

TERESA SCOLLON

Asthma Attack

It's like a dance scene, a ball,
in a Jane Austen story with lines
of dancers bowing and changing

hands. What is it about dances —
everything that's supposed to happen
happens. The ones who've been wary

are smiling at each other and offering
their arms. The red blood cells
look trim and fine in their regular

shapes, the oxygen keeps coming in
in pairs, clean and light in their airy
Regency dresses, and they meet,

they bow, they keep matching up,
stepping delicately around each other,
spinning around the alveolus

that's lit by a chandelier, and what
amazes you every breath is how
every single dancer knows the steps

and it occurs to you that this dance
has been going on since fish stepped
on shore, or even earlier, because

fish, don't they, and other creatures,
use oxygen, and you make a note
to look up the time period of Darwin's

theories though you're pretty sure
that Austen predates Darwin — just think
what Austen would have done

with Darwin's ideas! — and wouldn't
that be a dance to see those two
geniuses meet and bow to each other

as the dance goes on and now you
don't see the individuals so much
as the lovely rhythm, the pulse

of comings and goings and
the chandelier glows and there
are hundreds of millions of alveoli

just like this one all over the palace
but then the light seems to pale
and falter

and what's supposed

to be happening, isn't, and wait, there
it is again, the music, and a few steps
but the light is dim and the partners

uncertain, scuttling, some red blood cells
make off with oxygen but

others are left

empty-handed and the alveoli fill

with blue, there's more blue coming in

and the dance hall is closing, the lights
flashing on and off and you can't move,

you are locked inside that alveolus
and at the same time you are stepping

around outside with your hand on

the boulder that is your chest, bowing,
unsure, trying to restart,
 trying to draw in

what's been flowing since you were a fish,

since you were pulled into air, wailing.

Geopolitics, Stateside

I have been too lenient, letting the dogs climb onto the couch, where they love to straddle and shout at squirrels, at animals walking by. Hey, I say,

knock it off. How about a little live and let live around here? Real Americans, these two, lovers of comfort, lovers of love. Ferocious players.

I wonder at their teeth, their power. Surely they smell my blood beneath this thin sheath of skin. Amazing that they let me live.

But this easy living has gone too far. Everywhere the odor of dog. The couch is stained by clots of dirt from claws or possibly rectum, grime

from their oily coats. It must be cleaned. I find the cushions I lean against have no structure: inside the cover just loose green fuzz. Somewhere someone

makes a living making this stuff. Is it a child? So much I don't know. I vacuum up grit and acorn shards beneath the cushions

and note the frame: steel visible under a thin scrim, coiled and ready to spring. Meanwhile, one dog is giving the other the stink-eye, who erupts

in noise. Somehow I must manage this. How much will have to be done again, over and over? Consider the washing machine, which does what it does,

like a man focused on one idea only. Things come out clean but threadbare and shaken. One dog sheds like crazy, the other's so greasy she leaves streaks on the walls.

They had to be trained not to shit in the house,
that their house is my house, too. Every once in a while
there's a new regime around here, say, after watching

Cesar Millan on the TV, but who can focus on status
all the time? It's an alpha concern when there is other work
to be done. Anyway, we live as a pack here. When I sink

onto the couch the dogs press their bodies against my legs,
look into my eyes. We are here, they say. Now.
Message of the bodhisattva. Not the moment

to introduce new rules. After all, I count on them
to keep me safe. They are perpetually who they are.
So I work at the stains on the sofa with a washcloth

and a little white soap. The cushion covers go
into the machine on delicate cycle, with extra low
agitation. I am only trying not to destroy

what I have. It is not that it is any less soiled.

Meanwhile

bombs fall on Ukraine, shattering everything
carefully made, frightening the animals, turning

parents into cloaks over children. The old
flee on the backs of younger men, picking

their way across broken bridges. Once they sat
in quiet houses. They gazed out

polished windows at trees and birds,
watched for spring. Outside my window

the white pine grows a foot every year.
It was taken from the woods by a friend,

who saw it hemmed in and struggling. Now
it grows fat and round. Once I found

a baby robin deep in its branches, stashed
there by a watchful parent while she

foraged. We shelter each other. Where
we are planted is pure chance.

For all we know, the trees of Ukraine,
who have no shelter, who appear in photos

halved, beheaded, scorched and jagged,
are crying out, their voices carried

by westerly winds all the way round
the world. For all I know, the trees

I live under feel tremors through their toes
in the earth, shudder for distant sisters.

For all I know, their rising sap catches
in their riverine throats.

Stolen Code

for the mRNA vaccine

By now the instructions have been destroyed,
dissolved and dumped with the trash,
as in any spy story,

the ribonucleic messengers expelled
in the nano-balls of lipids they slid
around in. And good

riddance. They were greasy company,
but useful. By now the cells
have all assembled

their spikes, like the cruel gutter
spikes that discourage pigeons,
who by another name

are the doves of peace. Easy for me
to talk of peace, when my role
is merely ceremonial,

parasitical, swanning around above
the neck while the city-state of the body
prepares for siege.

We are creatures of war, meant to survive,
committed right down to the cell.
I am allowed

to think what I like, to siphon energy,
to pretend I know what's going on,
to write odes.