

SCRUTABLE HOUSES

By

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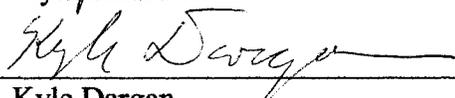
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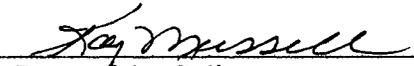
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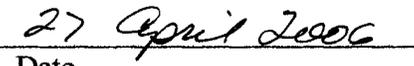
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DEDICATION

For all of my teachers, my parents first.

SCRUTABLE HOUSES

BY

Niamh Mairéad Corcoran

ABSTRACT

Scrutable Houses is an original collection of poems that attempts to inspect critically and with care the literal and figurative houses of our human dwelling. The title echoes yet departs from Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina," and scrutability is linked to questions of identity—finding our place in our families, in the world, in ourselves, in art. The first section invokes the palette with a sequence that sketches a partial history of the color blue, emphasizing the body of color, dyes and pigments, the raw materials for art. "Houses" of art recur throughout in theme and in ekphrastic poems, which point to the precarious intersections between history and aesthetics. Never far from these museums are the more private homes of personal muses and memories. Throughout the collection, poems turn to various poetic forms and meters, houses that enable a vision of making, unmaking and remaking even more habitable worlds.

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PART ONE

The Blue House*After Marc Chagall*

The house extends a familiar blue
welcome: open door, expressive windows
bending toward the riverbank, unquarrelsome
as clown eyes. It is almost majestic
on the steep yellow hill, this house
of memory, unwilling to fold into the river.
It impresses with its Orphic mask, severe,
astonishing, and its rough-hewn wooden
joints shored up with brick. We know this house,
its absences in the corners where a woman
waits in bluest shadows behind the door,
and a more visible child toddles
downhill toward the river that reflects
spires and steeples, and he is waving,
waving to that cold white city
on the bank opposite these outskirts.

Blue Sketch History

Glaukos

It wasn't that the Greeks couldn't see the hue.
It was everywhere in their minds, in the weight
of Attic skies, in Homer's seas that dictate
course, take men and waterline from view.
Look in a woman's mien, a widow's rue,
or in the dull eyes of wives, husbands yet
to come home, Penelope's man years late.
On the strand *glaukos* was all women knew.
Their eyes curdled past fishing boats to the thread
of horizon, scuttled years into wrought absence,
love needling the far off vanishing point.
Then looking up in brine bleached air, they read
the signs, the undersides of birds, silence—
a color men would try to name, anoint.

Lapis Lazuli

In valleys of Afghanistan rusted out
husks of tanks and virile land mines sprawl,
become sand, dust, borders of poppy fields.

And in mountains where religions winter,
where bombs won't atone for collateral misses,
men have come to these mines for centuries

by beast, foot, prayer. Monks, poets,
thieves and craftsmen still stage their grief,
their gaiety, seeking god in veins of stone.

And if a local traces the run of an old seam
in one of the burnt out corridors, a world
of blue relics opens for a moment—

to ancient skies of illuminated
books, the Virgin's robe, thrilled vein
of a Rubens nude—before it bleeds out.

Found Poem, Beginning with Cennini's Instructions for Making Ultramarine

After *The Craftsman's Handbook*, 15th century Florence

Keep it to yourself, for it is an unusual ability to know how to make it properly. And know that making it is an occupation for pretty girls rather than men; for they are always home and reliable, and they have more dainty hands. Just beware of old women.

Let my body be the lapis lazuli. In mortar, on marble, work without water. Pound and sift. Again. Rive mineral stone fine, finer the blue. With this powder yoke rosin, wax, brittle tears of mastic—anticipate melt, strain through white linen, make it plastic. The body, the lapis, sluice and map palatable frictions. Effluence or gall of body and stone. Keep hands well greased with linseed oil, and for three days and three nights restrain me.

To extract color, squeeze and knead. Yes, like bread dough. Press down, draw out, drain and dry. How many grades of blue are desired? I will yield and yield until palette-laden, orchidean. Of the first yields, they are good and perfect. Let them be. The last two are worse than ashes. But isn't purity the more terrible color.

Ultramarine

Not yet old, tonight
on the stand I am the model
of blue beyond the sea, sifting
one curled foot in front of the other
in waves of cool drapery,
as they smooth the rigid
lines of my body
in pastel sweeps.

That artist's hand
is empathy. She eases me
from stone posture,
first like light then water,
uncommitted to my perfections.
She yields to blue shadow
under thighs, breasts, lips,
my untold flaws,
without erasing.

Folium

It is the illuminator's name for turnsole,
organic blue gently squeezed
from the mutable *Crozophora tinctoria* seed.

