

Of Mneme

All winter's dusk and murk I spent hard at work
against myself, depression's demon a contagion

I caught in dream,
crouched on my chest. Thus lust-

less and languorous, brain
in a jar and ocular nerve, I went out of the world

and wandered around with the shades in hell. What could I eat
then but the strange cupboard I'd amassed: salt-preserved turnips

cut in cubes, Finnish herring-licorice, loquats
canned and swimming in their syrup, the cat (I sassed)

if she'd come close enough: an emergency
meal in disaster's season. As a girl, barely three,

I'd asked my mother if she'd kill a cat
for me, so I could know how its body worked,

as I'd seen her do with the goats we raised
for meat. In childhood, life was not precious

so much as *there*, yard teeming
with daffodils, tadpole eggs a bouquet of eyes

peeping from the pond scum—amphibian Argus Panoptes
in infancy, or so it seemed

to me. Life flourished or fled, its wont
as often as it stuck around. Of twenty kittens

born under the steps each spring, one
would fall in the well and taint the tap
water with rot's smell; two would get eaten
by a possum; and the deranged mackerel-
patterned cat I named Natalie, after a girl I admired
but didn't understand, gave birth to five, eyes
slicked shut as if reminder that the body is left
to decide for itself the first week, if nothing else
does it first. Sure enough, Natalie had eaten
the litter alive an hour later. Indoors, at the top
of the stairs lit by an Edison bulb, a daguerreotype
of my great-aunt Kathryn—done in pencil,
I learned, when I was tall enough to look
more carefully, drawn by a traveling artist who'd roamed the countryside
a hundred years before—turned insect-
eaten, its colony of silverfish shivering
with graphite's ghost inside the glass. The body
of a cat is not so unlike a snake's, all ribs
and tail, and the snake the thing we knew
to fear the most. I don't mean Eden, another ancestral
loss; water moccasins lived in the creek's root-
dark shallows, or laced their left-behind skin

through the outhouse rafters. One bit
our only good guard dog, a teacup Chihuahua

my sister named Precious in the month
it belonged to her. She was always finding

and discarding animals, clothes, chew-spitting
boyfriends; left to this new home, Precious led a pack

of Great Pyrenees that each weighed more
than me, and they prowled the perimeter, moon-

lit luminously white through the tall grass, each
following its littermates like a train of ghosts. Bit,

Precious ran yelping up from the creek, thimble-
heart pumping poison, and fell dead at my mother's

feet. A long time before all this—I must've been four
by then—and up to her forearms in soap-

suds, my mother told me, Miriam, I think I can kill a cat
for you. She'd thought a year about it, had finally

roused the courage. Oh, I don't care about *that* anymore,
I told her, blasé as any amoral child who's forgotten

her murderous nature in a moment
of distraction. Visiting my student in the hospital

last fall, I asked whether she'd felt the weather
in her mind shift after six sessions

of ECT. No, she told me, and she was no more
forgetful than before. Adulthood begins
as early as forgetting does, but does forgetting
begin with hurt we cannot categorize? It casts
its fumigator's fog over everything. One Passover
eve, one of the goats slipped her pen for the verdant
yard, lingered in its tangles eating spider-
wort, mouthing the frilly heads of shade-
dappled daffodils that bloomed in neat rows, planted
by the long-dead aunts who'd been born in our house
and died there too; like Eurydice, how could she
have known what awaited her in the wild
grasses, of the narcissus's cyanide sap? Beneath
the butchering frame where her sons had hung
from their back legs and bled out into a black bucket,
my father funneled mineral oil down her throat,
a poor emetic but even if it hadn't been, already
death was strolling through the mesquite
thicket, thinking nothing of its thorns. I once
named my mother's favorite milk cow Eurydice. Seventeen
then, I was old enough to understand metaphor
turns literal if you let it, too young

to call it a different thing than magic; I'll let you imagine
how the story ends, and rural life's thousand

more: The llama that joined my brother's herd of cows
for a week, the neighbor boy who had an aneurysm

at ten. A tornado took roofs off half the houses
here, once, long enough ago that no one thinks

of it anymore, except in prayer. We were foreigners
once, but this, too, we've forgotten. Last winter when derangement

sat squatting on my spirit, my body useless as a machine
missing half its gears, I lay in bed, and all I had was gold

leaf I'd bought in an alleyway across the world where gold-
beaters in loincloths, three to a workshop, pounded

with wooden mallets a syncopated sound that drew
together and apart sinuous as a snake, and I pasted it

on my skin until I glowed like a minor god
in her temple, surrounded by her holy clutter

of brackish pickle jars and popcorn
made with aniseed butter, and I wondered if the darkness

in my mind would lift, and what of memory
I'd find left.