

Medicine Wheel

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English

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For those who've helped me find my own path on my journey.

Patrick's Prayer

You are the only true way. Instead, they scoff
Your word, throw logic in my face and spout

contradictions. Why can't they understand
Your PERFECTION?

None of them—like John
the other night, when I went home
with him, and afterwards I tried to tell him

his desires were *sinful*.

He just laughed—LAUGHED—
so I started kicking him, screaming

Faggot! Faggot! Faggot!
and couldn't stop . . .

No one understands—they're all
rotting,
from the inside, their souls
consumed
with evil they *can't even see*,

like the apples in the orchard
behind the house when I was a kid:
they'd look so
perfect lying there,
fallen in autumn,
and once I picked one up, and
almost

raised it to my mouth,
but maggots and worms
spilled over my hand,
and I saw the tent caterpillars
crawling
over the tree,
devouring it,
suffocating it with their webs.

I believe they—that is,
we ALL
can *still* be saved.

They just need to accept,
to grasp Your word . . .
Everyone wants me to stray:
like lemmings,
blindly over the cliff
into Hell, they could not allow themselves
a tiny hop of faith, a moment to realize some things
are beyond them because they are mortal.

Like Jesus, I try to show the sinners—
last month, Brad and I came
down to his “level.”

Then, as he sprawled out
smoking, I **SHOVED** the Bible
in his crotch, told him how much sin

he'd committed.

Reconstruction

Thick smoke masks still-burning fires
like a mother's quivering hands
shielding her children's eyes.
Bodies of holy men and worshippers

dragged off camera, concrete and stone
blasted from a blackened metal skeleton,
pavement mixing with loose dirt in a crater.
Another Mosque, this one in Najaf.

When the war began, you wished it over
so missionaries could enter
with food, medicine, and Christianity.
None of these has arrived

as a man runs towards the television,
face taut, shiny with tears and sweat,
shaking arms uplifted, his curse or prayer
only a single-syllable wail.

He and those amassed behind him
are all equally damned—
whether they still embrace Allah
or had their faith reduced to cynicism—

without Christ. Even as you spit the word
Muslims, in private, you speak of how
welcome they'd be: how God alleviates
suffering to those with open eyes.

Maybe this is unfair, but I imagined
your glee if you watched
what I was watching, picturing how to clear
rubble, expand the foundation,

construction crews lining the street
to build a church—no, better, a *cathedral*—
and how you could fly there, stand at the altar,
the Bible in your gesticulating hand.

Thin Blade

Triumphant, you pull the blade
from the scarred tree trunk
you finally hit.

The leaves rustle to my side,
and—on a whim? a calculated
action?—you throw again.

We both hear the squeal.

The squirrel spasms, trying to escape
while its body drops into shock,
back left leg useless from the steel

in its tendon, blood speckling
leaves and fur. You watch with the same indifference
you'll show me when I refuse to follow God—

unblinking, shoulders back, lips tightened,
breathing deeply through your nose,
staring at something already dead.

I want to kill this animal and end its belief of survival.

I smell autumn leaves decomposing
under my feet as I sway and shiver, the squirrel's
front paws scraping bark, unable to ascend.

In ten years, I'll wonder how this coincides
with what you'll become: crusading for God
in daily life, in government, in schools—

everywhere.

The Ugly Face of God

Signs wave to the rhythm of praise songs
interspersed with cheers—
*Hallelujah. Praise Jesus. Let this be
a lesson for us all. God is not passive—*

as mourners follow the coffin draped in a flag
towards its grave. Most
ignore them, hoping they'll simply
disappear,

though two men whispering
not to create further
spectacle restrain
David's red-faced father.

They could be protesting death,
war, instead
declare this soldier and all the others
dead because

America refuses to burn
homosexuals like witches in Europe.
At the head of the crowd, a man
interprets the Bible

as liberally as fiction. He's the one
who'll face courts, defending his right
to celebrate God's judgment
while lawyers sue for millions

as if money were
keystone to the message.

My Mother Speaks to Eve

Would you have paused if you'd known
so many years later you're seen
as a seductress, trickster,
bad as the serpent, used to keep your daughters
in kitchens, slaving for our Adams, mocked
for wanting anything else?

All the tales of you ending Paradise,
told, it seems, *every* Sunday,
fool even the wisest of us—it gets
into your head, after a while,
and we feel dirty just existing.
Even I was tricked,

abandoning my painting
because I thought marriage more important,
my place in the home, feeling the pain
of childbirth—reliving the legacy
they say you began, caught in the cycle
that I worry will never break.

