

Heather Bowlan

Birthday

I've lived 32 lives
and in each one I've been a panther.
I startle myself awake each morning
with my baby-cry.
I hide in trees, the poplar, the white oak,
mark the clearings
and the wild things too in love
with the open to leave it.
Then in the gloaming
I let my all-over cloak down,
rasp at each corner with my sandy tongue
until it seals itself over
every inch of skin.
I leap into the valley's dark corners,
look out from the overhangs veined
with the bloody memory of copper,
find the deer and timber-rattlers.
Shake them awake. Let my eyes go green
in the hunter's way. Watch the stars
like candles, marking time.

Tall Tales

The summer comes when the swing
on the Japanese maple breaks, and that fall
the bees sting one by one until the nest won't hum,

no matter how many times we hit it.
When we run away, we find a fountain
in a flower shop three blocks down

and wish hard for a hat made of perennials, but the crones
running the joint are wise, they call the cops.
Customers stand around and whisper instead of buying forsythias

while we loiter by the orchids and count pennies greening
in the fountain water. We hate forsythias. Who remembers this?
We grew up in houses too big or too small,

in love with our dresses and grand displays
on staircases until our hair dulls its baby-shine.
Cue a few feet taller and we do so much to forget,

amphetamines and gin, but when the acid
kicks in all we see are white bears marching down the street.
They say you remember it wrong, your glass house,
you forgot the blue, the purple, the green.

The Miraculous Neil Diamond

Dear M, I visited your rose garden,
and now I'm back home, jonesing. Forget orchids
and stargazer lilies. I've got the afterimage
of Mercury Rising on my eyelids, coral paling
to white at the core, or how about Grand Amore,
Technicolor fist-sized clusters beaming like
Dorothy's shoes. Send me just a few citrus petals
of Sheila's perfume for a midnight snack
or the resin buried in the Rainbow Sorbet
for the bedstand. A second look at Neil Diamond's
fuschia whorls & crisp white petals and maybe
I'll taste the flowers in your names.
Familiar, then forgotten, then sumptuous strange.

Benediction

The first word of this aching morning:
surface. The second is blurred
even as it forms, but it could be *sift*, or *bridge*,

or *pivot*. I taste concrete.
As surely as if I'd bitten my tongue
it wells up, begins to harden into another day

of not moving from this bed. Hair slick
as tarp on the pillow. If there's only the order
of the twisting streets in London and Pittsburgh

in the maps taped over the aging stains
and godawful paint on the walls,
and the thrum and moan of Nico's harmonium

buzzing on repeat through blown-out speakers
in the corner, *that will keep me safe*.
I say this to myself, never looking away

from the blank ceiling blotted out by pallid light
as though a few minutes before, a storm's blind eye
crept in to force stillness onto my mind's wild windings,

so full of solid and broken lines they're leeching
out of my skin. My eyes open against
the labyrinth that bends and tangles outside the door.