Red when acid, violet when neutral, blue
when alkaline. Blue and impermanent, this tender field
is like blue notes turning off an oboe reed.

Clothlets soaked in turnsole pigment
are housed between leaves of parchment or vellum.

In illuminator's hands the color dissolves,
tints leaves in stains of the visible world
that teach me to read again, to turn like
a heliotrope toward the illumination, the transparent,

as a scribe, a page of light.

Indigo

The craft of dyeing is nothing new.

Sink indigo leaves and weigh them down
in vats of water. A disciplined craft
and never easy. Someone has to beat
water, flog the tubercular sump
with paddles until blue mud bottoms
out. Someone has to shape pretty cakes
for dyeing. A punishment, turning
the mutinous roil for days,
someone's arms weighing oars of other
passages, shadowing fettered
threads of silk routes, sculling west and west where
dyeing is being thoroughly mastered.

Prussian Blue

An accident of origin,
I am tainted yield, scourge,
as when stock blood
left in the test tube produced
a shocking reaction,
the birth of synthetic blue.

Cheap and easy,
the military adopts me.
Armies of women
mass-producing, needle
crotch seams of blue uniforms.
They can almost smell
groin-sweat of husbands
and sons and soldiers.

Then sold to artists, I am
their harlot, their absinthe addict,
their background, even their
pure depression. I can handle
their abuses. Perfectly
unstable, I turn on them,
fade in the light, regenerate
in the dark. I am ghostcolor.

(Continued; stanza break)

But lately the government
controls me. They've studied
my moods, made a pill of me
to leech fallout from the body,
a last resort for the terrorist threat.
When the dirty bomb drops
swallow me, swallow me whole.

The Dye Maker's Secrets

Who hasn't been degraded by color?
I plug away in a dirty business
in a dye shop at the city's limits,
rending colors from blood, root, mollusk, stone,
and fixing dyes with salt air or stale piss.
We stain fabrics for priests and kings.

Every morning we scour the coastline,
gather sea-mussels for the masters' backs,
Tyrian purple we're forbidden to wear.
Our hands go numb from breaking open shells,
crushing soft bodies to extract the bloom,
the clear fluid, the alchemist's spunk

that tries on each color until its purple fix.
Countless bodies for an ounce of dye.
Hands, stained that disembodied shade, in protest
release the mussels' sea pulsing throats, leave
the Mediterranean shores a wreck
of shells, the grammar of a lost color.

PART TWO

Angiography

A battle ready Celt, inked skin and light heart,
a father primed for the fight in the heart.

Dye shot clear through branching arteries
reveals pure casualty, blight in the heart.

The root muscle slacks in the X-ray,
overexposed black and white still of the heart.

Radiation mapped: the clean line of blood flow,
the ragged bite of a stigmatic heart.

Doctors cannot predict collapse. I believe
this forecast only, winter stifles the heart.

But of the warm flush when the dye went in,
briefly ravaging, despite a weak heart.

Not pain, but the devastation of bloom,
beating and beating, the bright unbeaten heart.

Proper Burial

Often I have mistaken them for stones
when digging. Over-eager, I would run
the shovel through the skin by accident,
and love the wet, echoless split of passing
through the center, unrestrained, unaware.

In winter they looked so much like bones, the balls
of femurs missing sockets, fisted knuckles,
the way they bulged under a cover of soil.
My father kept potatoes in the basement,
preparing them for proper burial.

I reached into the dirt-filled bucket once.
My cautious fingers touched softening forms
that we would cast like Pyrrha's stones behind us,
their second planting since they had sprouted eyes.

Clearing

Under his tongue, the vatic taste of mud.
About her feet, the wet nest of rotting corn.
They are beginning to clear the cud

of summer from the sloping backyard.
She gathers dropped walnuts, some green, some black
with ink that stains the fine hatch of her hands.

Behind a ring of pines where compost steams
in heat, where there is never a noon-shade,
she follows the wake of his mow and dreams

his ribs whole, before they came tenderly apart.
Left is the imaginable breastbone scar,
the ochre of a sunflower heart.

Aureolin Yellow Hue

*Some nineteenth century water colorists
cautioned against mixing aureolin with other colors
because the bright pigment could accelerate fading.*

—A curator's note

He composes himself the morning he enters
his seventh decade, counts the remaining
maple leaves in limbs, leaf by leaf, then exits
the porch to go inside and drink tea.

His house has stood over one hundred years.
It will be plowed over with spent fields
before the kitchen's cracking ceiling is plastered.
Though rafters are firm, the wood solid for now,

all of the floorboards bow slightly at center.
Every room has its own peculiar slant.
When water spilled the children would guess
which stream would leak across the floor the fastest.

