty-faced

sister, the moon. What I am trying for
is a moment—just one—of trembling grace.

