Our Lively Kingdom

Our lively kingdom’s now broken
into village plots that others love to visit.

The Happiness plot rendered through
refuse of the old argument
and memory of two bodies pressed by sheer heat.

Perennials and herbs grace the kitchen window
of its sweet cottage
but really almost anything can grow here—even last year’s annuals
come shunting through with a tiny roar.
Long Distance

I’m listening to him
listen to me over the cell phone line

a low shwoosh of small stories
meant to close a gap in time we’ll have

when I return. My voice a slow trickle
like rivulets of river water over stones.

I watch a bird darting in the underbrush
as I tell him a story of our daughter’s phone call to me.

He responds by telling me he is staring
out the back window of our kitchen

at our dog on our porch who is staring at a bird
in our backyard. He heads outside to put the phone
to the dog’s ear to see if he will recognize my voice.
He says the sound of me
does not recall me for the dog. I laugh.
He says mmmm which is different than hmmm.
Marriage Bed

The marriage bed is a village of strange love
where knowledge grows less sharp, less exact.

Ghost or spirit-guided, the bodies follow
as friends might follow each other’s shadows in the too-dark theater.

One feels the other there, one knows the other’s patter of footfall
on the dirty carpet. Likewise, the bodies

torque and form their nighttime language, each limb a small animal
seeking comfort, sustenance.

Somewhat deep in the dream of each of our nights
there’s a small hurt that renders meaning.

Caress lingers on the sheets, a light dusting,
and the day begins again, un-remembering and un-making

that which must be felt again each night, the question repeating
and the question being answered.
Poems for My Birthday

I.
On November 6, 1962, I was exactly one, held in the arms of a mother of four. I was the fourth, the chubbiest, the stillest, easy to manage. She placed me inside the carriage. Fixed the blanket with her eyes on something else. She hurried inside to finish her work and did not watch the slow trio, my grandfather pushing the carriage, flanked by the curious black-haired 3-year-old girl, grey-eyed, like the doe, unflinching. That day, as my nonno strolled us up and down 246th Street in Bellerose, Queens, Sylvia Plath wrote three poems in her cold London flat. It was cold. We can know this now. My sister hummed. My grandfather squinted at the unusual November sun, each of us bundled in ’60s flannel. My mother wanting to nap but no, scrubbing a pot, delivering a cup of tea to my cranky grandmother, figuring out dinner. She stands still for a minute, rubs her palms against the sides of her apron. She isn’t thinking much. But she can feel the afternoon waning. My grandfather has returned with the two of us and there are so many next things to do.

II.
When my mother was 57 I was 15. Fives plagued us that year, five decades, five kinds of ways of dying. We died a little from each other. Her marriage and everything that could slip did, tangling on the floor at our feet. This is my birthday today. Today I am 57. My mother does not call to wish me a happy birthday. She has forgotten. When I call will she tell me the story? how easily I came, an afterthought, a bright accidental penny, something good that grew around her like protective uncomplicated vines?
She noticed blossoms here and there but liked the vine as well in winter, in the depths of stillness, the child, to the woman, to the bowing branch. The sound of our wheels on the crackling ice of 83rd Avenue returning—doctor, dentist, department store—we’d burrow into books and television, and cooking.

I’d shadow her.

III.

Gulliver, too?
Did Plath write this one last in the day, about the monster on his back? Was she thinking of tyranny, of giant hands holding her or of the sound of the name so close to gullible, gully, Gullah, gulag? At the same time I’d reached baby hands to the sky to be lifted out of the carriage she’d been raising hers, manicured and perfect, perhaps to the wrong god. Gulliver did not understand what way his present body could be scorched and tortured by the less powerful, and yet there he was, abandoned to a parallel world of moon and stars, of desires that were no longer his exactly.

When the phone rings I think I won’t answer it, but then I do. It is my mother, in fact, and indeed she’s called to say her leg hurts and she is worried about my daughter. The baby in the carriage learned well; I close the door again now that she is too old to receive me.
Octave

The car’s a flimsy capsule
I realize as I try to
drive and to sing

Where should I start?

My son the singer
anywhere
Growing up
8
was my favorite number

I try to reach it first

That’s not even a third
maybe 2½ laughing

I’m still driving us forward

but my voice pausing
yielding
backward—the car seemingly
moving without me

dooooooooo

I start again—singing
makes me drive more slowly—

Once, twice, and again

I hit
the octave—doe

I drag the high “doe” out
to be sure I’ve hit it
to convince myself

In time, the boy beside me

amused
amazed that what floats
easily between his lips
is hard work for this woman
who bore him

My hands grip the wheel—what is
the direction of the octave—
a low and a high but the same—?
a mystery to me
as all music is

Is there an octave in the poem
I break–remake–consume
without effort?

The car our shared oxygen—
    our guide
now dangerous
    it needs guiding

The road
on its own cannot be laid out in octaves
And love

certainly

not like an octave at all

or maybe—the low the high the same? but driving is different

and we push ahead—

pace & mastery at odds
my hands grip the wheel

I try again to hit the note but can’t complete it

I navigate through a bad pass
from 93 to 95—show my son
the way
the breakdown lane

becomes a fine place to travel
with permission
Some Loved Object

Now here, now there, the roving Fancy flies,
Till some lov'd object strikes her wand'ring eyes . . .