My Grandmother's Story

*So went Satan forth from the
presence of the Lord and smote
Job with sore boils from the soles
of his foot unto his crown.*

– Job 2:7

Susan Snyder—you wouldn't remember her,
I don't think you two ever met—
had a baby a few years back. A little girl.

Adorable, of course—
wouldn't cry, wouldn't make a fuss.
She'd just lay in her crib. Giggled and waved.

Made Susan so happy. Then
the baby got cancer a month after
her third birthday. Susan took

all these trips to the hospital—
the closest one is all the way up
in Warren—and wracks up all this debt,

but the chemo just isn't doing *anything*,
and the doctors are all pretty sure the girl—
Jayden, I think her name was—would die.

But she kept driving I-71
to take Jayden to her appointments
and another driver, some middle-aged man,

fell asleep and drifted across the lane,
both vehicles *completely* demolished,
but Susan and the man managed to walk away

with only a few scratches and bumps.
Jayden died.
Isn't that a miracle?

I know that it was just God
showing some mercy on that poor little girl.
Don't you think it had to be mercy?

Sati

Timber and dead flesh, flames
curling around bone,

smoke signaling soon nothing
will remain for a spirit to mourn.

Tightly braided black hair
ignites, curls

like paper, vanishes in tiny
specks of fading light.

Skin blackens, stealing blushed
cheeks, melting away a mole

just below the left hole where soil-brown
eyes were flecked with green.

Alpana: her name meant
beautiful.

Living flesh, mouth a scream of fire.

A second soul slips
mortal bonds, towards reincarnation.

Ashes scattered into the Ganges,

intermingling
toward the bay,

until even God cannot distinguish

fragments of
spirit.

Night Terrors

The slightly open closet leads to Lucifer
hiding. Lights out, she imagines his grin
behind the mirrored door, his clawed hand
ready to snatch her blue horse

with nicked and faded eyes.
He'll gallop through shadows and pitch
under her bed, scaring away weaker
boogey-men, and wait for her legs to hang,

just a little, over the edge.
Under the covers, she's sweating and praying,
pleading forgiveness for
killing a butterfly:

enamored by the design,
she traced wing patterns.
That was before the priest
slammed his hands on the pulpit,

*We are all sinners and sinners burn;
murder, blasphemy, desecrating the perfect
body God gifted to you—a sin is a sin.*
At night, she hears hooves

singeing the hallway carpet, seeking
her father's tattoos, her mother's earrings.

Katherine's Confession

His hands, God, his hands
on my breasts, and I went stiff
in the dark. His stubble tickled,
scratched me. I said

no—softly, but I did say
no—but he whispered and kissed,
and I thought, even if I didn't believe,

we're in love—we are—
once we graduate, we'll get
married, and then it'll be okay;
surely sex doesn't count
if it's with the person you're going to marry.

A hesitant "okay," even though
each time the shadows shifted
and engine reverberations overpowered
skin sliding against sheets, I went numb
thinking someone was turning
into the driveway. Each gust of wind
that creaked the house
became someone in the hall.

It didn't feel good—not like
he promised. I thought
we'd feel joined, like one person,
but it just hurt, and when he rolled
off me, I could still feel him,
the pain from him.

He slipped away as silently as he'd come,
and I lay awake, watching the sky lighten.

Flyer for New Harvest Church, Hope, Kansas

People just cant see them so much anymore because we're all blinded by modern-day rationalization: we've seen women speak in tongues, water turned to wine. God still shows Himself and miracles cant be faked—we've seen so many; a woman with breast cancer asked Jesus to heal her and within a few months, without medication! Beth Shipley's testimonial: *I used to be awful—just awful!—I used to party all the time, smoke pot, drunk, did drugs all through school, but none of that made me happy—I came to New Harvest and was greeted with open arms and its made all the difference in my life.* Lost? Don't know where your life is taking you?

One Night of Healing

Your beliefs: a patchwork
of fantasy novels and religions
strangled by time and quaint

verses of poor poetry
posing as prayers.
None of this bothered me,

despite the tiger's-eye pendulum
on a swinging chain
divining our future,

the fire spirit within the stone
pushing it to "nod,"
though you fatigued from exertion.