A bright yellow, muted with ivory white,
colors the outer shell of metal siding.
The house thins quickly into autumn
light, a hard winter in the mixing.

What the Scarecrow Thought

I am beginning
to splinter, all the rain and heat last summer,
and months of standing between tiller and mower
alone with my thoughts from first frost until now.
I remember only the mingled smells, ripeness
and rot. Tell me, what was the difference then?
I failed you and could not keep the crows away,
but still you will carry me to the garden's edge,
dress me, give me a body, try to teach
me to keep death and scavengers away.
I know the drill. I am grateful for ritual.
You lift me from the trapped cellar, and we
enter thick light, cross the lawn together.
Purple crocuses appear before forsythia.
You stake me here and I keep watch for you.
Not too far away, there is a wall
of pear trees guarding an apple orchard.
Scanning branches for hints of the season,
I start to think of love as lack of fear.
And why shouldn't I love the murder,
though they plot, black buds on pear tree branches,
to rake the garden for seed or excrement?
Black blooms falling from the trees, they ravage me.

An Ordinary Day

Scarecrow leans more with every wet refrain.
Heavy skies used to answer the gardener's prayer,
but August's rot, high corn leveled by rain

was the summer's disaster. Then what to gain
after ruin? Fecundity goes bare,
scarecrow leans more with every wet refrain.

Gardener accepts the states he can't maintain,
knows threats of blossoming, sees loss appear,
August's rot, high corn leveled by rain.

When it was still jungle his voice would strain,
"Alive, alive-o," rising from fronds to air,
and scarecrow lean more with every wet refrain.

Two bodies weather in corn though both remain:
scarecrow, with cross for form, and gardener share
in August's rot, high corn leveled by rain.

"An ordinary day in absence of pain,"
he says to the cross confessing his desire,
as scarecrow leans more with every wet refrain,
into August's rot, high corn leveled by rain.

Dogwood

for J. H.

Fair trees! wheres 'e'er your barks I wound,

*No name shall but your own be found. —Andrew Marvell, *The Garden**

The first time you interrupted your parents
in medias res it was almost afternoon.
 A brother called to ask about insurance.
 At their door you heard the bed give, breaths swoon,

and Vivaldi's *Concerto Four in F Minor*,
Winter grafting their bedroom wall to wall.
 You heard it like sleet on snow, unprepared,
 you were scared of what proceeds each fall.

The memory held, not image, but sound,
 each breath carving the other's name in loss of self,
 pizzicato strings and undying arpeggios.
 This was before you knew your body's gulf,

before you learned that firsts descend then rise,
 eye to mouth, groin to eye, a parabola,
 a warm accretion stuttering within
 the body's eroding peninsula.

And this was before you recognized the bed
 as archetype, that guttural sight.
 Love was still muddled in the jungle-gym.
 You had not yet begun to write.

(Continued; stanza break)

Instead you were the perfect little surgeon,
able to catch worms with skill and tie
them in knots on rusted fishhook shanks
like thread, slick and trained through a narrow eye.

Once you kneeled on stepping stones behind the house,
quickenning the edge of a Swiss Army knife,
then carved the name of the tree into the tree—
dogwood—nothing to carve but the thing itself.

After the Race

I can still see my father emerging
that April evening from his own
tenebrism to chase a matted girl
across a finish line of lilac
and dogwood in teeming allegiance.
But it wasn't the abundant flowering,
so much as the light that I remember—
a membrane of late sun clenching his torso,
making a circus of his body
against a stark green yard.

As for victory, I cannot say.
Shucked from the grass too soon,
a mud-hungry Antaeon creature,
I needed the darkening earth,
practiced the laws of apples
and moons, that drill of pull and fall,
for I was not ready to take sky
or be lifted above splendid shoulders—
a height far too close to mourning.

Third Quarter

On the back side of the house there are no windows,
a door to a garden, but no windows
to gape past glass like a harbinger, and moon

at rows of sober roots bound by the third quarter moon.
I am that way, too, gripped by tide and phase.
Today I wane, out of phase,

the backyard jars the heart.
Spigot gulps, sprinkler reels. The heart
refracts as he kneels among the fallen

stalks. He stakes everything that has fallen.
This devotion is also in my bones. I know
this is nothing new (wax or wane). But know

the water in my bones is drawing
out. It is the earth I love; it is drawing
me from the cellar to unremarkable rows,

and why I walk barefoot among these rows
tonight, sinking ankle deep in the earth
with pale roots, beside where he knelt in the earth.

Breton's The Song of the Lark

Barefoot, she slices her way into the foreground
an angled path through wet fields.

Behind the girl is the light, the sun
secretive and still (I want to believe it is rising).

