

Abstract

The Syncope suite of poems was inspired by three classes I took in graduate school, two of which were electives in philosophy and poetry as well as pathography. The poems also draw from feminist reimaginings of mythological figures. They reflect diseases of the mind and body; in "Syncope," especially, these diseases are what separate the mind and the body. We are at once trying to embrace and free ourselves from them.

Keywords

Syncope,
mythology, lyric
sequence, ritual,
pathography

SYNCOPE

CARMIE ORTEGO

LIVING BY HALVES

Half a gallon.

That is what you always told me then
 when you asked me to buy *tuba*. Just enough
 to loosen up but not get drunk.
 Enough, like the grade seventy-five. You didn't
 force us to achieve more. The passing grade
 was just fine, because what ever
 would you do with more?, you said.
 There are just certain things
 that arrive after another has left.
 For example, your ingrown nail
 after your operation. How odd sometimes
 that the body yearns for, grows
 new flesh to replace what was lost.
 But why have two if you can do
 with one. Just one breast.
 Just one good foot to walk with
 because the other is infirm.
 Although it strikes suddenly at times,
 pain is a stranger that remains
 outside the door.
 You just need to buy
 another silicone when the last pad
 has been damaged, the water
 for the bath should be warm
 because if not, your soul feels
 as though it's squeezed by the cold,
 your shoes should be open-toed
 so your feet could be aired out.
 Happiness, too, should not be let in
 easily. Because sometimes,
 in the measuring, in the halves,
 only you can feel the overflowing
 pain no matter how you describe
 it, and there are silences
 that no amount of *tuba*
 can let spill. But as you said,
 if one wants to live,
 there are some things
 that have to be tempered.

PENELOPE'S GEESE

I.

Another day in your absence
and I must put down
the distaff and gather myself

about me: head bowed,
arms folded, legs
crossed, no use sullyng

the image you used to have
of me: always the same lean
grace even now, about to sleep

on a chair. There is not one stray
lock of hair here that you
may tuck behind my ear.

Even if you did barge in
the door now, you cannot
touch me; know me
as you once did.

II.

Because that is what you wanted,
you said, *to follow knowledge*
like a sinking star,

so I tried the same, with
a butterfly whose wing
now lies at the wayside, or

a flock of white seabirds
flying close to the shore:
things less difficult,

less grand. These days
I have taken to looking down
when walking, looking for

traces of things that have fallen
or flown away, things broken
or torn apart, so full

of possibility. Like the fact
that by this time, the neighbors
could know me almost

as well as you did, a woman
trying to take in disappearances
by pursuing lost roads

and dirt paths. At any moment,
I might finally be able
to find the body,

reach the keep. But
at any moment,
you could come home.

III.
And so one more test
he must pass:

not the bow that he must string
nor the suitors he must slaughter

but my geese, my twenty
geese, all killed by an eagle.

And if he insists that the eagle
is he: then I shall remain

unmoved as that bed
he must remember.

IV.

In the end as in the beginning
we need no words,
no words for this strange

fluttering when I saw you
again with that stubble
after so many years.

I could not let you hold
my hand, not when
I myself have failed

my test. Be still,
my heart, we must grow
one more goose,

begin one more year.

RITUAL

Bleed in the moonlight to celebrate it.
 So much loss is necessary to revel
 in such fullness, your lost dreams
 are just behind your closed lids.
 death snake corridor ghost color garden heaven
 you remember the words when you awake
 but not what they meant.
 Death is a snake the ghost has a color the garden
 in heaven is but a corridor that leads
 to nothing. Or the snake is the winding
 corridor color the garden full of ghosts death
 is a kind of heaven. Today
 a golden moth laid a dozen
 golden eggs on your tabletop.
 She died soon after, which is one
 of a dozen things her eggs might mean
 for you. Or the eggs wax golden
 for the candles you cannot light
 tonight. Not for fear of sorcery taking
 things by force but woman listening
 to her own body, candles
 to accompany the haze. They could
 go together, mismatched shoes
 you dreamt were given to you
 by a kindred woman, angel
 of anger. There is nothing to destroy
 that hasn't been already lost, the way
 you grope for clarity and hear instead
 a clarion, its call as bright as
 moonlight. The lips are sealed but
 the ear follows its own pulse,
 today you bleed while the others
 are gravid with seed. It is an ancient rhythm
 your grandmothers have told you about,
 of circles and eternities, words like labyrinths
 with no corners to remember.

It does not even matter which grandmother
it was, what name she went by.
This moment is as sacred as any other.
The woman who wakes into this haze alone
can utter that which is unspeakable. Death
is a kind of heaven. To celebrate the moonlight,
let it bleed.