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Gold Stars

It was forbidden to touch
the Hummels in my aunt's pretty house,
arranged just so and shut
in the glass cabinet, pigeon-toed,
rosy-faced, holding kittens or balloons,
their porcelain bellies bulging
under pinafores and overalls . . .

and it was wrong to kiss
the high school janitor after track practice
against a concrete wall
in the band room vestibule
where a fake velvet blanket draped
the old upright piano,
and a long row of trombones tilted
in their shiny black cases . . .

but these
were the gold stars I gave myself
when I thought no one was watching
and nothing would get broken,
and I was brilliant: easing

the little brass latches
and reaching in.

The Physics of the Inevitable

My hometown mourns the farm boy
who kicked a cob stuck
in the combine's flywheel,
and I imagine his foot swinging just as he was thinking
I know better than this,
but it was too great, the weight
of his crusted boot,
not to follow through.
And I think

of the Viking ship pitching
in its greasy groove all summer
at Lake Schaefer, and how the carny said
it don't hardly take any juice at all to run this ride—
once set to rock, it just about
went on its own.

And I've made love like this,
the whole time thinking
how I wasn't,
the whole time my mind watching my body
as a thing in motion but not a mystery,
more like math—more like the arc of a burlap sack
tossed from Moots Creek Bridge,
then the heavy spiral
of rocks and cats.

Blue Mantilla

When you picked up the hitchhiker
on the road to Red River though I said No,
and he sprawled across the backseat,

filled the car with a stink of sweat
and shit and talk of duct tape, then dug
through his triple-knotted knapsack

for something awesome to show us,
twenty miles of forest from anywhere
in New Mexico's wilderness,

I hissed *Stop the car*, but you hushed me
and smiled eagerly, as if we'd lucked
into some great adventure.

I didn't turn to look at the hollow book
he pulled from his sack or the top secret items
hidden there, but sat very still, curling

my fingers around the door handle,
and the plastic Virgin Mary glue-gunned
to the dash stared past me, her mantilla

spread like the boughs of blue spruce
standing mute under the sky, blank
and huge and empty for miles.

Poem on the Road to Depose

My body is a sack
of black spoons,
and my dreams
steal from me.

My books are full
of bite marks.

The lights outside Milwaukee falter—
good morning, corpse candles.

I've come zealously to represent
my client and will not listen

to the click
of the black spoons.

Purified by diesel
and the long gray bone
of the sky,

I am limb-caught and swallowed
by the monstrous laws of the dead.

Lace Blouse

*Living never wore one out
so much as the effort not to live.*

— Anais Nin

Because it cost too much,
and I couldn't arrange my face
in the way such delicacy demands,
I left the lace blouse in the vintage shop
and bought coffee, more books.

That night I dreamed
of birds at the ocean, even then
scolding myself: birds again—
senseless, short-lived, crying on the breakwater,
hiding their faces beneath flimsy wings.

Slip & Fall

To guard against it, the grocery stores
put plastic mats in the produce aisles
with holes the approximate size and shape
of the typical grape. I'm talking about liability.
I'm talking about avoiding the awful snap
of collar bone on linoleum, the shatter
of graham crackers and bifocal glasses.

I've been worried about the birds I cut
from construction paper that didn't look
like birds but anvils or trowels. Anyway
they did the job. Fewer bloody splotches
against the glass, fewer reasons to feel guilty
for getting in the way of hunger and abject
joy. I've been lost in the oil slick

of a junco's wing. I'm dark and sticky with it,
but regardless, all day I've been singing a poem
about traveling, singing even as I reach
for the phone to talk about insurance and risk
and plausible options, singing even though
everything I dream these nights is forests
and hands and bones and the winter rattles me.

It's a song about the end of caution—
an onyx pendant slipping from my neck
and smashing on the supermarket's asphalt
where gulls are painted to ward off
a mess. But harm is not worth avoiding
if the cure is smallness . . . I wheel gladly beyond it
to the hole in the sky where birds are spiraling.