Nulla Dies Sine Linea

On my birthday

A crow guffaws, dirty man throwing the punch of his one joke. And now, nearer, a murder

answers, chortling from the pale hill’s brow. From under my lashes’ wings they stretch clawed feet. There the unflappable years perch and stare. When I squint, when I

grin, my new old face nearly hops off my old new face. Considering what’s flown,

what might yet fly, I lean my chin on the palm where my half-cashed fortune lies.

*

Blood Memory

Hunched in the bath, four ibuprofen gulped too late to dull the muscle cramping to sate a god who thirsts monthly for his slake of iron, I am just a body bleeding in bad light.

But after an hour, as the wrenching wanes, I run more water in, remembering when I was a girl my mother knew one cure for this pain and, while I cried, carried me mugs of tea and whiskey clouded with sugar cubes.

In a palm of pinkish water, I scoop up a burl of my flesh, almond-sized. The tissues settle, livid red to nearly black as I tilt my hand against the light to see it glistening like a ruby cabochon, appealing as it appalls, recalling one future, years ago, that would have borne itself on my blood had I allowed.

The question swims into view: would I harbor another life now?

Last spring, I sat above the harbor in Naples with three friends whose children, after a week’s vacation, were all safely back at school. Palpable, the holiday mood

**Poet V. Penelope Pelizzon**

Cardin Reading Series!
Thursday, April 13th at 12:15 PM
Dana 201 / Mali 1
https://penelopepelizzon.com/
a morning freed from offspring brought!
(I’d felt a guilty pleasure I’d go home
not to cook someone’s lunch,
but to read.)
Still, it wasn’t long before our talk’s
compass needle trembled north
toward the motherland:
soccer games in the Flegrean fields,
ancient sun
reborn and swaddled putto-pink
in mist above the fumaroles;
rococo
messes of gelato;
first words, whose honeyed gravity
weighed on me
like a toddler’s head
snugged below my chin in sleep.

Then, Serena described
troubles at her daughter’s school.
Their new principal refused to pay
the local gang’s protection money.
And so, the teachers
arrived at work one day to find
the hutches where the children kept
rabbits and a little clutch of chicks
overturned.
From the playground swings
the throat-cut animals hung.

Next time we come for you
someone had written across the door in blood.
Now the parents wanted
the principal to pay:
that was how these things were done.

Screw her ideals,
Serena heard.
That bitch is going to get our children killed.
A blade bossed with oyster floats,
the harbor glinted below Serena’s voice.
Into that water, Apicius wrote,
the Romans tossed slaves
to glut the eels they’d later eat
with tits and vulvae, succulently cooked,
of sows who’d aborted their litters.

And from that water,
fishermen pulled a girl
who’d been under
at least a week.
She may have been the missing one
the papers were reporting on
whose photo showed her
lippy, grinning, seventeen.
A week in that wake.
She was scoured of identity.

Water’s thick in Naples
as martyr’s blood
rusting in ampoules in the cathedral,
where it liquefies on schedule
—and it does;
I’ve seen the miracle—
to show the city’s
still protected by the saint.

I can’t remember, six months later,
loggy in my cooling bath,
if some net had hauled these images
writhing up at me that morning
   as we sat together
   near the harbor,
or if they’d tangled in my thoughts
that same evening after Serena’s dinner
   honoring Women’s Day.
   Across Europe,
lapels flickered yellow wicks of mimosa,
   marking the feast.
   And in Naples,
flowers fumed for women
burned on the flank of Mt. Vesuvius
   where they’d been sewing
   sweatshop zippers on fake designer bags.

   But as it did with everything,
the city managed to transubstantiate
   horror into carnival.
   With Theresa and Ellie
I’d walked home late along the harbor.
Fireworks seethed above the bobbing masts.
   Mirroring those harrier stars
   the water seemed to flame, while
   drowned in lights
   the Lungomare phosphoresced.
   Scooters rippled through
   the reefs of cars,
   barely slowing for schools of boys
   and women in flocks,
   stiletto-heeled, who stalked
   screeching over the cobblestones.
   From an alley’s mouth
   a gobbet of men disgorged.
One, drunker than the others, loomed
   over and bent his face to mine.
   Where are your babies? he hissed,
   spit pricking my skin.
   Get home to your babies.
Not just drunk but whetted, his glare
   stropped beyond seeing and testing its edge.
   You’re over-the-hill
   for trolling—is that what he meant?
   Or was he putting all women away,
   including the vampire-lipsticked teens?
Whatever he meant, he meant to make us bleed.

   I wince, drain chill water out,
   drizzle in a little
   more of the hot,
   and wonder at this habit
of holding others’ words as worry stones
   to fidget absentmindedly
   when thought goes slack.
   Agates of fury, quartzes of scorn.
   Cold in my ear’s palm,
   the hematite heaviness of a final no.

   And I still turn over my mother’s words,
   costly pearls,
   handed me years ago
   in a college project on oral history.
   She took my assignment seriously,
   agreeing to an interview
   as if it would allow
   her, too, to wash
through the wrack of half-forgotten truths.
   Painstakingly on tape
she recorded her life,  
lapped by sluices and hesitations.  
Her years in the Women’s Army Corps,  
screening films on safety and hygiene  
to bored enlisted men.  
Her depression.  
Decades as a secretary. Marriage.  

Until, near side B’s close, there gathered  
a final, muscled wave:  
how, when she was well past forty,  
her bleeding stopped.  
At first, she thought it was her age.  
Then—slowly, sickly—  
she understood.  
She’d tried to find  
a doctor who would help her, but  
(five months along, it was too late,  
even if she’d had the money.  
The tape’s hiss like receding surf.  

So here I am, at daybreak,  
adjusting the taps with my toes.  
I think we are shelled animals,  
hailed by tides, sleeking invasive grit  
with our nacre. I think of her  
hiding in the tub for half an hour  
to read; think how pleased  
I was, finding her, to pull her  
back to me.  

Little plumes of my flesh rock in the swells,  
but my body is bland now,  
yielding as kelp,  
and with my toes I pull the plug.  

Drained, I need a couple hours of sleep,  
then I’ll start the day again.  
And maybe, if I’m sleeping late,  
the dream will come,  
one that intrigues me almost  
more than it disturbs, in which  
I’m falling, bound,  
into a bay of blood-threshed water.  
Fear ties me; brine  
bites my lungs and I can’t breathe.  
Then, with a clarity I mistake  
for waking, I wake  
below trees, at a table laid  
variously with meats—  
meats I realize,  
from a shudder in the grove’s air,  
are human.  
It should be awful; it is awful.  
But with a calm  
familiar only here, a calm  
I’ve never known in any other place,  
I find myself longing to taste  
the dish’s savor,  
braised and stuffed, as Apicius writes,  
with larks’ tongues.
To Certain Students

On all the days I shut my door to light,
All the nights I turned my mind from sleep

While snow fell, filling the space between the trees
Till dawn ran its iron needle through the east,

In order to read the scribblings of your compeers,
Illiterate to what Martian sense they made

And mourning my marginalia's failure to move them,
You were what drew me from stupor at the new day's bell.

You with your pink hair and broken heart.
You with your knived smile. You who tried to quit

Pre-law for poetry ("my parents will kill me").
You the philosopher king. You who saw Orpheus

Alone at the bar and got him to follow you home. You
Green things, whose songs could move the oldest tree to tears.