The girl too is still, both arms stiff at her sides.
In her right hand and aimed at the field, a scythe,

the arc of which is wider than the sun.
Behind and before her, the field expands

unknown distances. Losses pool and hem
in blues at her ankles. The girl knows this.

She looks elsewhere, mouth agape, listening.
It will not be long before her hands begin

to tremble, remembering the weight of the scythe
and the field she must attend to.

It will not be long before the august silence
of the painting is breached by birds, then blade.

PART THREE

Bringing the Beast Back

The story broke on local news:
 my high school history teacher,
 walking his dog around the frozen
 man-made lake, fell through the ice.
 Details slip away, something
 about his dog chasing geese,
 falling through first, the man
 in his seventies chasing the dog,
 everything going to hell.

But they survived the fall.
 And the ice has filled in.
 Reporters have moralized the story,
 missed the point and warned of ice
 as if these dangers could be named.
 That morning when he stood
 in front of his class
 by the rolled up map of the world,
 with all its fault-line
 borders and hidden biases,
 he pulled it down like a shade,
 pointing to the solace of mapped oceans,
 unable to speak of the past.

He held the lesson in,
 heavy with dates and names,

(Continued; no stanza break)

until alone and wandering
he risked it all like the twelfth labor.
Then the gunshot crack of ice breaking,
and a world that can hardly feel
the degrees between blue water
and black ice slumping under.
Even the cattails were genuflecting
by the pure accident, the intended lesson—
the blind need to save what we can.

Train Station in the Blue City

Jodhpur, India

At the station children call out, *hello*,
hello, their voices precise as earth-cut
stones after the scaif, spectral hellos

that light us down the railway platform.
During the long wait for trains in heat,
human fevers thicken the honey of flies

and flies halo the children's salient mouths.
A boy taps his open hands against a man
selling carts of newspapers and sweets.

Lashed away, he comes to us
with a voice that scrolls about our knees,
raveling, *hello*, a chronic metronome

of need. When the sinking tap of small hands
lands, monsoon winds honing the scar-
white heat, the wretched exits of trains

and their infernal biddings, will we listen
or board the air conditioned train? The last
stop has many names, the all-demanding world,

hello and amen, hardly spoken there.

The Living Museum, La Casa Azul

After Frida Kahlo's My Grandparents, My Parents, and I

In the epicenter of cobalt,
bright as pain, she is naked, she is
two in her family portrait, standing in the patio
of *la Casa Azul*, clutching fistfuls
of umbilical ribbons in her right hand.

The paternal cord pulls
her from the far side of the sea,
heaves past Nuremburg, past racial laws
and Nazi charts, mapping her
three generations back.

The maternal vein dips,
too fertile, past the fetus
roped atop the wedding dress, rises
above the cactus flower, pitching wind
borne seeds to the Mexican desert.

In the living museum, *la Casa Azul*,
her past and her present lead
past *retablos* and the four-poster bed, past
death masks to where her ashes flourish,
bright in a vessel behind glass.

Dic-Lit

Many statesmen and revolutionaries have been consummate writers of prose and poetry. Saddam, however, is part of a less honorable tradition of despots who have turned their attentions to the arts. From Nero to Napoleon, Hitler to Mao, there is sufficient output to suggest that we acknowledge this as a genre in its own right: dictator literature.

—Jo Tatchell, *The Guardian*

When we peered into the dictator's mouth,
 swabbed the fleshy insides of his cheeks for
 proof of identity, dragged the cotton
 tip across ulcers and searing blisters,
 collected desert fallout from the tongue,
 we caught a tender spot and he flinched.
 We didn't know the tyrant was also
 an artist with a need to control things
 chapter by chapter. We could almost admire
 his mad output, his rigid military
 epics and yarning gags of romance.
 We could even ignore that he ordered
 book contracts, owned the obedient
 publishing houses, and sent mild threats
 to critics and school children to revel
 in his imaginings, where the artist
 turns the tyrant into the perfect leader,
 a man who, when he opens his mouth,
 his people stand mute and still, hanging on his
 slick fiction, eager to believe he is
 benign as the silent, moving picture
 of an unkempt old man in a doctor's office.

Cookbook Chemistry

for J. K.

Because we delighted in the brilliant
color shifts of liquids in our chem lab,
eager in our over-sized goggles, our drab
and stained denim smocks, the teacher dismissed

us with the nickname *cookbook chemists*.

We took the veiled joke with a grin, but when
he called my lab partner *skirt*, suggesting
XX genes and science hardly mix

in his classroom, lines were drawn in the linoleum
floor. War oiled into motion within the shadow
of the periodic table. And row after row,
elements swarmed the coliseum.

