

ANGELA KIRBY

*Pareidolia 175: Requiem | Rest*

1. *Timor mortis* | The fear of death

They've cut them all down on the Christmas tree farm,  
a late spring slaughter where morning light bloodies  
each round eye of sawed trunk, raw wood red as sun

Like Noah post-Flood the trees grow drunk, go rolling,  
wind shaking loose even the memory of water  
until they come to rest, lighter, in each others' arms

I thought I heard coyotes cry, dark toothy humor  
slurred to tears, but three a.m. floodlights show  
only trees, skirts raised and dried past caring

*Timor mortis conturbat me*, now the stumps  
have turned graveyard: birds no longer come  
to these branches and *lux aeterna* is the axe's glint

2. *Dies irae* | Day of wrath

Somewhere between matins and lauds the world wakes  
in sheets of rushing slush that rap at doors and windows  
wanting in, where I stand mid-shuffle, fugged with warmth  
and recent sleep. These are not the little hours, when a lick  
of psalm and promise to do better are enough to prop up  
day's sturdy sky: this is shallow breath right under crumbling  
ceiling of night, and you can't just Indiana Jones the dawn  
with a bag of worries weighing the same as the dark (as if  
anything could be as heavy as you, bones bird-hollow to hold  
the still air of locked rooms, lymph a deep slough swamping  
mercy's small boat). When lightning reaches out its hand

and timpani of thunder announce the dance, I remember how I stole your few small things—shawl, coat, quilt—to make myself a talisman transferring your want to me, some warmer embrace by the ghost of your throat, arms, body at rest; I remember this dance to the tune you'd sing (*you ruined my life, you are terrible, terrible, I wish you had never been born*) and the two of us locked in bruising waltz: your grip on my shoulder as I spun with small steps while the blows rained down, your wrath the dead center of my tight, turning world. Even after I watched you burn, it all returns in a storm I have no prayer of stopping, *dies irae* your afterlife and me still here trapped in the house of bones you gave me, the gift of your judgment to come.

### 3. *Rex numerorum* | King of numbers

In the beginning was the word  
assuming a beginning, assuming  
a god who surely knew that underneath  
everything, even the words  
were numbers: assuming this,  
say god is a professor of  
very advanced math

or physics: for every action  
(the blow) there is an equal  
and opposite reaction (the hand  
print); momentum (force equals  
father) sets to work on an object  
(your bones), travels through time,  
and we all know time is  
an arrow (your arm) released  
always in a single direction  
(me): picture the chalkboard  
formula scrawled at the front  
of heaven's class, the arithmetic  
proving god's terrible conservation

of energy, how death transfers  
your power to the world:

of course the sum at the end  
(pandemic, hard winter, a year  
of earthquakes rocking me  
to sleep) is weeping, wailing,  
gnashing more than teeth

*Principia mathematica*,  
Newton thinks, smiling down  
from his white steed cloud:  
nothing is ever lost between us,  
and he (and you) must sit  
with god, too deep in numbers  
to hear the words *salve me*

#### 4. *Voca me* | Call me

Even now my body longs for  
the benediction of the swing  
legs out legs in  
a parody of running  
and a grip on the chains  
anointing hands with metal's scent  
the rest of the afternoon  
oh the genius who said  
let there be flight  
but let it be  
tethered by this equal  
fear of flying, all the gravity  
stored in my child body oblivious  
to the voice of the air making promises  
neither of us could keep  
the moment the chain  
goes slack at the top  
and one eye

squinting as the sun  
moves across and up and down  
the sky: will one more  
ascent be worth  
the beating  
if I'm late  
(her voice never  
raised in public, tongue  
never sounding out my name  
to let me know she knew me and I was  
wanted)

                  I was claimed then  
and now by silence  
*Voca me,*  
mother;  
if not, who will  
speak for me and  
call me by my name

### 5. *Lacrimosa* | Crying

The rain began sometime during dark, after we were sated  
on Lyrids, an unpronounceable comet, and the space station  
swinging from Earth's belt, so the sun didn't rise but drown  
and, drowning, exhale a pale trickle of light through the sky

Your last breath came the same, unceremonious, without  
gasping fanfare; no angels of light unless you count sodium  
vapor, frozen in battling constellations across the hospital  
parking lot: dark above and below, us unmoored in between

Here, a year on, the rain stays all day; a language whispered  
against the glass, a throat full of tears overflowing; relief  
and reminder of our history full to bursting the goldfish bag  
we are still swimming in, your god the barker of this carnival