But the night my fever
rose to a crescendo,
you burned candles

on the oak nightstand,
sat by the bed, begged me
to let you pray:

*Even though you don't believe,
just accept that I want to help
and the Goddess will heal you.*

Afterwards, you bragged
how your deity breathed life
into me, a non-believer,

and I felt like a spectacle on parade,
though even the unfaithful
can't bear suffering alone.

Boy Preacher

Wind flips pages of the Bible
on a podium while the child, holding
a microphone, stands

on the curb outside Wal-Mart.
It's summer, and he's wearing a suit,

shouting in a voice that imitates
southern Baptist preachers
in movies and on TV:

*Jesus WANTS you to be SAVED! Accept
the LORD into your HEART!*

The cars go past,
slow, but none stop.
In an interview, the child mentions he sinned

against his mother, and Jesus forgave him
when he was four. He has years

before the first girl
ignites his hormones,
before he desires

what a neighbor possesses,
before he feels urges for destruction.

There's a man behind him, watching,
silent. He's letting a child
tell adults they need to accept

what he's accepted, as childhood—
the years imagining being an astronaut

or school teacher or anything else
because the world was open and waiting—
dies with each projected word.

Christian Hardcore

Curling into himself, he hunches forward
as if squeezing the gurgling roar from his chest,
purging it onto the microphone shoved
into his mouth, his neon-green hair in Liberty

spikes. The only words I discern are *Jesus*,
our only Lord and Savior in the chorus
while the bassist slaps strings
and kicks over an amp.

In strobe lights, the crowd's
a jerky sea of leather jackets, chains,
gauged piercings, combat boots,
tight torn pants. One

man moshing has a red, circled "A"
spray-painted on the back of his jean jacket,
beneath it in sharp lettering,
Anarchists for Christ.

On stage, the singer leans back,
hands cupped around the mic,
screeching like a bird of prey,
as if

he's yelling in a fury
against sinners, yelling
loud enough
for God to hear.

Nephilim

I

Was it smooth flesh,
the tender pulse at her throat?
Soft, moist tongue,

flowing hair, swell of breasts,
curve of thighs, the way
lips parted, sticking slightly

and showing only a hint of teeth
that drove the first angel
through metaphysical realms

into a woman's embrace?
Or did he gaze into eyes—
hazel, sapphire, emerald, or earth—

and see her soul,
the Word burning
bright enough to blind?

He took her, or ravaged her,
somewhere between love
and blazing lust.

Then another descended,
and another, until
angels and women

intertwined
while the world
slid into sin.

Then: monsters,
creatures fallen from grace,
and God on His throne sent water.

II

They met in a bar and spent the night
trying to find love.
Then they met again.

She still adored
his scarred hands and beard
that only grew in patches,

and she begins to imagine
leaving customers hungry,
burning her uniform and nametag,

moving into a nice apartment
on some high floor with Leonard,
waiting for him each evening

with dinner or maybe news
about her job search; her first day.
And she tells him this.

He smiles through Marlboro smoke,
“Yeah . . . we’ll see,”
and flicks ash out the open window.

Savior Syndrome

You gave me a Bible on an overcast Sunday,
preached about the sensitive balance of my soul,
how I shouldn't turn my back and walk away:

an eternity of torture—unless I stayed
beside Him and accepted mercy. I should know
all the lessons of the Bible and Sunday

sermons. You tried to appeal to poetry
but offered clichés: *God is in every flower, each snow-
flake—He'll never turn His back or walk away.*

*If you leave the door to your heart ajar each day
you can feast on His divine light, the whole
of His Bible and teachings on Sunday.*

But I kept thinking you were trying, really, to save,
or just cure, your brother—a decaying brain beyond your control—
and I, regrettably, needed to walk away

because I couldn't stop imagining his vacant gaze,
the mechanical hiss of his breathing, to know
he'll never read *any* book on *any* day
and can't move to turn his back or walk away.

A Brush with Religion: Christmas, 2005

You'd already disowned your sister
for taking candles and tarot cards
over the cross—you called them
false abominations—

but how many of your words were lies?
*I see in you pure light, a sun
burning to surface;
it's this you feel when you see a man,*

*homeless and hungry, and want to empty
your wallet to him, though he asks
only for change. Only tiny beams now;
given time, you'll let them flourish.*

You believed but didn't mention
I could embrace this goodness
only through Christ.
How close I was to believing you

when you left me dangling in a Purgatory
between faith and non-belief, slowly
slipping, remembering
your pristine voice,

smooth like drying concrete,
innocent as quicksand.

