

Histories

3.

And in prison, writing names on bodies with the sap of cashews.
Names to obscure their real selves,
names to protect what might be left over
for when they returned to the world from hell.
It is an old trick, to fool death by writing
a new name on your body.
I was afraid my soul would be obscured,
and in cowardly script, almost invisible to the eye,
scrawled with the tip of a needle: Saddam.
It has faded to a nice smudge on my belly,
where a network of hairs and stretch marks
pretend it never happened.
I learned alchemy in prison.
Words mean only what you want them too.
You say, sunshine and you mean hope.
You say, food and you mean refuge.
You say, sand and you mean play.
You say, stone and you mean, I will never forget.
But you do, but you do and thank God, thank God.
When they called from the university,
in all innocence, they said,
there is a letter for you from *your* president.
They had never heard the words Dele uttered
before that letter bomb exploded.
You tell your friend who runs the place.
And you sit turning the letter over and over,
while she gently clears the wing

and then comes back to sit with you as
you turn the letter over and over.
Fingers ignorantly searching for wires.
Over and over you turn wishing you were American
and could have the naivety to not fear a letter from
your president. To feel only pride or the gentle rise
of acerbic wit as you prepare
to decline whatever is on offer.
You smile at your friend who has no reason
to be here except she won't let you die alone
and you rip the envelope open.
There is no explosion,
A letter spills out with the crest of the president.
You are crying.
You are glad you are not dead.
Your friend is holding your hand.
Dear Eloise Klein Healy,
blessing be upon your name.

4.

When I was five,
I tried to fetch water from the unfinished septic tank
with a plastic teapot for my sister's tea party.
I fell, the weakness of water eroded wood giving beneath me.
What kind of son betrays his father like this?
As I emerged, I saw he was about to leap.
Maybe that was why he beat me so much.
Maybe it is too much for your father to believe
that he would give his life for you.
And who can blame him?

I wanted to be a son you could be proud of father.
I killed the way you taught me.
But I liked dolls and tea and playing with my sister.
Forgive me.

7.

As I grow older I want to hold my mother.
Hold her to my chest and soothe her.
Cradle her head that is small, thin as a sparrow's,
and say, he loved you, he did.
All those years, they count for something.
And the only lie would be the not knowing.
And I am a man too.
And like my father, bad, bad, bad.

8.

When you first see a man die
from a machete cut or a bullet,
which is to say, when you first confront
the astonishment of blood and feel it
creep over your skin like a sugary sludge,
even though the cracks it wets are not your skin,
but really the obsidian of the road,
you feel sick in ways you thought not possible.
A deep and wonderful bile
that can never leave your stomach.
And then the days pass and you become familiar
with its ways and it bothers you no more

than cherry syrup dripped over pancakes.
You grow bored and impatient with it all.
With the shock of those just arriving moments.
After that, people can die around you day and night
and you go on without noticing.
My capacity for it scares me.
Blessed are the undefiled in the way.
There are two ways to view the body.
Resurrection and crucifixion.
Everything that falls between is ritual.

from the collection: *Sanctificum*