I'm out back behind the tents of your finer family, who paid  
for funeral trappings and whitewashed sideshow; I'll take rain  
and rain and rain: what the fuck good is crying when rain  
does the job, washes away the truth of your hands on me

What little light there is takes its cue to leave; rain departs  
with it and what's left behind, as the sky closes eyelids bruised  
blue with sorrow, is a swaddled new land soft in its blanket  
of cloud come down for comfort or to smother us all

6. *Libera me* | Free me

Some take to god the way a duck  
takes to water and, knowing  
what I know of you, it's easy  
to see why: the tale written twisting  
through your DNA and your father's  
and his mother's goes so far back  
the letters shrink, unreadable  
except where they find bone,  
braid it to rope for hanging  
the thread of your story on,  
and on it goes until I snipped  
one of us free. We are all loose  
ends tangling in the abyss's breeze,  
so who wouldn't want to write  
a happier ending than this  
vertigo, the only anchor  
years gone, the saving hand  
a fiery one to burn the whole  
tethering tree. Tonight the wind  
hones its voice to a howl  
through the trunks packed tight  
right up to the house; I wonder  
do they think *libera me*  
and beg for the mercy of standing  
still—or the greater release,

roots ripped up and the world  
tipped sideways before coming  
to rest against solid ground.

7. *Agnus dei* | Lamb of god

I wish you'd been born on a farm full of sheep  
with shears the sharpest tool fitting the hand  
and only their empty fleece shapes piled deep:

blood bathed each acre of your father's land—  
the cows tonguing windfall pears off your palm,  
hogs grown from wriggling piglets to grand

spotted sultans, chickens clucking psalms  
for plans laid but unhatched—all met the blade,  
bullet to the skull, or drowning sack's balm.

This idea that sacrifice must be made:  
little *agnus dei* on patent leather hooves,  
wide-eyed and bloodsoaked trying to wade

the killing field of your childhood, and who's  
going to save him from the altar, too?  
You look up with hungry lips made loose

by his fat rendered in the pan; you grew  
up knowing to eat is to kill, each bite turned  
ashy with entrails and skin; you knew

these were offerings on the fire burned.  
I stood outside those gates till the end  
waiting for you to feel you had earned

release, hoping your terrible god would send  
something toothier than this lamb—  
or was it me leading us, limping, deeper in.

8. *Misericordia* | Mercy

Mercy is molassesed chicken feed  
chuted straight to the coop, warm from the mill  
that you crept in unseen to steal  
each mouthful the day's only sweet on your tongue

*Pie jesu*, the animals were clean,  
knew you from gathering eggs

Mercy's a hazel twig pocketknifed free  
from the arched clump fizzing yellow in spring  
its whippy length tested between two hands  
before striping the bare backs of your legs

*Pie jesu*, it could've been  
the buckled belt, the barber strop

Mercy is the drink in the blood  
that dulls your brother dragged to the barn  
draped and tied on the cold metal gate  
where cows huddle humid and curious for food

*Pie jesu*, if his hands were free  
he would've broken the old man's neck

Mercy is your sister's nightgown  
unbuttoned, collarbones wings in the moon  
and your brother's swollen face pressed deep  
to her belly that later miscarried a son

*Pie jesu*, the things you can hide  
when your prison is a working farm

Mercy's the old man crying into his bed  
*no one loves me* while his daughters, three Fates,  
heave his white flesh to one side  
off a bedsore where you could bury a fist

*Pie jesu*, they never thought  
to eat his heart before it stopped

Who knew that mercy could look so like  
the back of a hand coming right at you;  
the mopped brow, the gentle touch for lesser folk  
who can't bear the halo of a harder love

*Pie jesu*, the bones are gone  
carpals, metacarpals, phalanges  
nothing touches you but memory

9. *Lux perpetua* | Perpetual light

If there is joy it must be light,  
bright memories gathered as beasts in the barn:  
let *lux perpetua* be your night.

Close your eyes at last to the sight  
of the butcher's pain, the blood-dark farm:  
if there is joy it must be light.

Bloom in it as a flower might  
lean into the hand that means to harm,  
let *lux perpetua* be your night.

Drop the weight of holding what's right,  
discover wing folded under your arm —  
if there is joy it must be light.

And riding it, may you rise in flight  
above all shadows' petty swarms:  
let *lux perpetua* be your night.

We saw each other as enemies might  
or lovers who part before they learn  
if there is joy — it must be light:  
let *lux perpetua* be your night.