Calls to Venus, calls to Mars, *Cuprum, Ferrum*,
transition metals armored up, taking sides
as our Bunsen burners were boldly fired.
Again, *Cuprum, Ferrum*, then, *Aurum*,

Aurum, we incanted primaries, while the boys
won praise for testing more methodically.
But what honeyed loss to glimpse a recipe
for art, the spoil and shift, the beautiful choice.

Failing the Masters

Penitent Magdalene,
your god-bound eyes
and knotted hands that clutch
the breast, the nest of hair,
the pubis, hiss sweet and
sin, erotic pomp down
to the ointment pot.
But my fixed dust wreck,
imitating Titian, pinned
to the studio wall like a
splayed moth or monarch,
is mistaken for self-portrait,
a specimen faithful
to my textured lies
and flaws, as if to say,
root me in flux,
call me what you will.

The Way To Represent A Battle

*...but see that you make no level spot of ground that is not trampled
over with blood.—Da Vinci, The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*

He knows something of the order
of terror, how it begins with a throng
of horses kicking up blue smoke and earth
colored dust. From ground to atmosphere,
it is airborne, the terror, it crosses
species, enters the bloodstreams of men.
It is everywhere replicating, terror
canvassing paths of arrows and conquerors.
What can he do but compose the havoc
until even the killers are bemused, running
coy as mannequins, limbs advancing
in proper alignment. Right foot forward,
left arm following in a balanced trot.
But more than the predictable violence,
this is what he knows: there are precise colors
for pain. And human suffering follows
a strict facial anatomy, a slope
of the brow, nostrils and mouths flaring
just so, heaving silent laments.
Even the blood of the dead has its color
and form, unsparing lines to be tread.
Planning the battle, by god, he is resolute
in getting it right. He instructs

(Continued; no stanza break)

each drag of hoof and foot in dust,
each stroke of strewn armor, dropped reins.
And by getting it right, he suffers
the consequences, stretches the limits
of sinew and limb. Beauty
is partisan, despot and desperate
to warn, to warn: after this
there will be *no level spot of ground.*

Lament

*He sent fire from above, a fire
that burned inside me. Lamentations 1:13*

For the city and the dust,
The ground that bore the weight,
The audacious sky, the fallen,

Mark among these blocks
A center, and around, a widening arc,
Gathering ground and sky,

Sign that the cities and the dust,
The world bearing this long hour,
All inside this space are not abandoned.

Vertigo

What did Rilke mean when he said,
Beauty is the beginning of terror?
 This wide horizon, trochaic sound of rain.
 It is perhaps our fear of edges,
 what our secrets may become.
 From the unsubmissive Cliffs of Moher,

muddied margins between land and sea
 look more like the undefined edges
 of objects in a Cezanne still-life.
 Peach skins leak into lemon rinds.
 Something more than brush-stroke opens
 unbruised fruit on a wooden table.

What makes me inch back from this cliff—
 the rain. Something more.
 I lose sight of sheer drops, of ordinary
 edges, cracks in a bedside lacquered dish
 that I can no longer trace. I cannot hold.

I must keep my secrets. In the dark
 room your words were dangerous,
 and what I felt was closer to terror
 the night you called me beautiful.

Banagher Triptych

In memory of N.C.

I. Portrait

Keen the onset, misleading display of inflorescence.
 Words go slack in the mind or the mouth
 then a hand goes suddenly
 numb without apt warning.
 Who can grasp these rules these codes
 of breakdown? Too elegant the way
 the fractal body repeats itself, charts each failure each
 time her pelvis tips, unsupportable, peony. She
 bloats, but not past recognition. She
 charms the accurate disease.
 But parents must parent
 again. And when she flushes
 blind no more sickroom souvenirs, she
 knows her body, knows it's not her body becoming relic.

II. Still-Life

Here a procession descends on the house to be near her.
Blue beads and Aves, room of cadence.
The guests gather the leavings,
washcloth, brush what she touched.
And hovering priests austere
or giddy, begin their keening. Still-
life is pitiless, all of the remains, cut flowers jars
filming at the waterline. Out her window, the black bog
seems empty of miracles. Still her
father keeps his bees out back.
Sting venom lent hope though
bees are idle now. The view
drones opens. A murmur lifts off the
bog. He starts his morning walk, listening, talking to her.

III. Landscape

Shock of curls. Color of honey? Whiskey? I am trying
to remember her. Her hair, her face
will not come to me, cross the
peat bog or the Shannon.
But I can picture our drive
west, Banagher to the Burren to
the Aillwee Caves where ice age meltwater whelmed, dissolved lime-
stone, chronicle of water passing through, reforming stone.
We inched in cave dark, channel of sound
and slip, stalactites massing
roof to floor the bodies
chaos forms. I remember
her hand reaching back. Fearless she called
out, *Follow me*, buoyant over river purl, waterfall.

