

FLASH CARDS

Often we climbed Lookout Hill together to scan for hawks,
and sat on see-saw benches that skirt the fire circle. Our child
played happily stacking stones, singing times tables softly.

I gaze at the quiet ring where stone soup bubbled,
hear the scraping whoosh of a flash card
from my own childhood. My father, angry,

sent me back upstairs to try, try again.
Who can break the solitaire of shame
that shapes a child's fire for words?

The need for fast figuring still makes me tense;
brain blanks at casual arithmetic—to add a tip
my fingers move secretly, under the table.

Yet true crisis brought utter clarity—the pile-of-stones sound
as you dropped to the floor in agony triggered an orderly
checklist: wallet, diaper bag, baby, friend to watch toddler.

Cancer removed, your sternum-to-pubis surgical slash
was a colorful canyon of layers; the visiting nurse
taught me wet-to-dry wound dressing.

Four years later, the card I flashed, reluctantly,
was the emergency DNR, do not resuscitate.
The airport medic said I did the right thing.

I held your head so it wouldn't thump
as the ambulance rattled over potholed streets
in a distant city. Is he your father? they asked.

I talked to you out loud, in curtain number five
watched the subtle transubstantiation,
as two curves kiss, from living to living on.

GOWNED IN GREEN TANGLE

I trail cherry tomato vines' explosive growth to sprawl
out of garden bed ramble across the lawn climb the deer
fence persist into late October with globed red clusters
of six so sweet to mash against roof of mouth.

Years ago your cancer receding briefly I wound watchful
waiting around me a pashmina scarf like meditators use
warm ritual hopeful as this black tortoiseshell kitten hovering
shy fosterling not purring not cleaning its cobwebby whiskers.

After the cells mounted a new assault I assembled other outfits
dressed in piling detritus springing static-clinging skirting
me magnetically a not-quite-crinoline of dust bunnies torn
calendar pages unopened mail crusty dishes.

Dressed for duty opioid patches gauze remote control
bulging my pocketed vest controlling remote sensations
I hustled competent movements covering a caged dressmaker's
dummy in crisp tailored Oxford cloth prêt-à-porter.

In my closet is one I tried to give away doesn't fit me anymore
but no one is falling for it felted dress of desolation over
leggings leather-laced the way the conquered Iceni wore
them mud flat brown.

I travel now red-hooded in hiking-boots green corselet
falling away past hemlock creek's stony riffle to ridge of
beech trees I can't encircle away from or is it toward
the fangs of the wolf that was my love.

MEDITATION RETREAT

The young woman beneath me coughed and coughed
all night in the cabin loft, the heat like scratchy
Easter clothes. I dozed at last into a treasure house

of my children's drawings, fluttering toward windows,
flying out into the street. You were there, love, a given,
a gift—trying to catch them.

What are thoughts falling through the mind
like snow? I always, should have, am not, can't ever—
let them go. Let them sip salts from the sandbar

like Clouded Sulphurs. I chanted: I have a little notebook
and I'm not afraid to use it. Bhante said everything
vibrates like electrons, impermanent.

I lie in the dark in this windswept cabin
and call you home. I am calling you to me.
I am calling on your kindred animals.

I need them to drink my tears.
May they be thirsty. O crow,
O bison. Gate gate paragate

pārasaṅgate bodhi svāha.
We have gone altogether, gone to the farther shore.
Fold me in that distance.

IDIOSYNCRATIC ATTACHMENTS

1. *Saving Jack Mountain*

A summer storm gathers on the shoulders of Jack Mountain.
Drops patter on scree. Timber rattler eases off
warm greenstone and riven shale,

slides to wait out the downpour in her dry communal den.
In the draw below ascending ridges of old-growth trees,
springs trickle down through a sea of wood nettle,

its tiny sprays of seed-pearl blooms an afterthought
in a spill of green. Thick chestnut oak and hickory shelter
ebony spleenwort, bearcorn.

We walk up the winding trail, noon quiet but for Linne's cicada,
through abundant motherwort, elderberry,
crownbeard, and curly dock.

Cerulean warbler buzz-trills in dampened heat. I try to imagine
the entire teeming ridge flattened, scraped, hauled away in
400-ton-payload trucks the size of two-story houses.

Pearl crescents alight and sip on fallen fruit. Tomorrow
I'll return to the work of resistance. I reach through thorns
today, gather wild raspberries, and eat.

2. Floaters

In the chair at the eye doctor
dilation drops begin to take effect
my edges waver

crossed loosening
braid sinuously
opens

physicists say matter
is mostly space

is mostly space
a floater like an untwisted
skein of yarn

squashed harvestman
or crane fly with dangling legs
appeared in my right eye

as I leaned over
the glass wind chime
twisting copper wire around

small mammal vertebrae—
arches of bone make
protective spaces

for the spinal cord—
braided like the carpet
I sprawled on, working pliers

coiling wire to jam
into the bottle neck of green-tinted
bell-strung mobile, rope

thrown over
high hickory limb above
mirroring cistern

prayer beads arrowhead honey jar
bones and stones clinking
when wind blows

through all the trees
they would cut down to build
their damned fracked-gas pipeline

floater unnerving
like mitochondria and gut flora teeming
inside warning against imagining ourselves
more substantial than not

3. The Stone Tribe

Drawn to them—glinting, grooved or pocked,
water-smoothed, immutable, dull pebbles,
till spit-rubbed, true colors unlocked,
we bulge our pockets, stucco shards
to chimneys, fill jars and trays.

