it smelled for days before I found the bones, skinned clean at the base of the drive. I never knew that rot could sustain, or the precise sharpness of a skunk’s teeth, until it died, when it mattered little. My husband gauges the struggle, decides whatever took it down was quick. Then, he adds, there are different degrees of hunger, as if it charts the same course as disease.

We agree the bones in sun are a kind of joy. Exposed. Sometimes burial is a dusting, sometimes—marrow-deep.

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My mother has blue days that are blanketed with forgetting—the horse’s feed, how to untangle her hair. Others, she is sharp with details.

She remembers holding the reins in her hand. How to punch through leather to cinch. How to hold her palm flat against the sun.

How planes can’t take off when the heat is too thin to hold the wings, their stalled bodies gleaming white on the tarmac.

The air, more dust than breath.
A thousand words is worth a picture

I cull them—scattered in the hay bales, in the trough, swished into the mare’s tail like sun,

put them in a Mason jar by the window, so, when the time comes, you’ll have something to pick from to name the girl buttoning your shirt, wiping your cheek. I will not mind canter, reins, paddock.

There were years of you where I never had a name anyhow. The difference—the photo that sits on the sill will soon lose its nowness, but I will never live a year without you tacked under my tongue.

Mother, you have always been mine to carry.

So, please, when you are tired, you can whisper fetlock, cinch, wean and I’ll know to how to tuck you in.

We’ll pretend that your hair is still that stream of dark and all the boys have formed a line, waiting to hold your hand into the next dance.
As a girl, I pretended the sky between slats
was a bed of black widows,
spider silk strung across dark,
the star-bits—their sacs pulsing with eggs.

I was never lonely because I hadn’t grown into
any reason to be afraid.

My hair held the silo-stink of dandelion & molded hay.

Now, I walk the back-alley behind a row of bars, lit,
and the sky is a map of women held under.

I see one beauty walking barefoot down a dirt road,
trying to be soundless. Her hair—wheezing smoke
from the gap of men’s mouths. The star is a key jagged
as a knuckle in her hand. She is twenty paces behind,
hoping he doesn’t look back.
My husband complains that his promotion isn’t his highest calling. He loses sleep, paces the night with the kind of anger that seeds in men. I dress in a dark closet. The covered mirror is another negotiation with my life. I sweep//scrub//coddle//swat, & call it a lovely morning. A snip of happy. I peel a crate of oranges, rub the rind behind my ears, against my wrists, rub the heart against metal tines to flush the juice, place a follicle on my tongue until the sweet goes numb
Unfurling

Of the many reasons I love you here is one

the way you say guess what
then nothing after I answer what

as if the echo itself
was the only thing desired,

or maybe you are curious about
what loose words might summon between us

after ten years of marriage.

You know, too well, I cannot flick past a good silence
without trying to organize it into herringbone
or hymnody,

so I tell you about each unhappiness
because it’s easier to undress.

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Before sunrise, you collect handfuls of cicada
skins that cover the trunks of trees
by our door,

arrange them into piles as if there is still song.

When I ask why, you say guess what, I am afraid of how
you might leave me,

Their wet, soft bodies unzipped in dark,
their reasons—transparent.

*The first line is from Craig Arnold’s “Bird-Understander.”*