The Birth of the World

After Joan Miró

An auspicious slip of blackberry
jam to canvas begins this dream
painting. In oil he moves away
from the sweet stain, hints at forms
in a wash of weightless color.

I am impressed by what he withholds.
I would probably give it all away,
and paint a gray sky with a red
balloon rising, a girl crying
in the foreground, looking up;

or maybe paint a chaos of apples,
the outstretched arms of a woman.
But this isn't about ripeness or loss,
needing bodies I created for plot.
No gravity here. Still, I can't let go

of the spilled fruit. I imagine
the artist holding up an open hand,
or spoon, or brush, measuring the phenomenon
of falling more honestly, because he has
just eaten, and by accident, let go.

PART FOUR

Leaving Tír na nÓg

From the fog of her mouth, from the sea's loose
Blue-green horizon, her siren songs
Of Eire beckon and collapse like spent light
On the island of bogs and walls and heather.
Boatmen try not to listen, but hear the tendril lines
As they pass, *Away, come away,*
Then simply, *Yes.* Yes begins their dream
Of soil without blight, plots without headstones.

Even the myth is a distant island now.
Old names are spoken less, another tongue.
Once I saw *Niamh* spray-painted on a bridge
In a border town aside the word *loves,*
Threatening to become part of the tourist code
That marks sign-posts, sea-towns, obsolete maps.

House of Muses

Invocation to the Tenth Muse

Woman, ally, weaver of garlands, desire,
Aphrodite's lyric, immortal servant—
I am yours and willing. Come, unscript me in
your house of muses.

I. Sappho Critiques Artists' Sapphos

Waxed by countless fictions, I swell—no longer
 myself, but the figments of artists. I morph
 into ruin easily after Ovid's
 gossip that launched my

fall. For I was spurned by a boatman, he said,
 yet one more hysterical woman. Painters
 followed suit, turned me into their longings. Man-
 handled, familiar

exile. Here, Moreau is in love with my near
 death. Sea-bound and trailing my crimson habits
 like a downcast putto, I'm deviant, caught
 always in free-fall.

Did they really think that a man would make me
 jump that cliff? I regard the sea and often
 long for breakers. Composed by the tides, I sing,
 I will not shatter.

But when my love left, I avoided grim seas,
 deadly ledges. And as I think of her now,
 by this painted cliff, my god, again I slip,
 falling, exalted.

II. Figurehead

Because I prayed

this word:

I want

—*Sappho*

Summer landed and your love came at me
like a figurehead, bold Venus chiseled
into the prow of the craft. Wave-hungry,
demanding, you steered me down to the seabed.

I never thought you'd answer that prayer
with the promise of your body, island
with strange weather, rising and falling pressure,
mercury spiking in the peak season.

“I want” sounds ridiculous now, greedy,
but I'll say it. I want those beginnings,
brute but fluent nights without apology,
not even the husk or wound remaining,

stuttering mornings that cease to inter,
that propel, current after cutwater.

III. Virginitv: *Never*

again will I come to you never again.

It's that final, Virginitv's stone mind.

But I'm not a bride, never sang her lament,

Where have you gone leaving me behind?

because I never wanted to coax it back,

never mourned the slip, my beloved

approaching, our sweet and sudden going slack.

Mother, I love the gentle laws of the tongue.

And if I say these wedding songs amuse

me, that they hint at how far the ancients bent

toward love, careening forward, willing to abuse

the limits, would you nurse my impenitent

drive, or tell me to widen the gulf between

my love, make room for the Holy Ghost, (or Hymen)?

IV. Pygmalion Interlude

Sappho, Dannecker c. 1800

Just before she plays, in that moment before
hands begin to glance the anticipating
strings, before she breaks out of smooth recline, rights
herself to the pitch,

just before that moment, the makers' hands are
busy, holding her in a dream position,
tooling tirelessly at stone that never
felt that much like stone.

It is that moment, and the moment after,
when her mouth is fixed but alive, about to
part and sing, the ambition of song being
greater than statue.

V. Epithalamion

*...For her dress when you saw it
stirred you. –Sappho*

I quit the holy sacraments with penance.
Unconfirmed, and for the most part unreconciled,
I've been redressing myself ever since,

though half heartedly. A lover defiled,
I'm a rank one happy in sacrilege.
And even though we are not entitled

to marry, imagine if the privilege
were our rite—something felt like the evening
we throttled beach bound across the Bay Bridge,

past the median's Black-eyed Susans, clinging
to what? To words we may never possess?
By the sea there were more important things.

We dismissed *I do* for the cut of *Yes*,
moonrise as witness, a wink from Venus.