Conversion

You breathe quick breaths, skin slick with sweat
while Julie sits cross-legged on the floor, her leather backpack

open, contents scattered in a hazardous semi-circle
of yew wands, colored candles and stones, tarot cards,

books with curled edges and broken spines:
Teenage Witch, To Light a Sacred Flame,

Daughters of the Goddess. You manage
smiles and nods as she speaks, but your eyes stray

to the door, to me, pleading. Later,
she'll convert to Catholicism—your doing—

but for now she lights a red candle,
pinches out the match, and searches through a paperback

for a chant to attract romance
for you, sliding back, fearing

fire and brimstone just for being
so near to blasphemy.

Cleaning Fish

My brother sawed through bone,
removing heads, his knife

tearing veins till
they dangled, and I squatted

with knees under my chin
while he stripped scales,

placed meat into baggies
filled with water. One bass

gasp—its gills *flexed*—
a pectoral fin steering away,

its caudal fin smacking
the cutting board. Bob threw

their remains into the woods,
washed blood, while I remembered

my Sunday School teacher preaching
how animals don't have souls,

and don't go to heaven.

In Newport, I Get My Father's Views on Religion

Well go now, you dumb BITCH.

The miniscule whine of brakes prompts
glares from crowded sidewalks,
though the elderly woman wearing
a bonnet and modest Sunday dress
who'd stepped into the path
of our pickup without glancing
still doesn't see us.

*Just because she thinks she saved
herself by giving away some of her money
and listening to a preacher drone about
how SINFUL everyone is*

*she thinks she doesn't need to pay attention.
She's going to HEAVEN—*

everyone else is a bastard-heathen.

The road narrows.
Cars await the mingling
flood of four churches.
Sleeves roll up, children dodge
parents in wild purges
of pent-up energy. Then
everyone tries to merge.

*Look at them; they all act so much better,
like they're ANY different, like
not going's the worst sin—
forget murderers, rapists—*

*did you know, once, when I still went,
they told me victims are to blame
because they put THEMSELVES
in that position?*

At the four-way, men in suits
hold near-perfect posture, once
carefully combed hair matted,
wives at their sides, children
running ahead, yelling back.

The victims—can you believe that?

We leave the congestion behind
and in the rearview mirror
I watch a mother grab her son
by the forearm, lean down to administer
a scolding directly to his face,
and he's trying so hard to pull away.

The Last Grave

Passing among tightly packed tombstones,
birds scatter up to branches when I near.
In the distance, I see only the shoulders

and head of the caretaker
who straightens himself to toss another
shovel full of earth.

He notices me,
stops, and nods.
I ask how he's been, and avoid

the grave that will soon hold
my brother's oldest friend.
Eighteen. Car accident.

"Doin' fine—almost got this one.
Don't know where they putting
any more, though. This the last spot.

Guess they finally
have to go and fence in
another field, huh?"

An alarming caw, and the crows
remind me of
Zoroastrians,

who left their bodies
in an open tower, allowing
the carrion birds to feast,

and though I don't want to,
I imagine a black bird
digging its talons into

Jason's passive flesh,
plunging its hooked beak
into an eye, pulling out soft meat,

clean bones pushed into a pit
of generations
while the newly dead arrive . . .

No. I force from my mind
the picture in the paper
of twisted metal,

and see him
scratching his shaved head,
intact, though I can't forget

in two days my brother
will help carry the coffin
towards this hole.

Centralia

For Sascha Feinstein

I

Along 61, the hills are stripped. Coal slopes
creep farther down while yellow beasts dig, scrape
away dirt and grass. Only black remains.

Dust covers houses, cars—colors filter
through its film—and angels tied to light posts,
lining both sides of the street, halos draped

in ragged tinsel, wings back, trumpets raised,
sounding a silent note. Drawing closer,
I leave towns behind. Soon it's just trees.

A line of birches defines the road, asleep
with winter. Beyond them, only a few
stand as skeletons in a barren sea

populated only with rocky heaps—
unusable fragments—collecting dew.

II

Melted snow patches from smoke rising through
solid-seeming earth where moss clusters grow,
the only hint below ground fires empty
coal caverns, burning after forty years.

A wooden sign, painted in red, nailed to
a tree beginning to decompose, shows
not "The way into the suffering city"
but simply "Fire" with an arrow, nearly
vanished, pointing towards a cemetery
without mourners, smoldering in morning

sunlight. Past the gates and tombstones, a slope
rises above the town, a church seated
at the top, onion domes overlooking
gathered masses, shivering, still with hope.

