

## Five Poems

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### *Hush Harbor*

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*Colored people who left white churches built invisible institutions  
Sometimes called hush harbors.—The New Yorker*

Of all the things to have: the blues.  
A man plays a chord, two in the morning.

There's a Gospel hurt in him  
that gets you thinking, there's more than

a woman he's telling on, but there isn't:  
*You know I don't want you, little girl,*

*if you don't want me,* goes the song,  
and out the door goes the woman,

suitcase in hand, into the road,  
without so much as a by-your-leave.

There's a reason he doesn't ask her  
to stay, of course, and it's so he can sing

the blues: *Have you ever loved a woman,  
O man,* better than you did yourself—

and those who stay to listen  
hear only the good woe; shake their

heads and hang their hats: Amen.  
When he says, *Have Mercy*,

he doesn't mean show some  
compassion; it means he's touched

by something. Holy ghost  
or hard angel, only he can tell.  
It's been said white preachers  
used to skip over Moses in Sunday

sermons; couldn't let the coloreds  
in on scripture whose one straight

point was *let my people go*.  
But no one's letting go of anyone

tonight who hasn't already left;  
no one here who hasn't made

hard noise from the rattling  
hollows. And if it isn't Jesus

in the dirty kitchen, it's a gone  
woman who takes you to church.

## Cellophane

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It wasn't like this before the fall.  
If anyone knew you at all, it wasn't by  
Aiming right on target. Dead center

Between the eye, or the thin  
White line on your torso, dignified  
By a downy fluff of hair.

If anyone knew you at all, it was by  
Knowing how to miss: aim for the button  
not the heart, aim for the fabric,

Not the skin, the flutter, not the beat.  
You teach your husband how to be  
Imprecise, because you rely so much on science—

Tell him how your father flew planes  
Made of cellophane and wood,  
How that little red propeller whirred

Against hard wind, how he wound *lift* into it  
With a hook and a rubber band.  
And he'll know that this nostalgia's

The hurting kind, your father gone  
Six years now, your heart as straight and level  
As only dead weight can make it.

He'll ask how your old man could ease  
The cellophane into each plywood frame  
Without the wood breaking—

And the trick, you say, was how he'd dip  
The thing into liquid film, and wait until  
It leveled so lightly, you'd barely

Think it was there. Daily, he'd approach  
His burden, steadying the hand  
Against its weight. On film so sheer, a breath

Could tear it from its frame.  
You speak to keep the pain even,  
It has to stretch across the years,

Length by heft.  
You learn to break only as far  
As there's still breaking in you left.

## ***Seven Kinds of Stories***

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*Some sudden crickets ambushing me near.*

*Carlos Angeles*

Nothing tonight but the lovesick churr  
of sudden crickets. I sling dark thoughts  
across the room, see where they fall.  
I do not want to sleep. I flip the pages of a book.

A woman strings bright threads across a loom,  
trusts piety to bring him back.  
In wavering light, silence answers: *Soon*.  
Cinderella scrambles for lentils on the floor,

Empties each grimy handful in a pot.  
I do not want to sleep, I scramble  
for a point in an unusable plot.  
Penelope unravels a thread

Because the tapestry suffers from  
too much red. A boy is plunged  
headlong into a river, dry at the heel  
where his mother fastens her hand.

Cinderella cannot *forgive*,  
but knots her brows to *understand*.  
I do not want to sleep. There are plots  
I think I know by heart, but I can't tell

who left, or returned, or broke the spell.  
They name the boy Achilles and bind the heel  
in leather, calfskin, the barks of ancient roots.  
He wonders at the godly foot, warned against

the smallest harm: a stone, a bramble,  
a stick. In Messina, Benedick  
outwits Beatrice and wins the scene,  
calling her his Dear Disdain.

She makes a pact with the god of wit  
to win the play back.: this is only  
one scene; there are four other acts.

You sleep and do not read,  
you sleep while I turn page after page  
in dim light, follow a plot I can use  
to know your mind.

A pumpkin does not a carriage make  
In real life, but it will do in Cinderella.  
She eases a foot into a glass slipper  
Bright as stars and cold as ice.

*Midnight*, She promises, *Midnight*,  
Paris shoots an arrow clear through that coral  
skin. Makes a moral out of human flaw,  
as if the flaw meant human failing.

Penelope fixes her gaze in disbelief:  
The olive tree so carefully pursued  
turns on the loom into a map of Ithaca.  
The odyssey isn't *his* return,

it's how her world extends without him:  
beyond tree, or garden, the threads  
on the loom. *Try*, they say, the slipper  
on the urchin, and Cinderella

wins the world, the story, the Prince.  
Seven kinds of stories and that's every  
book we know, in a thousand variations,  
yet I've missed one—

the stoned-eyed, impossible monster  
we're meant to overcome. Was it Perseus  
who told it first, was it Ishmael,  
the snake-haired woman, the slippery whale

in an unruly sea? And what would you say  
if I asked you tonight, say you found me  
in this room, hunched over a page in dim light.

There's a boat and a whale and a sea.  
Let the narrative tell it, and let us be.

## *Playa de Kamakura*

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—Juan Luna (c.1896)

*Luna traveled to Japan in the summer of 1896.  
In August of that year, he and his brothers were arrested  
on suspicion of being participants in the Katipunan  
revolution. —Museum of Arts and Sciences, UST*

No turn in sea or sky,  
no smear of sun or balm of air—  
incredulous atmosphere, shattered  
by neither gull nor human cry.

This is the end, I think, of allegory,  
the end of red on the canvas, gaudy as  
smoke in gentlemen's bars; I tighten my stroke  
and keep my eyes plain on the scene.

Pewter and salt on the surf, the soft,  
wet earth as dull and brown as *tsokolate-ah*  
in Salvi's house—I try more silt in the dye  
and black in the red.



The eye turns slack that kept its look  
on gallant *monsieurs* who knew her tightest  
quivers; and from the old vermilion,  
only eggshell and slate.

*Luna*, I ask myself, is this the end  
of a long pilgrimage—a sky that keeps  
its leaden rumor of sun? Under the pillow,  
I tighten the hand on the gun.

## ***It Was Autumn or Fall or Whatever***

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It was autumn or fall or whatever  
But the trees were not budding  
Across the river, it was russet or  
Puce, or whatever, but the trees

Were redding or yellowing at the tip  
Only the window saw it in spears or dots  
Along the oaks or gingko trees  
As whisper or innuendo or whatever

Would not flame, the swirl of dirt  
In the long whirl was autumn or fall  
Or whatever, the squirrels nipped  
Hard acorns and nipped into the brush

As rote or custom, whatever,  
Across the river that somewhere  
Would end in a big word. Mississippi  
Or New Orleans or Chicago,

The water so still it was silt or slate,  
Or whatever didn't catch into the trees.  
And you touched me or I touched you,  
Or whatever, it was only narrowly autumn.

And the squirrels darted back  
Into the brush, each time we advanced  
Toward them across the lawn.

*After Marianne Boruch*