

Wife X

Penelope

1.

We brought the baby
home. Sweet feet, tiny boots.
“Telemachus, we’ll call him,” you said.
Yes! Telemachus. Like a whistle
through my lips. *Far from death.*
“Yes, please, far from war,”
I kissed his warm belly,
his little pink lips

at the changing table. And as I said this,
it seemed my original heart —my husband—
shifted. He was in the recesses,
standing with the curtains.
The man who had given this name
became pale faced as a hatchet,
flat and unhelpful, in the background.
I felt him cool. I shivered
in our living room.

2.

Squall.

You try to swab the baby clean,
his face like a crumpled tissue.
“Why? Why?” You yell at the baby’s feet,
still kicking. Everything about you seems
to say everything is wrong: me,
for how I scoot around the baby’s side to reassure him
while kissing his forehead—wrong, wrong.
You are wrong, you reek of wrong-ness.

If this was battle strategy, you’d be an expert,
but not here, not now, lights dim,
air smelling of the warm luxury of milk.
I try to ease you, put a hand on your arm, use a smooth
voice, but you say, “It’s all your fault.”
I point out the simple thing: He had been kicking
and pushed his soft head against the wood bar.
Suddenly, you are deflated, sick. Stew.
I stand between you and the baby.
I can feel you hate yourself. You hate me, too.

3.

I am waiting to find you,
one of these days.

To come home, baby attached
to me in his sling
sucking my bra strap,
my chest melting into milk, ivy sweetness ...

To come home and find you.

Hanging by a rope to the chandelier,
by a rope to the support beam in the roof,
from the overhead fan. Wrapped
around a beam. On the floor from pills.
Dead on the rug face down
near the baby's activity mat.
Dead on the toilet. Dead in the tub:
blood blade cuts, bath toys.
Or dead in the car.
Dead in bed.

Blue-purple? Pale-white? Limestone-gray?
Swollen, dry as a plate, damp as mulch,
smelling like the crushed bone and fat
I use to cook broth,
or not having a smell at all.

Urinated, defecated, or empty.

Will I walk in and out of the room
not even realizing you are there?
Not realizing something is different under the blanket,
behind the locked door.

4.

I always thought I wanted to feel all the feelings
in the world, everything. I wanted everything.
Unlike my friends who married bankers or politicians, such routine.
Now I just want to go down for a nap.
Someone to touch my head, slide the hair out of my face.
I want to move where I can watch the ocean blue,
in and out permanently.
Where nothing ever changes.
And where you are not there.

5. Penelope Remembers

Who once smelled of man of musk of salt and tusks, whose cock in my mouth was ocean slapping rocks, brilliant salt, tender and strong salt, fragile veins and ripples of skin, purpling unlike anything else I had ever seen, strong salt and birds and keening shore. I once loved the edge of your leather when you walked into our home. I used to follow you into the kitchen, impatient. I could not wait to slip my hand between your slats of leather, to find your exclamation point. My mind was full of calculations: how to act like a lady, how to act like a wife, how to get what I wanted. What I wanted was you. What is like a man's thighs? Nothing. What is like a man's ass? Nothing. What is like sliding my hand along a man's cock, your cock. Nothing.

I married you. All of you. Nettle-scarred, boulder-muscled, kettle-headed, beautiful with your unending tendons and curls. How could I not want to follow the hair from your calves, dark, up your knees, oh your knees, the hair on the inner thigh above the knee, which rowed rowed rowed me into your darker shores. Day and night, it did not matter. The thin curtains of muslin pushed in and out depending on the weather. South-westerly breeze. South. East. Northwest. Who cared? I did not care. I wanted only you.

6.

And what if you take months, years? This slow pursuit of death, this winding down like an endless top ...

7.

While our baby opened his gaping mouth onto my breast.
While I bathed dressed walked the baby to sleep.
And every footfall of yours was half ghost, half stalker,
hunting me in our own home.

You made me hard you made me lucid you made me rancid.
You made me cope.
Your hands not on my body, the absence of your hands.
Now we sit on the couch, Telemachus asleep upstairs.

You turn to me,
armaments, shield and rail.
Night behind your eyes, grab my hand. Twister, claw.
Scrape away. Damaged knuckle, damaged goods.

You say, "I am leaving because of you."
I am not breath, I do not breathe.
What do you want with your jagged honesty?
Back into living, back into the human race.

To ruin this one good evening. Fireplace, flames licking ...
You spent the past year sliding into the ground.
I have spent the past year tangled in you.
You want death like a lichen to grow over your face

out on some battlefield.
Roots to break through your tendons.
Your body on some field, anonymous rotting.
You want war-assisted suicide. You call it victory.

Honor. The husband as lukewarm bathwater chilling every moment.

Being with you is a slow tourniquet.

*Is this marriage, I ask myself, where the person
becomes someone else and drags you along?*

My body, a large scrape, scab jiggled loose.

What does it mean to say *I love*? To demand
your sweet innocence back?

How much regret do I choose?

Postscript

But may I say when you were gone, god what heaven to have you away. I thought I'd miss you, and I did. I did, I swear, I really did. But then once the rustling was over, the boat unmoored, like a bird I became moving twigs in the nest to fill in tighter, to fill in the spaces then suddenly all it was was us: me and the baby, Telemachus. My son with his baby smell. His diaper and the rest just that smooth skin of new life. And god, how glorious. Do not believe anyone who tells you otherwise, but this is all a woman wants. Her nights on a mattress on the floor stained with sugar milk the baby has spit up. To be in the dark, to be in the quiet. To be soft and relaxed. To be with a creature who has never once, never once hurt her. Who loves her uncontrollably. And to forget the world of men.