You are on the phone with a customer service representative or a restaurant’s hostess or a potential employer, and they mistake you for a woman again. They say *How can I help you, ma’am?* as you ruffle your manhood to hide your high-pitched plume. Then silence. Then *I’m so sorry, sir.* You wonder where their regret comes from—how their embarrassment cracks under the belief that emasculation is a cardinal sin. You are not sorry anymore. All that hollow-stomach-dry-throat-wet-eyed shame never changed how you can’t control the shape or shade or tone of your own body.

You know the western marsh harrier, how he circles over wetlands—reeds and wisps of tall grass all limber in the afternoon squalls. After two years, his feathers turn dark brown, like a hen’s—tufts of soft white upon his nape and crown, light cream patches where the neck meets the wing like it’s still 1980 and feathered shoulder pads are all the rage. You have his sallow yellow eyes, the only way to distinguish him from the girls. Your voice—light and feathered in frailty—still makes a sound, which is to say a hen’s feather still cuts through a sheet of wind, keeps a boy safe from a territorial cock, or two.
Ash Mama

I never called you Mother Tree. May I now that your body felled you—bark sallow & unfurling from your hollow bones? I saw an emerald ash borer in your pancreas, watched it loosen your skin, swallow you whole in one month. They said it would take years. I never called you Great Ash, until that’s what you were—dust through my fingers, filling your own mother’s grave. You never called me seedling, your weak-limbed boy—frail-leaved & thin-veined in shadow. Every tree needs light, every crown wants to rise. We each wore ours differently. You died before your mother. No sun for you, no head in star-soaked canopy. You kept me alive all the same, until they took you away, left your roots in the ground, bound to mine, as if to say Grow, baby. Reach, queen boy. Let your crown shine.
Listen:

a hummingbird’s wings move with a quiet rage,
a buzz that dizzies you like the unborn turning
soft head over tiny heels in your patient womb
until you push that babygirl free. What is a life

bound to a branch? Raceme stem, white flower
cluster, you wait for a lone cherry blossom, for
a blood-red berry fleshy & plump with its own
mortality. His whip splits open a chokecherry
tree on your back, leaves you to carry a lattice
of razor-edged leafbloom, of cyanide seed, such
deathly gifts. The berry dies before it falls. This
is how he keeps you—you body’s fatal fruit

forever out of reach. No poison end for you,
no sharpened-blade demise. You cannot climb
the tree that becomes you. He comes for baby-
girl. Listen: how the little hummingbirds stick their

needle beaks right through your headcloth. Listen:
how you fly, cartilage of your mother wings sore
with fear, desperate to carry you both to a dark
freedom—the kitchen knife a spiny-honed leaf.

Listen: footsteps outside the door like a rattling
chain, a cracking whip. But he will never bind
a branch to her now. He will never root a choke-
cherry upon babygirl, skin slack as a fallen berry.

bitter-berry

It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job
to know what is & to keep them away from what I
know is terrible. I did that.

—Sethe, Beloved

Matty Layne Glasgow