

**a sudden nostalgia that i am meant to be somewhere else**

on the wedding day  
of my parents, my mother refused  
to wear a dress. *for the love of god*  
*just put it on*, my mother's mother screamed  
into the wet rotting  
air, which only knew to sink.  
the sky a hazing, a haze  
of dust you could bite into.  
at that point i was nothing  
but an ideation of a goddess nobody wished to  
serve. a sticky amorphous oozing.  
i only had two existences. one as glue  
and one as the dress my mother refused  
to wear. the fabric itself only had two  
colors, a chinoiserie of muted red and fading  
gold. one to fight the fear of dying  
and the other of poverty. in china, we buried  
our old at our weddings, inside our newness  
and our wanting. i had no way of knowing  
what my mother wanted  
because i was merely the dress she refused  
to wear, a bulge of stretched skin pressing firmly  
against its cloth. i didn't want to force  
anything upon her, but i did want to excavate  
a newness out of her that couldn't be replicated. I did want  
to own the bones from her body too unfamiliar  
with death to fossilize. now, i spend my years as a rabbit  
being chased by a dog, its chest heaving and shuddering  
with a kind of instinctual desperation  
telling it to go faster or it will surely die.  
that fear is a kind of glue  
that welds the world together by force, for example  
in the form of my mother's mother screaming  
at her to wear the dress even if  
she didn't like it. to have a child even if  
she didn't know how to raise it.

personally, i always wanted to offer  
two choices to give the illusion of freedom, even if  
the two choices really meant the same thing.  
and i always wanted to tell you that you would look beautiful,  
even if i knew the dress wasn't meant for you.

## The Bedroom

--

The first thing my mother ever did for herself was claim  
the master bedroom as her own. In this room was a hardwood floor, unscuffed  
by the repeated journey of a child dragging her feet. In this room  
was a wall, bare as the skeleton of a tree in winter, sickly but still,  
refractive. An old corridor newed with red paint glistening blood.  
Peeling walls the aged yellow of hollowed out bone.  
And here, a sprawling landscape of drywalled fantasy, how easy it is  
to be swallowed as quickly and as hungrily as her dry tongue could accept  
a monsoon. To live all at once, to pack these memories as tightly together as she could  
and settle down here-- that was my mother's occupation.  
To love the ground of this place so it does not absorb me, to listen  
to each conversation as ambience. To hear every sigh  
as a confession. That was mine.

--

The second lesson my mother taught me was to avail myself  
of pragmatism. At age four, I found myself  
sitting cross-legged with head bowed, half-listening, half-praying  
as a monk would in his cherried monastery, under the fold of orange juice-stained cloth.  
My mother's words a harbor of business, trade bustling in and out  
of earshot. A study in diplomacy. Between her and me,  
a feeble detachment. And thousands of minutes later, I still only know  
limitations. I know now the right story to tell,  
and the wrong one. Yet sometimes I bury what I know  
under these thrumming floorboards, which cry like a father who has lost  
something that he cannot even know. The distance between  
my mother and me as we sit together in negative space --  
that is its own poem, and my mother confesses  
that when we lock eyes, she sees  
my father instead.

## Etymology of Loss

The day my mother died, I opened  
my copy of the *Tibetan Book of Living  
and Dying* for the first time. I stroked  
each page, the soft fur of age glistening  
between my fingers. *Perhaps*  
*the deepest reason why we are afraid of death*  
*is that we do not know who we are.* It is time now  
to admit my mother's death to be two  
deaths, the first in her chamber of skin,  
the second in a glass room  
in my mind. Her departure left a silence  
underneath the trembling  
of my skin, which swallowed  
grief as quickly as a reassurance  
that this was anything but finality.  
I want to think of death as a metaphor  
about empty space. Yet even a ghost will gnaw  
at its coffin. When it's packed too tightly  
together, there's a thickness to dust  
I'd never noticed before. Like the birth  
day cake I ate at seven -- a diabetic sweetness  
smudged in dried frosting, recoiling  
from the skin of my throat.  
A sprig of pale lily resting on my platter -  
no, wilting upon a steel coffin, glinting hungrily .  
The light goes out. The flicker  
of a wilting wick lingers, butane  
licking the corners of my mother's withering  
lilac lips. I cannot remember  
if she was there to witness the feast.  
What does death do with the body  
it discards? The same that we do  
with the things we do not want. Mother,  
when I try to capture your face, I can only remember  
your cheekbones outlining a mouth  
downturned, flushed in the rouge of anger.

When I try to grieve, I open  
the book and highlight with a pen the words  
that can border you  
in your wake -- a cold body still  
stuck, clinging onto caking dust.  
But what is this? A creation? Or an erasure?  
To contain you, I created a room.  
The distance between  
you and I, empty space.  
Even now, I wish I could enter and exit freely.  
But I know now this is not an elegy.  
For I still do not know the words  
that can contain you.