

Elephants

1.

There was this small college in the south where I read
and three white boys in the audience
in KKK outfits, stiff like lilies for a funeral.
The walk up to them was long with fear and shame and rage.
But I took the hood off one and wore it back to the stage
and through my reading to a deafening applause.
But I mostly remember how hot it was under the fabric
and how that boy's smell filled me,
and how wet my tears were.
And Bean in the warm bed breathing softly and me cold
on the floor and writing this poem in an old notebook.
And the arrow slit of skylight lets in only a red night.
And her Gennady Aygi translations flutter by the bed
like a flock of simple white birds.
The more we promise to never leave our lovers,
the faster the horizon arrives. My lust is simpler still:
that Bean return to me every night with her gentle warmth.

4.

Here elephants come across the skeletons of other elephants.
They pause among the whiteness, raise their trunks and howl
to the absent flesh, circling the bones, picking up each one,
putting it down, circling one last time, they stand still in silence
for an age, then move. Steps less assured, slower.

Why was it so hard to tell my mother, I love you,
like the man in Sarah's translation of Gennady's poem
tracing a woman's face with a flower?
To cling to death, to a metaphor as real as a dying parent
is to wrap language around an absence.
There are stories that can kill you.

5.

It is not likely that my father and I will take a walk soon
and not just because he is dead.
But he did come back in a dream to cook
me a simple dish of beans with tomatoes
and through the steam rising from my bowl,
he smiled as he cut me a slice of bread,
vanishing slowly with every saw.
The heart is like this sometimes.
It finds the hands of your dead father
and shaves away another layer
like a thick slab of warm bread.
Sometimes that, Tadeusz. Or sometimes this.
That the lines lead you out of the labyrinth.
That the Minotaur is your toy bear thrown casually
against a chair in the dark.
That rain will come.
That rain will come.