

four serpents of death

the first serpent, black, coils at your head, her
body arches over you, lying there on your left side
her open mouth claims you, curled
within her territory

your stillness makes you
strange, exposes an absolute disability
out of instinct I move to challenge her, venture a
rescue but you are dead and your body
is a question awaiting the care of others

two coroner's assistants help as she now prepares
to swallow you whole, wrapping you completely in
a white sheet, a grey blanket, sliding you as sealed cargo
from the stretcher into the back of a black station wagon

car doors slam, voices stop and the black body
moves out of your street with its secret of you, while those
who loved you are left outside your house
with a handful of pamphlets on grief
and a number to call if we want to see you again

purple

she breaks her freeze, weaves, sand breaks
open before her

behind her are scoops her belly has made; sacral
marks, fresh script, she tastes air for the movement
of time, she

is the cursive slide of twilight, the gentle
opening of the gauze of dream

she is the boat moored by the underworld, her
markings transmute the lifetime into narrative, her

shed skin the reminder of a body with feet that
marked the earth in ellipses

white

to some this is an upward tunnel, a kind of home
without settlement

she must be laboured, like a climb for height, there is no
going out, stars are merely a scattering of her atoms

inwrought too, she is the spinal matrix

she binds the incarnation with image and lifts this shedding
skin scale by scale, image by image, sheets of ice to the sun

flashes of a life dissolve into white ascent

blue

an atmosphere, she holds
the earth like a yolk

breathes clear light to
wait in the forewaters
of the sun

loved ones' thoughts of you
bear you into this sky

balingup

two hours lost on the backroads,
hills rocking and subsiding in greens and rosy blondes,
the kids so murderous with boredom and hunger we dare not
pass the pub, the only light in a town with its life put out

its queen, a barmaid who declares her challenge by
crawling her upper body across the pool table as
she plays her shots, wields her cue like a spear

her subjects fill the room, every one of them
watches her, has a postural hump, stained hands,
when caught in her attention they motion with incomplete
gestures, not unlike newborns

she breathes smoke over our children, ignores
us waiting, leaves the Japanese casual to stress
over our complex order

on the way out of town, our folly seems comic
ordering the seafood platter so far inland – and
by the time we make Balingup, the retreat of the Buddha, the night
is raucous with frogs, night light and two yelping
three-year-olds, delirious with the pleasure of our dark arrival

gimel

in this desert words of love stand shimmering between the sand
and the sky like the flames of the forsaken angels

I choose the white camel as it has the widest stride and
is at peace with the twilight

we leave when the sky is orange, the moon makes its cut, the
stars are like spots of blood and the cold promises nothing

we walk into her steamy camel breath, her sexy stride floats me on
the tide of movement as her breast breaks into cold night air

she counters the covert moving sands, the grains of erasure
and return as she carries me awake and asleep, making her way
via a scripture of stars

serpent and cow and horse, she is fire and salt, bone and honey,
she bears me away from the business of human community, blows
air in my lungs and prompts this heart with rhythm, she makes
this direction into a future

with the base syncopation of her footfalls, this white mountain is
the lantern of my soul and she is the walk

house of the sterile mother

finished with the confusion
of lives that spin from spools left
unattended, she sets her course with her back
to the sun, for Binah, the sterile mother,
has shown her every room in her clay house

within those walls, a mound of cells on the
axis between birth and death, this black queen cures
hope and smoothes futures

here women in white linen draw baths of milk
for the convalescent who, for a time,
are relieved of colour

you cannot camp with her,
pitch your tent too close, she only
keeps the company of that camel
who, lowering its heart to the sand,
kneels

children's hospital

the building is a stack of
beds waiting to be attended

the nurse struts past your bed
as though she's just been awarded
for walking without turning her head

your slack body a long crumple, you
look out a window and the winter on the other
side trying wildly to reach you is silenced utterly

inside the season is as constant as linoleum,
fluorescent light, a season of barium meals, lumbar
punctures, bandages

parents, sad ghosts kept chained to the beds
of their children, are separated for
the ministering of morsels of information, then
set free to wonder back to their children in relief, despair
or confusion

meaning-resistant phrases float
up and down the corridors: it won't hurt, it won't take
long, it doesn't affect most people, the doctor
will see you today

hospital villanelle

metal lift doors separate
and we are expelled:
as if from a cool room to a plate

on your bed, paralysed, you can't agitate
nursed by demons from the first circle of hell:
metal lift doors separate

the alloy needle pierces your vertebrae
milks your spine to trace a single cell:
as if from cool room to a plate

no one will say exactly what is at stake
in this sanitary pit into which you fell:
metal lift doors separate

IV poles drag children on leads as we wait
anorexics switch, scamper and yell:
as if from a cool room to a plate

the neurologist looks into my clothing to speak
and say, his chart upheld
he plans to extend your stay:
as if from a cool room to a plate
metal lift doors separate

ravens

they hang out at the dry end
of summer, silver-eyed, highly oiled
in the shadow of the equinox, scoring the air
with that acid drag, a sound
like an emphysemic sigh

on the ground they move like vaudeville
pirates, hopping around roadkill

if you were dead, they'd eat you, tugging with those
deep beaks, feed you to ugly babies with naked heads

unfavoured birds

marshals of garbage bins, croaking
like inebriated toads, despised by sheep farmers for
stabbing lambs in their birth-struggle, pecking the eyes
out of labouring ewes

chased, by posse if necessary, of smaller birds across territories
of air,

who would guess that it was you who, in one
Nyoongar story, sacralized our swan, lent your black feathers
to the naked, humiliated bird

and it is you who carries the unburied dead all the way to the sun

sappho

you may have lain with Artemis herself I think
for I felt your shadow as it fell upon the gate

only that archery can marry such wilderness
and grace, I can tell now by the attitude of
your chin, the depth of your suprasternal notch
what kind of poet you will be

a wolf lurks in your haunches, a doe in your breast
and your eyes hold the only question I may never
be able to answer

we have yet to speak and, though
I cannot match your humility, I am prepared
for this dialogue to collapse me
like water into ground