VI. In the House of Muses

The dress unbuttoning.

I wanted to believe in
the dress always unbuttoning.

Yes many and beautiful things

We did. I gather the wrack,
garlands of shells, brine
to outline her soft throat.

Once again that loosener of limbs

Stirs me. I touch her
raised places. Here, where the sea
glass slipped, and here, a lit mosaic.

The moon has set and Pleiades

Half the night is left.
But what if tomorrow
I still believe art is our wake, the aftermath?

Ordered Pairings

X. Man Ray's *Untitled* 1935 (from *Facile*)

The shadow of her
upright ink written body
curtains across her
outstretched light driven body
breasts in perfect origin.

X. Constitutional

As for marriage
they'll write us out with vulgar pens.
Our body of rules
will dismiss all semantics—
I am her watermark.

Aubade

What got into us that morning,
 salt-pure, incessant, you cleaved across
 in waves and left me for wrack? After,
 we were punchy in the sheets, musing
 about what to do with our remains
 well into afternoon.

You opted first for a sturdy coffin.
 I said give me the sea. You warned I'd float.
 And I thought of Millais's Ophelia,
 buoyant, palm-up in the rushes, garlanded
 by nettles, violets, the pansies for thoughts.
 Then weight me to sink, toss me over-
 board between islands and cities,
 between San Juan and Galway.

In bed we learned procedures for burial
 at sea. Dropped either by ship
 or aircraft, in casket or sailcloth,
 three miles out and six hundred feet
 deep at least. We agreed on the sea.
 But who'd go first? Who could visit?
 Could we do it together? Logistics heaped
 until heedless and cleaving,
 there was nothing between us
 but the stressing, the unstressing sea.

Acyanoblepsia (the non-perception of blue)

It could have been the sea,
impasto this summer, and the sky
between the rented room and the sea;
it could have been the distance,
fog off the field, shift
of a rare star coming toward us;
or been the shadow under her chin, nearing,
deepening when her hair falls loose.
Let it be this. And be this room,
the hours, the edge. And be soon,
her approach, lambent,
adamant, last light glazing
the bedside table, Irish linen
and scattered delphinium,
the unconditional perception of this.

Keeper of the Light

The summer I was keeper of the light,
 shuffling tourists through the Seven Foot Knoll
 Lighthouse, recounting how the barn red, wrought
 and cast iron structure marked the shoal

at the Patapsco's mouth for years before
 being cut from its screws, lifted like a saint
 in ecstasy and dropped in Baltimore,
 the fourth order Fresnel lens and the light

retired, the house turned to this museum,
 I longed for rainy days when I could hear
 weather against metal, and no guests came.
 In the barrel of the lighthouse the sheer

inward curve of the walls was conducive
 to being alone and to the happiness
 that sometimes comes from it, when we give
 ourselves to a strange and civil aloneness,

most bearable, as in this house without
 corners, as in this house of light that was
 once suspended over the river mouth.
 And as I think of other lighthouses,

(Continued; stanza break)

built to endure and open for respite
or rescue, what I would give for a window
to chart the concentration of light
past buoys and boats, past the sea I know

to be wordless as without border.
How I would stay useless as a grounded ship,
attached to the imprint light leaves on water,
beacons we can and can no longer keep.

PART FIVE

Scrutable Houses

After Elizabeth Bishop

My lover's son refuses to draw houses,
insisting he doesn't know how.
Maybe I am happy, relieved of the burden
of interpreting a child's rigid lines,
red crayon smudging into the blue,
tightly shut, four-pane windows.
And of a sagging roof, I'll never
have to guess at its weight.

But if he does draw a house,
let it be moonless and tearless,
without grief in the flower beds.
And if the path, winding away
from the house, later calls back,
Say I was the loneliest,
spare him that epitaph.

Preparations

Mornings I arrived at the house, the emptied
house, with rags and soap and a metal bucket.
Water still flowed clear through the pipes, the rust just
starting to fill in—

edge to center. Memory sometimes moves like
this, as if it wanted to still us, take hold,
bring to focus all that remains of past lives,
years in that farmhouse.

I remember scrubbing the walls and floorboards,
wetting cloth and wringing it out until I
heard the clean sound only, the water slipping
back into water.

Then I saw you framed by the window, yard bound,
counting every daffodil, this a final
preparation. Yellow and swarming fragments
make up the back yard.

And a bulldozer in the front yard grinds on,
here to raze the yellow now ready farmhouse.
I think *what good comes of counting flowers?* Then,
If not you, who will?

The Garden of Unmaking

*Flowers, unlike the faces of human beings,
appear to be the perfect size for imagining.*

—Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*

In the garden of unmaking milkweed
leaks. Thistle and sun spurge recently
mowed down turn cross in their lust to seed.

