

M. Brett Gaffney

Inside the chapel

the executions are quick and accompanied
by music, a hymn chosen by the women
who, one by one, sit in the chair.

The congregation watches quietly,
hands in laps, good books closed.
They know why this needs to be done.

It is the will of God that the sisters
be sacrificed, their wombs as barren
as the community's crops.

Eyes rolled up to heaven, the women
writhe with passion for their Lord.
Only when the arrow pierces forehead

does the organ silence, the last note
a signal to reload the mounted crossbow.
The priest asks each if they understand

what is happening—they do. They whisper *yes*,
chapped lips parted and jaws slack,
drunk on their own coming oblivion.

They have not eaten since the conviction
and those who have waited longest are delirious,
claiming to see angels at their side, angels holding

their hand, angels firing the crossbow. Only one
struggles, leaps from her seat to sling communion wine
into the crowd, holds the chalice as if it's her own child.

She wails and she weeps and for this she is spared
another day and another day until she is able to take
her death seriously, with the guilt and regret and prayer

it deserves. Standing by the altar like a statue,
pale as our ivory Virgin, she pleads one last time
with Father Joseph but he does not listen.

As her sisters are carted away with as much care
as sacks of flour, the rebel grows meek,
fingering her gown like it's something to eat,

her hair now a tangle of tears and sweat,
mouth agape and drooling penitence.
On the Sabbath she is seated and on the Sabbath

the congregation stands and *Salve, Salve, Regina*
fills the rafters and the girl remembers her baptism,
how the river flooded her ears with its water song,

fish skirting her ankles on their way downstream.
That day the sun was bright and she called it God
and oh how warm the sharpened creek stone,
how sweet the blessed blood.

Feeding the Dead

Her name is Maria, *comida*.
They eat her a little at a time.

She likes to be needed, to feel her blood
ebb and flow from their mouths,
tongues like whales lost at sea.

She travels with them, a shadow,
city to city, sneaking them pockets
of herself on the train, offering
her slender wrists
 like holy bread in taxi cabs.

Over time her face pales like the sugar
skulls on the streets of Culiacan,
where her father told her stories
of monsters who stole women
for their beauty, warm lips. *Papa*
she'd say, *that won't happen to me*.

But Maria, *comida dulce*, never knew
creatures this grateful, humble
in asking her to be theirs,
blood-companion, their sated sighs
like a river flowing its waters down
down to thirsty children in villages
forever burning,
 such fire-teeth.

They are her children and her
guides. This new life—a tinderbox.

Oh, papa she wants to tell him
if only you could see how they need me—
more than those boys next door
with hands like clumsy vines,
skin sun-kissed and greedy
—how at night they stretch open
like wings, like stars, like hungry pups.

The smallest one, her favorite,
asks her if she misses home
and its holidays, autumn always
a hard season, the hiding months.
Maria braids the girl's hair and sings,
lets the question slip to dawn.

Sometimes she wants to light candles
and dance in a dress the color
of hot candies—

Día de los muertos,
where feeding the dead means leaving
sweets and ripe fruit in graveyards,
where our bodies are still our bodies
and we find the way back to lit houses,
windows open and bright to remind us
the darkness can only stretch so far
before we decide to leave it behind
or let it burrow within us and feast.

Maria puts her monsters to bed,
sits to lazily stir beef stew in the belly
of her bowl. She leaves it on the table,
watches the sun rise over the strange
new city, nightgown swallowing her
tiny frame. She's never felt so fed, so full.

Hellhound, Lost

Wandering pup—devil dog, heart full of smoke,
digs up gardens, little graves,
 sheds a coat of gunpowder across this city.
Shreds of souls hang from his jowls like tired trash.

Beast of reckoning, of judgment, rests at the crossroads
of alleyway and back road, cries to a moon
 that has forgotten his name.

Red-eyed stray trots in the rain, looks into houses,
through cracked doors, windowsills, these barriers
between light and dark, watches families
with warm laughs, sitting around the fireplace.

He whines,
 soaked with longing,
and a Labrador lifts her head, barks, as if to say
 there is death. I see him,
 and he is like me.

Some day he hopes a pair of hands
like this mother's with her soft crochet,
will fold over his face, smooth past
 the licks of flame and flea to find
 the hound with cracked paws,
 sleepy teeth.

One day, he thinks, they will wash the blood
from my bones, bring me a bed full of raven feathers,
feed me animals I have not killed,
 chickens maybe,
 whose wings were never made for flight.