Artemis, whatever becomes of this love,
let her perfection take me mercifully

echo

his was a distraction you could build a house around, he
became a centerpiece in the garden, a sundial of sorts

what compelled her, as she bathed him each day with
hand-made soap scented with sandalwood and patchouli
dried him with a rose-coloured towel and massaged oil
into his withering spine

was a time past, before he'd looked into water, when
he'd looked into her, fascinated, he'd set his arms around her
to hold her just before he caught his reflection in the
birdbath

so there he stood, like a sculpture melting in the heat
of his own longing, a plant drying out, dying upwards, away
from the earth

they had to unhook his hands from the birdbath
in the end, how does a man drown in that much
water, they wanted to know

looking for himself, she answers

with my sister at the funeral parlor

with its carpet ticked in pink and beige,
hotel furniture, it could be a foyer, but for
our mother lying on the table

her torso prepped in white plastic, the underside
of her jaw heavily stitched from the autopsy

her hands borrow our warmth, there is
some talk, as we study her body for the last time;
the irregular bulges on her knuckles from
arthritis, her school-girl calves, the toenails we dreaded
our children might inherit, we mix up the tenses, sometimes
she is here and sometimes gone,

then we slide our arms underneath her, pass a length of
white silk, under and over, and again, the act of shrouding
stands us outside of anything we have ever done together;

elastics, the hand-clapping games, sliding up and down the back
end of the bath to make waves flood the bathroom, acting out
the Chicko-roll ad, biting tough batter in slow-mo mouthfuls
our acrobatic and dance routines, their critical, perfected finales

all of these acts of sibling co-operation, establishing timing,
rhythm, hand-eye finesse

wait outside the rosewood double doors while we, stand on either
side of a table to do this for the first and only time

yellow

sunflowers are powder-coated with it, petals
sticky with the weight of it

insects stripe themselves with it and eat it, scale
by scale it makes dragon magic over the biggest
koi in the pond

it falls into the bowl having wobbled off the
broken egg shell and must be spooned out
of the white

our child wears a ballooning vest of it
we bend over her worried face, murmuring
assurances before she is
lifted into the boat

it roasts the lemons on the trees, the snake
hiding in the cool of the restaurant restroom
is made poisonous with it

a colour of pride and cowardice, danger,
exuberance, illness, it is prone to exaggeration
at times unwelcome, it is often there anyway, like
all the flowering weeds on the street verges

pilgrim

rivers flow above us in the clouds, moody purple ranges stand
tethered to low forest plains of desert conifers

This is Namatjira country, with deep sand the colour of salmon
lone bull camels appear and disappear, a dingo skinny as a fox
jogs beside the car

my friend lays irises for her daughter in the place where she fell
where an Arrente hero stopped to roast and eat caterpillars

she has come to reconcile the dislocations – a daughter gained
in a marriage long dissolved, her remote death in country they
never shared

for two days she sits broody in the camper chair, her cup held still
on ten fingertips, then she moves like that woma python woman
from Uluru; the child a light under the sand of her

tasting the air, she enters a gathering in the centre of Alice, finds
the Arrente woman who gives her some words to see with, permission
to enter her land

we buy her paintings and drive into the desert

prayer

at Easter my grandmother's sister would
begin to pray on the other side of the world
with her Our Lady of Lourdes white rosary, its
French holy water in the tiny vial on the y-bend
long gone, leaving a crystal fog

her sibling here must have caught wind of them, standing by
the orange stick of a bus stop with her brown vinyl
trolley, waiting for the special service to the plaza
or tossing flaps of chicken coated in egg and flour and crumbs
into simmering oil

she had an oval vinyl purse, same brown as the trolley
with a metal clasp, a bankbook, and with these she
ran the house on a shoestring economy while mum
swam upstream in the workforce

our excess must have pleased
and disgusted her – our plates, loaded with colour, might
have fed twice as many in her language

though when sour, giving the litany of all
she did for us, she never mentioned others, the cousin,
for example, who later reported that every Easter her mother
would pray, and the money would come

white chickens

she keeps the pieces of three languages
in her apron pocket, often mixes them irreverently

her apron, a small linen square sewn on top of a
large one, two ties of white bias binding at
the waist, a nickel-plated safety pin on each breast

in the garden, she ties stakes with her
old brown stockings, and there
where her words fall carnations grow in tight auras of
crimson scent, peas scuttle upward

she allows the chooks, clean as swans, hungry as gulls to
scratch between the furrows, tiny clouds with muddy feet
tremble by the pickets to get at the weeds

a granddaughter watches her feed shining clothes through
the wringer on the whirlpool, catch dull flat shapes on the
other side, imagines herself going through, arm first, a flat
gingerbread version dropping into the basket on the other side

the child knows her grandmother cuts the heads off her beloved
chickens, cooks their feet in soup and, sensing the woman's servitude
to a larger life, wonders if she herself might be kept for some kind of
fattening

the reindeer

carves a path over the snow, antennae raking
the sky, dialling time backwards, tracking north

the girl on his back watches snow crystallise
on the conifers

she is searching for a boy who has glass in his
eye, whose blood is thickening with cold

she knows for him there are no more seasons, only
ice ages in which she, all mortal, must dissolve

yet still she is carried over a huge mammalian
heart and if this muscular certainty can transport her
there is direction

snow sighs under hooves, shoulders pump
a light sweat onto the fur of his neck, as they step, breath by
breath, into a final migration