I, too, was the prison guard—bribed by faith into bringing a newborn to the cell of a martyr hell-bent on gratifying the silence she deemed divine. I am the one who watched her eat what we call the free banquet—but only after the infant’s mouth gave up the warmth of his mother’s milk. I don’t remember the name she gave the child, but it appeared to have the hunger of a man who spends his hours building walls that will one day be believed holy or justified or merely useless-beautiful. Perpetua held the bald head up, as if it were cast of bronze, so cumbersome it seemed, so beyond human need. Still, her death meant more to her than any life, for life is not so permanent as its reply. “Do you see the vessel?” she asked her father, the father who stooped and wrung his hands in the damp cell’s air. “Can it be called by a different name?” The day arrived, resigned to its reoccurrence; and the executioner watched his aim forsake him till Perpetua raised the blade to her throat, said, “cut here.”
II.

To ensure the convergence of images, place / the thaumatrope stem between the palms. Proceed to rub the palms / together as furiously as possible, as if you were stranded in the woods without matches, as if many lives / depend upon this friction, and you will / witness the naked / oak find its lithographic / leaves, the empty / vase its levitated arrangement of freesias; even the swallow will concede / to its cage, knowing enclosure is only an extension of warmth, the exact magnitude of which your ear encounters when you touch it against the belly of a body recently filled / with the kind of movement you could see. Leave your face there / long enough—the fugitive / warmth you feel will be your own.

III.

I drive to the lookout you never / tired of. Cape Perpetua. The sky is rare, as in, unburdened of rain, and I buckle up the bag of you, as if a bad driver could still disassemble you. I do not let myself imagine the color blood turns as it boils down past liquidity, down to what cannot be said to be needed any- / more; though I do imagine the mauve dress I slid into one foreign morning, all its bronze bugle beads sewn by hand, its pleats of taffeta pressed past perfect. It was more than I could pay, but I paid—

IV.

When I sleep, I’m many things, sometimes a lamp shedding her halo on the scene of a crime no one knows to call a crime. Other times, I’m the wall-paper stamped with wilting irises bound in brown ribbons. Other times, I’m the oxygen reaching inside a child whose speechlessness remains unclaimed, looking to find what’s left of wonder. But lately, I’m a dormitory full of nightgowned girls, and I burn so fast no one can touch me, not by my searing
knowing
miraged
each

V.
I spread it over your bed, like a brushstroke meant to stay there, and it stayed there till you hid it safely away, awaiting the right occasion. But the occasion was never right, and when it arrived it was only a flash of light no eye could see, a searing convergence of nylon and the U-shaped hyoid, two silver fillings, the floating ribs, unharvested—If I had to give a swatch, say, to match that dress to its day, I’d gather a handful of Dead Man’s Bells—knowing as I do how they run rampant up this crazy drive toward the parapet, the parapet.

VI.
In my absence, everyone/ describes me/ as saintly, and I/ can only think of The Song// of Bernadette, in which there is a body// of water that drinks up sickness as a plant drinks up the light// we orbit and fear, making of it nourishment.

My shadow continues// to accompany me, as if it were my friend and not// ready to thin, dim, double, and depart in the hours I need most to be// reminded I remain. In my absence,// my blood knows its place, and my name// is nothing like lament.

VII.
I thought the scent of singed Rieslings would never leave me, my pores, nor would the deep-dwelling hymenoptera cease their exodus—each population crackling, aswarm, helixing up and out of the soil—miraged membrane of impending ash, the August sky gave up its azure as what lay beneath gave up its green. My mother’s fists flew high and at their highest lifting burst open, released a brief bronze haze of lately-turned earth—so quickly swallowed by the rage of orange and onyx underfoot. Her voice, too, flew high, though indecipherable within a polyphony of hums and spattings and snapping strings of a pure heat’s speed. I ran the length of three parched meadows, bare feet pricked purple by thistle whose pith
my heels ground down to pounce, before
I reached the landline, before I
filled the perforated mouthpiece with what
my face couldn’t keep
to itself, and a girl’s distress call kept skipping, it’s spreading, it’s spreading
too quick for us. We’re alone—

VIII.

where I’ll unfasten you from this seat       you don’t need any-
more than you need my telling       you you’ll feel
between sand and stoneground wheat       in my hands, that the secret

of this bloom lies       in its ability to send
the blood’s metronome into that trance that’s sometimes needed
just to keep the body       in time with its scheduled extinction.
I wait for the universe to stop parading its mysteries as if they were new, as if they were worth more than my beholding. The stars go on robbing the night of severity, exhausting themselves, their inadvertent glamor taken to be evidence of sanctity. I am what gives sanity permission to continue, like the absence of light through which light moves to arrive at its own name. I arrive at this day, at this almost wholesome hour, without invitation. Those who look at me kneel down, implore the vacancies that will never leave them to leave them, as if this were required, as if they had not been born robed in the music of their own reply.