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

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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.

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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.