Beyond geology we know their power—
at scree slope or cave mouth we gather
rocks as runes, build signal cairns,
seek geode secrets, mountain bones.
Earth's crust once pleated in orogeny

like bridal organza. I palm this keeper
from a Cowpasture River sandbar,
oval brown, with a creamy, pinpricked
band, like smoothed coral, a talisman
for these rough days of fracture.

4. Entwined

Braid our ties that bind, our scraps, strands
 wrapped around their kin. Fluffed
 knit scarf clasps damask green
of an old curtain, Oma's flax shirt.
 Here a blue spine, open, admits
 rivulet, rill, flumes of air, jaunty
 pinnatifid bows where we add on
 a new strip of silk. Flounces
commune with shiny sleeves,
 unchained persistence hums
through the threads, twirled
 like fox grape and greenbrier
 climbing toward light. We
are tied to these mountains,
 rooted by choice where the black
 snake may slither, fracked-gas threat named
 by elders who have seen it all
 before—dark petrochemical trail.
Watch our colorful braided coil
 unhinge its jaw, swallow.

WE SAY STAY SAFE, BE WELL—

these are the middle layers of the artichoke—
but I'm getting ahead of myself. First trim
the thick stem, remove tough
protective bracts. Cut angriest tips
from layers that clutch, not thorny, but prickly
like me, tense with fear and recycled news:
deadly force, respiratory distress.
It's a thistle, after all, well-defensed.
Dip in lemon butter, steam 'til edges relax,
pull away, leaf by supposed leaf; don't they
taste faintly of nuts? Reach inner rings,
translucent petals, cynarin's flavor almost
cloying, cut tender heart into pieces, eat.

SONGS OF THE RED VELVET ANT

1. *Soliloquy*

O honey bees, true ants, and paper wasps—
my social cousins who know the nectar dance,
lay trails of scent for comrades, construct
elegant paper houses, how I envied
your winged chance to savor pollen, tousele
blossoms, touch antennae—to belong.

When my mate carried me up in nuptial flight
it wasn't my dreamed-of bliss, no honeyed song.
Now I strut along in my red velvet dress,
drawn like daggers to the mouth of a nest
in my finery. Emitting foul perfume,
stridulating at the least threat, I can't help but
lay my eggs in the ground bees' open brood cells;
my children are destined to eat theirs one by one.

2. *Cow Killer, My Eye*

I'm shy in truth, but you in your sandaled feet,
naked toes, step aside fast to notice me
strutting down the dusty path. Floozy,
you're thinking, sashaying around in that red
velvet dress. Yeah your friend gave you shit
for anthropomorphizing me. But sugar—

I'm imagining you too. Some nights
in a dream of flight we explore the heart
of a foxglove together, sip and suck,
slip pollen from anther in a speckled cup.
Awake, both back in our armor, no signals
to send. I've wrapped you in my story.
Implacable, you enter the nest of the other
to lay your eggs. Do we belong together?

I FELL IN LOVE WITH MOUNTAIN GAPS

In the west they say pass not for dying I mean
but instead of gap like we say back east

Reeds Gap Rockfish Gap Jarman's Gap
wind gaps formed by stream capture as waters

leave their original bed diverted from initial
flow-current-coulee lively creek abandoned

for the valley of the shadow left me in the spark gap
the space between two high-potential terminals

often filled with an ionizing gas a pass has several
options defile saddle col should I close

fill breach dearth years after you died I made
a pass on a knoll enticed him from South Anna Valley

FIELD GUISE

Before I walked through the field I saw
a drab, open expanse, hay rounds receding
to dots, scrubby honey-beige swathe a mere

passage to a view of the Blue Ridge.
In the early years I drove by, as worker, lover, wife,
mother, improvised, wove our web each morning—

pick up, drop off, soccer, camping trips, chemo
appointments for their father who died. At the far edge
of vision we once watched a black dog lope past the bales

becoming, visibly, bear. Then they were older. Wet and dry
we walked in the field. Well-worn pocket guides
introduced the neighbors, like the sisters

V. alternifolia and *V. occidentalis*, wingstem and yellow
crownbeard, *Verbesinas*, from the roots wer- to turn,
bend, as sunflowers do, and werthan, to become,

as we once named families for their work: Cooper, Smith
Wright, Baker. Wet shoes squish as I lead friends
through goldenrod plumes, naming things.

We're greying—the next disguise. Distinguished now,
the grasses drop all pretense of anonymity; deer tongue
big bluestem, fox sedge, purple lovegrass spread

to the wooded edge, where what look like folded flakes
of bark are buckeye butterflies that flash startled
orange-and-blue wingspots over drainage swales

installed in the 40s by the farmer who plowed this land
before we chose to tend it by letting it alone.
Dogbane and swamp milkweed sidle back.

We find hidden morels at the just-cut verge of the bog,
and amethyst haze over once dull-seeming field—
transcendence in mistflower guise.

FIREFLY SEASON

Slowly, warm summer air blurs and chills,
mist seeps in bands above unmown
dogbane, buttonbush, fescue of river field.
Sparkles begin, flashes above grasses, under
saplings, inside dark shrubs, at the crown
and on the ground beneath the black trunk
of the old cottonwood: Chinese lanterns,
called low-slow-gloves, early evening fireflies.
This, then is love. Me in rubber boots against
ticks, swatting mosquitoes with the field guide,
your stopwatch timing pulses as Mercury rises.