Phillis Wheatley, “On Imagination”

She was the master
weaver
could thread hair, silk, leather
could speak even when
not spoken to
could conjure quietly
she had a mistress

but she was master
of the penned things that rose
above her desk—their lamplight song
the messengers—
reported her goings on silently

first, they bought her home, a little girl
to name and feed, to teach the Bible to
she so
quiet in her bonnet

and then they led her nightly to
her song she threatening to break
books’ bindings
pages bound but open

just like her to
She understood that it was Winter that kept her mostly while Fancy kicked up the loose dirt around the cobblestones of 18th century Boston

where She was free to roam and write. I had never been to Boston

when I read the skinny paperback, its yellowed pages

I was fevered, maybe 9 years old

both my grandparents died
in the room where I began to read
of Phillis
born poet, stolen from Senegal. Of her mother? No.
Her father: a prince, a king, a farmer?

As remote to me as Jane Eyre—only Phillis fixed
in history while the other
lived only in Fancy
or were they both of Winter made?

Phillis married and died. And in her marriage it’s possible she never wrote again, or maybe wrote the songs of the truly loved object, but what it was, I didn’t learn that day fevered and full of love

for the Girl who’d done slavery so spectacularly
Mercy

She draws her lines with a dull pencil
while others fold their sheets of paper
evenly in four
sharpening creases with stubby fingers

She likes the way her sections
divide unevenly
and force each drawing of the 4 seasons
into secret rooms

When the teacher shifts
between the rows
collecting the children’s pages
this girl will not say no

but will hand it over
as if she knows already that the slight shame she feels
should not be hidden
What has she done she wonders?

Her page floats above the others
her winter drawn widely with loose strokes
her spring pinched
its lines crashing the corners to fit
Charlotte’s Zinnias

Each pop of brazen orange or hot pink quivers
as Charlotte’s legs cross over her hand-made fence
her basket following in the mess of multicolored swiss chard
and flowering basil. I head the tops of the green stalks
as we talk of the zinnias, amazing and flourishing.
Bees. Their deaths and births discussed.
And chard. How you can freeze it. Charlotte
knows how to enjoy a good day
as they come less often in New England Augests when you’re 83.
_How can you not love the summer?_ Charlotte says
recommending I take one more short-cut
neon bath of zinnia into my dirty fist. And also she’s reading a book
about Chekov and how he became Chekov
which is a novel she says, a story about what he might have been
before _The Cherry Orchard_, and also
he never wrote a novel though he’d intended to.
I suppose that’s a fact inside the novel I must read.

It’s good, as we pick more zinnias and chard, my grip loosening,
that Chekov might be a person who was not yet himself
ambling, showing up at a person’s house to rent it for the summer
in this time or a time before, and Charlotte
an old woman in his time or mine. That’s

what is left in my head when I remove the small beat up
zinnia that could not stand with the others.
And as I snip the others at tight slants for each end to absorb more water
I am smiling on an August day while the old tip of a most pink
zinnia leaps somewhat across the sink.
No Heaven

All day I hear my own words
like the fancy words of a precocious kid
that kind of annoying. No heaven. This is it. We have to
get it right.

And then at night I think yeah right, we have to
but the day’s gone badly. I yelled at my dear old mom,
94 and all her wits, as she said she’s all there but wishes
she wasn’t. And I kept saying no heaven
and there she was with her tiny face searching

mine the way she used to to see if I’d been to church
or just said so. As though she knew that earlier that day
in the parking lot of the Barnes & Nobles
the wind flapping in our faces, our son distracted and
walking ahead of us through traffic

my husband and I had looked at each other after
smashing car doors behind us and said it together
there is no heaven psyche
this is it baby this is it.
Poem for Our 31 Years Together

Ever since I learned
that Julia Child’s favorite snack after a long day at the set
was a martini and McDonald’s French fries, shared with her beloved Paul

while the fries were still hot she’d recommended
don’t fold the paper bag over the little cardboard box

with the idea to keep them crispy, each fry wrapped in its salt and
meat grease,
the stored heat there to match the cold freeze of the vodka,

I knew our path was set. I am not sure how many olives she’d prescribed,
though for us they are like a briny vegetable pairing to the full meal
cornered by tongue and glass,
a couple, like us.
Bird Walk

On the wire woven through the trees
the bird—gray, larger than a swallow—
lands, seems frantic
to hear a call returning her high caw.

I stop beneath the tree
half thinking
we are waiting together

but my dog grows impatient
tugs for the next sniff near the end of the block
he, too, feeding on breath
and instinct and I let him
tug me along.

But I keep listening behind me
for the distance between
the end of the bird’s one high shriek and then another
turn to see the slight cock of her head
as she waits for sound to be met by sound
a companion
who does not seem to be anywhere near.

What waiting is is never clear
but I can feel it now
as something close
to this lost sound
a vibration nearly recovered and nearly returned
to the original vibration
the original shrill of need or love.
Love Visits Us

after Sylvia Plath’s “Kindness”

O Love, you flat-footed, awkward girl,
you sit at a table too short
for your long arms, your bony elbows,

waiting for us grownups to speak to each other, but we are busy eating, paying bills, marking our books with dog ears.

Bored or terrified you push yourself away again, fingers lifting one by one from the table, and absently touch your face.

Outside, you keep walking, the sky a blue you swear you have never seen before. In summer

you are surer of yourself; you briefly warm me with a tight embrace so that I remember how it’s always been. But in winter, Love, you are more silent, perhaps shy, embarrassed to take me with you into the core of things, into the press of familiar arms, into the breath

of the man you held out to me so many years ago when I, too, was a summer girl.
Beginnings, in December

When I press my fingertips together and make
a tangerine-size space that the light comes through

I see God there a little bit—a glowy something

I try to press deeper in
past the flesh and bone

my breath pulls into it to hold it there
deeper    stiller
and I worry about dying then

about how my small cradle of energy    of light    of what I think is God

will bounce along quietly and suddenly
into a new space

who will remember
how I cry all through Advent

and cry for not remembering

each other light

each cradle I have shaped

been shaped by