

SIMON PERCHIK

■
Before you even saw a lake
or a river or an ocean
or lifted half asleep
with stars washing over you

—hours old and already you hear
the nights left over from the Flood
and in the distance one wave
waiting for more darkness

as if it had a twin somewhere
—your first bath —by instinct
another minutes later, an overflowing
the way each tide

never forgets the other
—two baths and after those
nothing matters, though all your life
you wait for just a trace

some splash you almost believe
you heard before —just born
and the warm hands under you
reaching out from the soft waves

—before you ever saw water
you learned to cry —a natural! bathed
and the night beginning to recede
to feel its damp sand creak

against what must have been the Ark
or the sun or your cradle breaking apart
under these stuffed animals
—a single dove clinging to the rail
and the first morning.

■
These clouds are never sure
climbing as if the sky is still mountainside
—will migrate till they're cold

then graze on snow, growing huge, dark
though when stars can't be found they sniff
for stones the way all trails are marked

break apart half ice, half some valley
falling toward evening —you can hear them
single file and even in sunlight

each drop takes on an unfamiliar shape
becomes the mourner who follows on foot
from darkness to darkness as snow

or thirst or an unknown distant path
with both sides holding on tight to you
to the still warm dirt, or nothing

—she's been dead for years
yet the rain stays frozen in this small stone
that splashes when your hands close over

tighter and tighter till it dangles motionless
and between your fingers and your lips
as if it could say something, tell you when.

■
You wet one hand with the other
the way Narcissus looked at that night sky
smelling from flowers, naked shoulders
could be anything in the dark

—with just your fingertips
prod an old cradlesong and this sink
still listening for seawater.

You almost hear the tides
locked in some death swoon
slowly freezing though the sun
will always lean too far
as if it too wanted to hear
what it sees in the outer air
the glossy darkness it can't recognize
half mountainside, half
needing more water —you bathe

every night, twice a night
one hand scalded by the other
by the sun the sun looks for —could be

an old lullaby led by the sky
that flows across and the hand
you thought you had forgotten.

■
You read these notices, half bronze
half marble, half the slow, climbing turn
that has something to do with your arms

—they make a presentation, offer the dead
page after page :trees still standing
birdsong stuffed with newspaper and ponds

and after each frost
the almost invisible cracks
—there’s barely room to kneel.

It happens every Spring, you wait
for the ice to overflow
loosen the darkness around all graves

—what you unfold is that fountain
continually leaving the Earth
to bring back these names where mourners

bathe their hands rotting in the open
and from your side the shadow
already going about its business.

■

Like those old men on the ward
afraid to deal, just shuffling cards
again and again and again till the rattle
frightens Death itself —on winter nights

the darkness needs still more dread
and I sweep snow across my kitchen floor
as every scarecrow :this threadbare broom
tries to get a better grip —the hungry flakes

aren't fooled, chew the straw
and from its windswept frost
a droning, shapeless giant appears
as if my heart would become the world
bring back the sun by morning —all night

nothing I point to is safe
or touch —Death listens to our hands
—I held a broom and now
it's winter, even this floor
is afraid —this snow

needs a feast :a last meal, more straw
clanking boards and chairs, served
from loosened sleeves and scattered legs
again and again and the sun
is blinded by the light, will fall

between all the other evenings
again into the world as if Death
doesn't hear the days flare out
and in my hand
the snow, the straw and staring.

■
—to be the darkness just forming
the way stonecutters still begin
—with each fountain, closing its eyes
and these stars too
trying night after returning night

—the trembling rush
that would become my heart
and even the Earth not spared
once it stops to rest —back to being
the heaviness that's now my arms
and the sun years away

—where else! a windowsill
weatherbeaten, exactly the same weight
underwater —here I can count
backwards, send off my lips
to the bottom that has no sound yet
—slowly at first and my bones
even now kept hollow for birds, roots
that devour morning after helpless morning

unable to climb —even now
I lean this side, then that
as if you are here still rising
from a sea, alongside clouds
—a gentle sound starting up
left empty and your beautiful body
filling with flowers
not yet these sweet-smelling stars
half way between my hand and my other.

■
Pulling the mirror closer
till an old love note
almost ignites again

—even two suns are not enough
changing colors
just for the fragrance

her breasts give off.
She cups her mirror
the way a sundial winds down

and the light slows for evening
—you will recognize these beauties
the golden shoulders now invisible

brushed among the leaves and cinders
filling her arms with arms, eyes
with eyes and your fingers on fire.

■

This puddle needs repairs
jack-hammers —I will rebuild
from bedrock, knock loose each splash
crumpled, one on top the other
—will repave so you can rest
on water trailing off

—in your sleep the rain
the fish beside you rise and fall
motionless and you listen

—I am building an ocean
and from its light
a moon to lean your forehead against
—your dreams still ache and their fever.

This puddle needs planks, bulkheads
—I kneel and the ripples
far off, deserted

—under your pillow you will listen
for a darkness leaning against the sky
a dampness :your heart
covered with stars, drifting away.

■
How could something so soft
do any harm —naked, its waves
once stones falling from some mountainside

sweetened by streams :a sea made beautiful
more voluptuous than arm in arm
when huge sails would shape a song

sent back to shore as evenings a few hours
from the stars floating off
though an empty bottle could mean

the difference, would fill your hand
and no one begging for help —you would hear
this sea before its first tide :a pulse

a light being born, already weeping
—how can it be, this bloodstained sand
caressed the way waves

are still scented, made graceful
to welcome the lost, the splash
and because it is the thing to do

you cup your hands for tears
give back to the sea more stones
adrift, one colder than the other.