III

Along the rusted fence, a place where smoke
leaks in two streams from underneath the graves,
the dead, unable to escape, must burn

eternally. Here, on the surface, cold
reigns, snow burying roads, the path a moat
of ice leading to another street, paved,

that goes up to a mound of stones, a torn
American flag crumpled, faded, pulled
gently by wind. Sprouting from the pile so

small it seems only a child could rest there,
fake flowers still hold vibrant orange and yellow.
No telling how long they've been here with no

marker. Nearby, a tree trunk nearly bare
arches its branches like a whale's rib bones.

IV

A dead end on a road devoid of homes—
only a guardrail overgrown with vines,
as if nature was trying to yank it down
the drop-off. Ahead is a toy graveyard:
a picture book, pages faded like tomes

from Egypt; a doll with only a whine
left when her string's pulled—a demonic sound;
a once-pink playhouse, coated with thick, tar-
colored grime, the roof and one wall collapsed.

Abandoned. Intermingled among
dead leaves and plastic bags. Silence. Where
the children have gone seems senseless to ask
when nearly everyone is gone, though some
remain to make Heaven from smoky air.

Postcards from Benares

*Only have
the clothes on my back and bowl
I use each night to beg.
Blessings.*

*

*Found a teacher—learning yoga.
I feel better, more at peace.
Finally.*

*

*The world drops away.
I go to follow the monks.
I will not write again.*

*

*I'm writing from the hospital.
Almost dead, but okay. I don't want
visitors. I'm still in the East.*

*

*Apologies for my last message.
Left my teacher. Begged,
but in anger, threw
my alms bowl into the Ganges.
I'm now ninety pounds.*

*

The Buddha once followed this path.

*

Remember the rose-apple tree?

Seclusion.

Spirit. All things.

Sallekhanā

First, of course, I count his ribs,
then his tendons protruding from bones.

Somehow he keeps withered feet
tucked near his groin, knees supporting the weight

of his hands. Gnats land on his nose,
scurry along eyebrows, his eyes almost

staring across the garden:
monks and orchids.

He blinks an eternity between eyelids closing
and opening. Lilac incense curls,

and he looks so tranquil I envy him
though he's dying. Sipping the water bowl,

he's careful not to imbibe
a single insect.

Soon he'll stop drinking,
as he stopped eating and speaking, his last days

meditating, slowly leaving the world behind,
cells attacking one another, consuming neighbors

while his spirit uncurls its last interwoven threads
and leaves empty flesh behind, rising.

On Seeing Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*

He seems to be standing at the world's end,
hearing the voice of God whispered in the caress
between water and sand. I wonder if he intended
this pilgrimage, or simply digressed
during evening meditations, and now can't comprehend

this vast place with brooding horizons; how men
become so insignificant compared to a sea
and an infinite sky that meets only at the ends
of mortal vision. There must be miles of beach
beyond the canvas keeping him, and when

not a single ship obstructs his sight and no gulls
scour the shore, he appears out of place. But now
I notice he has a hand raised to his chin, and seems compelled
to remain. Perhaps he's contemplating how
we arrive at our destinations, when we learn to walk instead of crawl.

Virgin Water

Deep underground, I stay close
to Mahkah, watching where he steps.
Electric light burns my eyes,
casts stalactite shadows,
illuminates granite laced with black,
frosted with white, rippling as though
hundreds of miniature waterfalls
suddenly froze,
though they drip.
Crunch of stones underfoot.
Faint tapping of beads on his jacket.
I want to ask, How much farther?
but talking seems blasphemous
in this ancient place that existed
before words.

Mahkah suddenly stops,
points to the tip of a brown-red spire
jutting down where a drop of water
hangs, sparkles, then splashes
upon the cave floor.

"Virgin Water," he whispers.

He kneels and places an earthen pot
to catch the next drop,
prays to a god I know only a little,
in a language I know even less,
only common words:
thanks, blessing, purity.

He crosses his legs and waits.
I set the lantern to the ground
and mimic his position, until

my thoughts wander to what I've read
of Mayans and Virgin Water:

A child tied to an altar.
A Mayan priest, his headdress
silhouetted against fire,
shakes his staff, beads and his father's
knuckle bones rattle,
quetzal feathers quiver and dance.
Chanting, his chest slick with
Virgin Water, he stands over the boy
while others press obsidian knives
against tender flesh to draw tears,
their rain god's attention
drawn to the water
as they grip the child's heart,
raise it to heaven.

