When my dog hears the neighbor’s baby cry, he begins to howl, his head thrown back. He’s all heartbreak and hollow throat, tenderness rising in each ululation. He’s a saxophone of sadness, a shepherd calling for his stray. I’ve read that baying is both a sign of territory and a reaching out for whatever lies beyond: home and loss, how can they be understood without each other? Once I had an outdoor dog who sang every day at noon when the Angelus belled from the corner church. She was a plain dog, but I could prove, contrary to all the theologians, that at least once a day she had a soul. I’ve always loved dogs that look like wolves, loved stories of wolves: the alphas, the bullies, the bachelors. We have to forgive them when they break into our fenced-off pastures, lured by the lull of a grazing herd, or a complacent flock, heads bent down. Prey, it’s called. At night the wolves chorus into the trackless air, the range of their song riding far from their bodies, till they think the stars will hear it and be moved, almost to breaking, while my poor dog stands alone on the deck, howling into the canyon’s breadth, as if he’s like me, trying to find a place where his song will carry. Dogs know, if there is solace to be had, their voice will find it. This air is made for lamentation.
Scald

Rain reminds me how I need cool water to stay in touch with my skin. Need waves to hug my flesh till it’s raw, swimming to slake my body’s hunger for buoyancy, its lechery for salt. I know how they boiled heretics by mating fire with water, how heat makes a beast of every element, because once I stood by the tub and waited while my mother ran only the hot tap, until steam smothered my face, clouded the pane, the bathwater becoming clearer, crueler; I flinched from its curling heat; saw a scald cradled in the tub’s hard lap. How clean it looked, as if heat scoured the sides with an invisible hand.

My body undressed, hunkered by its side, a small martyr having second thoughts.

But I believed then, as all children do, that there’s an inherent loveliness in clarity:

windows, water, pure aggies, a crystal wine glass flouting the sober table. Her eyes blue as sea ice, goading me, her voice cajoling me to step into the tub, Get in like a brave girl before the water cools.

I thought if I closed my eyes I might
stand in the water for just a few seconds,
learn what it means to stand something.

I watched a lattice of light twist the surface,
held my breath, and stepped into the water.
Why I’m Often Suspected of Shoplifting

I must look like a thief wandering the aisles,
my eyes skimming over scarves,
their silks rippling like sea anemones.

My eyes in the farmers’ market
stroking the golden bulges of a mango,
the violet skin of Concorde

hanging from their chandelier clusters.
In Saks, once, a clerk came up and stood beside me,
gave me a restraining glance

as my eyes ogled the opal buttons
on a blue voile blouse,
caressed its collar with all the concentration

of a back-window voyeur.
Maybe it’s because the eyes are natural predators,
are orbital limbs, are feral,

are the fingers, the paws of the mind
pacing over open grasslands
with intent to devour.

The nuns always cautioned us to keep
custody of our eyes,
as if we should make them file daily reports,

wear shackles, stay downcast, stay lidded,
stay sealed like lips
that don’t ask, won’t tell.

I was only browsing, I wanted to say to the clerk,
my mouth full of new shoots,
a bit of tender bark, some smallish buds.