Assembling the Navy Wife

Fragile, hollow—I make a new woman
from these animal bones, a ghost that will disregard
roof and walls. Cardinals come to collect
her marginalia, drift in and out
of her ribs. If these birds had names, she would
call them Daughter I Do Not Have, Mother
of Pearl, Herring Bone. They button their past
tense into her body as they swoop in cursive.
She is not held together by muscle
or tendon, but brittle memory,
the sinew and gut used to sew flesh
to animal hide; my fingers grow stiff
around my needle. This is not a contract,
these stitches, yet here I am trapping myself
inside her. She’ll never know
that I talk to a piece of red linen
as if it is her soul. Leave your dead by
the roadside, leave your wells covered, there are
so many ways to die yet every day
she’ll live as if by habit. Breathe in, breathe out.
But, it’s I who might blow out the lights, drop
her hand, extinguish an entire town
with the waves gathered beneath her gown.
Pistol of Bones

I live in a green house on First Street
like a figment passing through rooms,

almost less than plaster and lathe, horse
-hair smoothed into walls, pine trees felled

a hundred years before I drank the sun
and rain, rooted deep in silence and sleep

married to a man who flooded our
bedroom each night, never sat at the table
to eat, nor took his pleasure in me. Listen
to the way oh is the surprise we know

with our mouths—my moon, my cottage,
my storms that blew acorns onto the tin

roof. I measure and sew my days
together—floral and nothing I would

buy again or hang myself in a new life,
the one without a man, the one where I

understand the marrow of words tastes
nothing like the marrow of bones.
You are a deer, my Dear, and not quite here, so I am alone and braid this green season into our empty house which in me is like a singed piece of silver thread being stitched through my center as all new homes are, and unfamiliar. Marriage is not salvation; it is waking with horses in a field, an apple resting in dirt, a deer with its belly slashed open, iron leaves of blood. My husband does not draw the knots out of my tongue. Somewhere the redbud trees are blooming the way bodies bloom beneath the earth, full of what they’ve left undone, and oh, tell me I’m not the only one who fears having her center plundered and known. I set out a bowl of red plums and study their skins from the other side of the room until my skin too is drenched. I’m red as a bowl full of cardinals clustered together before they break away. I’ve watched a female flit in and out of the chain link fence and see the male follow her to gulp down her dusk. Isn’t he bright, the way he takes her everything? These are the mornings of black snakes looking for warmth on rocks, and the blood smell thick and heady drawing mosquitoes, the moan of the trees protesting the wind, and the harmless distance of the stars’ light we cannot see by day. This is not to say one of us is the deer and the other is night, or earth, or the green of a summer evening, but that we are the dark with antlers by the roadside and spring grass grown high, the cricket chirp and gravel dirt crunch-scuffed beneath boots, the headlight beams into a slice of country and a fence, yes, the way fences pretend to hold back fields which can never be held.
The Navy Wife’s Alphabet

Night grows beneath the skin of my wrists
and I’m tilted on my axis, looking out the window

at a black cat climbing through the branches
of a cottonwood tree. This world

with no edges, and another midnight I’ve promised
to someone dear and lost, the slow drag

down to nothing that makes me
believe in the truth of the church

sign which reads: Are you a figment
of someone else’s imagination? Like trying

to train horses to gallop on leashes.
Love, I am alone with an entire alphabet

carved into the gnarled bark of trees, four initials
at a time and all those signs—plus, plus, plus.
It was the year we’d replanted
the old garden—the rhubarb still sturdy
and bitter, the compost pile full of oyster shells.

Leaning out our window at night I’d memorize
each feral sound, the animals that would keep me,
how the stars represented love as a series

of distances. I knew that an inexact heart could
build its own wilderness. Whether or not I wanted,
black snakes lived near the tuberoses, & the blueberry

shrubs grew laden with tart indigo suns. I’d lie
awake at night beside him feeling nothing
but their blue skins, and instead of smoothing

them, in the morning, I’d begin by tossing
the comforter over the rumpled sheets. Already
I had learned how to live on what I alone could

gather. What I imagined marriage gave me was
no more than the maple flaming at the end of our
driveway, which would someday soften into to ash.
Instructions on Becoming a French Prostitute

Move to Paris. Practice rolling your tongue past words like *Les Fleurs du Mal*, your lips as they grip every *vous*. Do this while brushing your hair in the nude, never naked, always nude. Acquaint yourself with lingerie, the exquisite hand-tatted lace, rough-edged where the silk threads end between your legs. Your legs, your bangs soft trimmed straight, eyelashes coated with thick charcoal dust. By now you’ve studied the soft lamb-skin wallets in hotel bars, the blends of silk and wool suits, scarlet linings. Change your name to Scarlet, your number on speed dial, elevators and keycard access, your white leather bag filled with tight jeans, dark glasses (for after). His silver hair recedes, and a firm careless hand moves through you. Diamond-mouthed you take him, leaving nothing of yourself.
Outside my house there are men heating up
the newly paved road with a blow torch. Their fire
sounds like an airplane engine. In orange
and yellow vests they make me think of what needs
protection, not the fruit of the fig tree from
wasps which will burrow deep inside, not the tadpoles
birthed into the brackish shallows that will
nibble an outstretched palm, but the piece of me still
circling into my husband’s ear, his mouth,
measuring herself against his bones as I sit aching
at my desk, bent and white as a swan, hollow
as honeysuckle wrists. The wind blowing outside ruffles
the men’s hair. They parade back and forth
to their truck like peacocks, their words dissolve before
I can hear. My husband’s words have found
the shady edges like snow in early spring, they glint
from the sunless rims like amber holds a frozen
sun. Look and there’s the curve of a beetle’s wing, a tiny
continent of stillness, dust. Any warmth now
and my scars flare. The life below the one that shows,
wriggling to come, to know itself black as tar
and indistinguishable after the men are done. I get up,

head for the kitchen to dive into lunch. The coral
mouth of a torch goes out, there are small fires sutured
to me tight as a blush. I wish for a dozen birds,
for sunlight to strike my throat ruby, bare—a woman,

a bell, a magnolia bloom, the same uninvited
wolf sitting in my dining room chair.