Morning glory rises with the pine tree
at the field's far edge, beyond the expanse
of panic grass bordered by rosemary.

This heaving gyre of mad abundance,
misfit coupling, is always on the verge
of combusting. Imaginable, dense.

This slow mind cannot contain the leaf edge
of certain climbers, nor can these quickened
fingers reach. Sense retreats in foliage—

passion flower leaf suggesting the child's hand,
his face, so difficult now to recall.

Mirror

I came from the grandmother's house, the dining
room wall opposite her 1916
Hamilton upright. Silver-lipped, I'd catch
her back in secret, glance the space between

us, the cherry wood table without bouquets
or placemats, dwell instead on the arc
of her arms possessing the keyboard, the back
of her head lolling like a meadowlark.

But when I glimpsed the yellowing keys, heard
the middle C well off its mark, along
with gruff lower notes, a piercing upper
register, tuneless, irrelevant, all wrong,

the room grew immaterial. In the blur
I missed it all, the loud pedal gone soft,
the bench emptied of her jazz band scores
and church hymns, the furniture carried out.

Still I keep watch, dull among these faceless
walls. I repeat myself through filming dust,
and mutter, come back, come back. I am
no longer exacting, far from exact.

Blacksmith

To find my home in one sentence, concise, as if hammered out in metal. Not to enchant anybody. Not to earn a lasting name in posterity. An unnamed need for order, for rhythm, for form, which three words are opposed to chaos and nothingness. –Czeslaw Milosz

Early Sundays our street was buoyed
By sounds coming down from the horse barn.
A pulse and clot of hammering surged
Through the house, sent by a visiting farrier.

As a girl I was afraid of that hunched man
Hammering, hands cooked in grease and char,
Body husked in a leather apron
From nape to thigh, sweating by the fire.

Now in my sleep an invited blacksmith comes,
Preparing his arsenal of tools for the dead.
Fire throbs its raw nerves in the oil drum,
But there are no horses anxious to be shod,

Only your name and your words to be rounded
Home in metal. Bending, pounding, he sparks
Uncommon pitch, iron and astral,
Your praises, your protests sentencing the dark.

Memory Wheel

We felt simple then, unadorned and clear.
Countless summer nights we coursed down train tracks
to a brick and mortar pump-house, a waterwheel
turning on its axis. The memory

of those summer nights we coursed down train tracks,
when the millrace rapids turned the iron wheel,
now rusts on its axis, the memory
of desire, unfurling its ember trail.

When the millrace rapids turned the iron wheel,
we tethered ourselves to the center
of desire, unfurling an ember trail.
Certain of our aim, the stream through the house,

we tethered ourselves to the center
of the brick and mortar pump-house, the waterwheel.
Once certain of our aim, the stream through the house,
we felt simpler then, unadorned and clear.

Ephemera

Raucous in the oaks
and drunk on volumes
of humid air, insects cup
and thrum their forewings late
this August night, summoning,
come to me, come.

Song tuned to the living, to sea green
fields in sun glare, vapor rising
in the gloaming, and fireflies.

I coveted after midsummer,
pressed flowers in the dictionary
of everlastings, lupine, larkspur,
creeping thyme, blue, the beloved
color of bees; hoarded
words and charms, snake skins,
moth wings in a painted metal box.

Scavenger with scrubbed Ball
jars on the sill, I thumbed
fireflies under lidded vessels, punched
constellations of air holes, black
holes. Kind and cruel
I killed for keeps.

(Continued; stanza break)

Mother of umbra,
it is late, and late in season.
The shining ones are gone.

Nights gulf with katydids
repeating their name-giving
three beat verse,
umbilical trick, the lyric
turning to vigil and *I am*
here.

Nacre

And if we favor the spontaneous
grain of sand lodged in oyster mantle,
making the black-lipped or gold-lipped mollusk
flinch and the soft body fuss to expel
the alien body, live miracle
of nacre, still we have to admit
the human touch in farming a cultured pearl,
our blunt coax and surgical graft of it.
We love a good implant. It doesn't matter
if it breasts by accident or intent,
only that layer on layer of nacre
pearl, nor matter that diving for the elegant
mother-of-pearl, smooth prism and mirror,
reflects our luster in a shell of error.

Aesthetic

When I tell my mother what I heard
this morning about the sense of birds,
that on a windy day they will kite,
perched in branches, riding sheer delight,
she is not looking at me but past
the deck as a starling, a nuthatch,
a redwing blackbird compose their bliss,
landing in pale green leaves. We notice
the breeze picking up, drafting the cold.
No matter. We steady and behold
birds miming flight in the willow tree,
replicating wing, sense, symmetry.