

DEVON FIGUEROA-WALKER

PERSISTENCE OF VISION

I, too, was the prison
 guard—bribed by faith
into bringing a new-
 born to the cell of a martyr
hell-bent on gratifying
 the silence she deemed
divine. I am
 the one who watched her eat
what we call the free
 banquet—but only after
the infant's mouth gave up
 the warmth of his mother's
milk. I don't remember
 the name she gave
the child, but it appeared
 to have the hunger of a man
who spends his hours building
 walls that will one day be believed
holy or justified or merely
 useless-beautiful. Perpetua held
the bald head up, as if it were cast
 of bronze, so cumbersome
it seemed, so beyond human
 need. Still, her
death meant more
 to her than any life, for life
is not so permanent
 as its reply. "Do you see
the vessel?" she asked
 her father, the father
who stooped and wrung
 his hands in the damp cell's
air. "Can it be called
 by a different name?" The day
arrived, resigned to its recurrence;
 and the executioner
watched his aim forsake
 him till Perpetua raised
the blade to her throat, said, "cut here."

II.

To ensure the convergence of images, place/ the thaumatrope stem between the palms.
Proceed to rub the palms/ together as furiously as possible, as if you were stranded

in the woods without matches, as if many lives/ depend upon this friction, and you will/witness
the naked/ oak find its lithographic/leaves, the empty/ vase its levitated arrangement

of freesias; even the swallow will concede/ to its cage, knowing enclosure is only
an extension of warmth, the exact magnitude of which your ear encounters when you touch it

against the belly of a body recently filled/ with the kind of movement you could see. Leave
your face there/ long enough—the fugitive/ warmth you feel will be your own.

III.

I drive to the lookout you never tired of. Cape Perpetua. The sky
is rare, as in, unburdened of rain, and I
buckle up the bag of you, as if a bad
driver could still disassemble you. I do not let myself
imagine the color blood turns as it boils down past liquidity, down
to what cannot be said
to be needed any- more; though I do imagine the mauve dress I slid into
one foreign morning, all its bronze bugle beads
sewn by hand, its pleats of taffeta pressed past
perfect. It was more than I could pay, but I paid—

IV.

When I sleep, I'm many
things, sometimes a lamp shedding
her halo on the scene
of a crime no one knows
to call a crime. Other
times, I'm the wall-
paper stamped with wilting
irises bound in brown
ribbons. Other times, I'm
the oxygen reaching inside
a child whose speechlessness
remains unclaimed, looking
to find what's left of wonder.
But lately, I'm a dormitory
full of nightgowned girls, and I
burn so fast no one can touch
me, not by my searing

knobs, nor my blistering
parquet. My walls oxidize
so rapidly, the furniture doesn't know
why, and the girls
pound their fists on my locked
windows, raising what voices are left
to them. They want to know why
the streets outside me still exist.

V.

I spread it over your bed, like a brushstroke meant to stay
there, and it stayed there till you hid it safely away, awaiting
the right occasion. But the occasion was never right, and when it arrived
it was only a flash of light no eye could see, a searing convergence of nylon and the U-
shaped hyoid, two silver fillings, the floating
ribs, unharvested— If
I had to give a swatch, say, to match that dress to its day, I'd gather
a handful of Dead Man's Bells—knowing as I do how they run
rampant up this crazy drive toward the parapet, the parapet

VI.

In my absence, everyone/ describes me/ as saintly, and I/ can only think
of The Song/ of Bernadette, in which there is a body/ of water that drinks
up sickness as a plant drinks up the light/ we orbit and fear, making of it nourishment.

My shadow continues/ to accompany me, as if it were my friend and not/ ready
to thin, dim, double, and depart in the hours I need most to be/ reminded
I remain. In my absence,/ my blood knows its place, and my name/ is nothing like lament.

VII.

I thought the scent of singed Rieslings would never leave
me, my pores, nor would the deep-dwelling hymenoptera
cease their exodus—each population crackling, aswarm, helixing up and out of
the soil—miraged membrane of impending
ash, the August sky gave up
its azure as what lay beneath gave up its green. My mother's
fists flew high and at their highest lifting burst
open, released a brief bronze haze of lately-turned earth—
so quickly swallowed by the rage of orange and onyx
underfoot. Her voice, too,
flew high, though indecipherable within
a polyphony of hums and spatting and snapping
strings of a pure heat's speed. I ran the length of three
parched meadows, bare feet pricked purple by thistle whose pith

VACANCY

I wait for the universe to stop parading its mysteries as if they were new,
as if they were worth more than my beholding. The stars go on robbing

the night of severity, exhausting themselves, their inadvertent glamor
taken to be evidence of sanctity. I am what gives sanity permission

to continue, like the absence of light through which light moves
to arrive at its own name. I arrive at this day, at this almost wholesome

hour, without invitation. Those who look at me kneel down, implore
the vacancies that will never leave them to leave them, as if this were

required, as if they had not been born robed in the music of their own reply.