I feel Mahkah's hand on my shoulder.
He stands cradling the pot, and another drop
lands on stone, until, finally, he says,

"We have enough."

Ouroboros

You sip chai spiced with vanilla, the steam
 rising between us while I finger your worn
copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

“It wasn't just Nietzsche,” you say.
 “Mayans, Aztecs—they recognized
nature's cycles, and projected them

onto the universe.
 Expansion. Contraction. Repetition.”
You raise the cup, not touching your lips.

“Forever, we'll be here at this time,
 you not talking, me drinking tea—
can you imagine? Stuck, struggling . . .”

But I know you're not thinking of me,
 that it's your father, nights counting
his bottles of Boone's Farm,

bagging them, dragging them to the curb
 each night, wondering how
a drunken world could better the real.

“Like that night I drove an hour
 through the woods to find you
hiding in a ditch, tripping on Paxil.

You want to live through that again—
 not once, but infinitely?”
Behind the counter, steam screams

and the cashier sets another chai,
calls another name.
You're right, I say, but sometimes

it seems everything is in its proper place.

Humility

Children gathered in chain-linked
basketball courts try bouncing
a half-deflated ball while
groups of shirtless teens riding bicycles
weave past me on uneven
sidewalk sections. A car thumps into a pothole,
shudders as if it might come undone.
The sun begins setting, graffiti
and trash piles harder to discern
as buildings fade to silhouettes. Broken
glass sparkles on asphalt in front of
a store window where seven televisions
mirror images while a narrator's
silent monologue scrolls across the bottom.
On the screens,

peasants gather, use shovels
or bare hands to fill cavities
on a nondescript, rain-washed road.
Under gray, formless sky, they do not speak.
Sweaty in the cool, moist wind,
men bring wheelbarrows of dirt
while women and children smooth their work,
bodies coated with mud.
The Enlightened One arrives and a youth
throws himself into the first hole
in the traveler's path, bracing his body
to bear the weight.
The Enlightened One kneels to touch him.
His silent lips move. Words on the screen:
"Someday, you shall be The Buddha."

Īshvara

I: Brahmā

The universe explodes with
a thought: planets, stars, the belts
of debris, expansive nebulae,
comets caught in vast circular
orbits. You and I
are here, mortal bodies
yet to form, yet to die
over and over again;
only a spark of
essence, a fragment.
Time suddenly springs
into existence, the evolutionary
wheel begins
spinning.

II: Vishnu

The stars continue
burning, planets
sustain orbits. My soul
enters into flesh,
becomes trapped, and frees
itself repeatedly.

In one life, I paint
landscapes, capturing
hemlocks, streams, perhaps
a fish, mid-jump,
the beads of water hanging
forever.

In some I meet
you; in others, I die
before the chance.

III: Shiva

The Big Bang in reverse—a mass
collapsing towards Existence's
center; planets rip
apart, stars
supernova, and mortal frames
die for a final time. A hand
of fire greets
matter disintegrating
into pure essence—
me, you.

The entire universe
reduced to pinpoints
of candle-flame, and for a moment
reveals God's true form.

Weaving

Her gnarled knuckles flex
as fingers guide wool strands
into rows, forming a quilt
with a blue star exploding
in the center, outlined in red
and black, upon a white background.
Eagles at each corner,
frozen, wings tucked tight,
keep keen watch.

She prays while she works
and answers my questions
when she rests her hands,
her wrinkled lips smile
as she slowly forms explanations
in a foreign tongue
so I can understand:

*For my son, who lives
away from his family.
Sometimes, in his letters,
he is afraid, because everything
is steel and he cannot hear
the earth.*

I ask about her prayers.
She says each one
gets woven into the blanket.

In the firelight, she seems to glow,
the shadows of her hands
splayed across the fabric,
moving, caressing.

Yggdrasil

Dry, rough bark under my hands
gripping the ash tree,
feet finding familiar grooves
upward through the branches.
Early autumn. Leaves brush my face.
The ground seems soft enough
to cushion a fall, or would I
keep falling
through clouds beneath, past the roots
traversing the hill overlooking home,
all the way down to Niflheim?

I've cut my palm. Blood soaks into the branch.

What if sacrifice and perseverance
were still the way to knowledge and power?
Wouldn't there be fields of trees with
young, middle-aged, and old all hanging
for days and nights,
to resurrect a father, heal a grandmother,
fuse fractures running through families?

My cut fills with bits of bark and stops bleeding.