

Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

Cow Song

My sleep rolls through the hush of crickets' purr
to find split girth, birth's note stalking my dark room.
Father slips on boots as her sound consumes
our squarish house. I am getting older.
I do as I am told. The cow's tongue slurs,
one blue slack leg dangling from her womb.
He steps through the springer's black perfume
and palm to belly, checks for breath, the stir.
The hooked moon shifts through redwoods as danger
lodges, sifts in his hand. Tight lips spill
stifled *goddamns* while dark hooves scrape their lists.
He goes in arm-length with slip-noosed hanger
to loosen young shoulder from hip. Cow song fills
the silver pail. The shotgun sits and sits.

The Boy Who Would Be Achilles

Until there is something spoken there,
the ear appears meaningless,
a white, tooled shell. The smiling face
is delicate, your finger on his picture
is touch, slip away,
like walking wet stone.

Hero. If you could say it again,
his name would be
awful, the hardest to remember
at parties. It's hard sometimes, you know,
to look at him the way you do,
in the best graces:

groomed in a school photo, or as the fat baby
industriously at play, or inconsequential
against the backdrop of California.
Remember that sky? He stood between
two houses, head cocked to the left
as he once saw in a film, not shot

like in that dream you had,
scalp and bone flapping
a botched mouth.
You remember nothing

from that day but that the cat got out
and the toilet kept sighing. He stepped out
to war with his impenetrable body,
some other country, and never returned.
It's not supposed to be like this
you think you said—

he was always the dutiful one,
quietly came between his brothers' conflicts
and buried the cat's kill in the yard.
No ordinary creature

could expect his death
sooner than your own
right foot would turn left.
You wish him thin,

out of existence,
the weakest archetype
in your good story.
But then, oh—

to dip him headfirst in that river,
make him call your name.

admire each other and carnival crushes around him.
You walk the drunk ones home with a flashlight,
drunk yourself. You will change your life.

Decorum

for Sean

At the reception, it is humid
and the bourbon smokes over broken ice;
it smokes on your breath while you talk
with tired-looking friends over appropriate music.
In his last days, x-rays lit
his chest from the interior,
bringing the lungs' tough white
knuckles of illness into relief.
You catch the eye of the deceased's lover,
then go back to the pile of marbled cheese cubes
stacked on a silver platter: a last grasp at decorum.
Someone has a moment with the deceased's bedroom slippers
and suddenly the evening has turned silly;
the black wool jackets have come off
and no one bothers to admonish the Scottish terrier
eating freely from guests' plates. Your husband pulls
a book of wedding matches from his breast pocket
and it too is ridiculous: your name and his emblazoned
in nuptial script below the sad gold
outline of a dove. On the chaise,
another new husband is massaging
his young wife's feet for the shoes.
You've already forgotten the long and academic eulogy,
remembering the dead in the bright chipped
orange polish on this woman's toes,
the prattle of ice in highball glasses,
and your best friend egregiously passed out
in the easy chair before midnight.
In the snapshot above the door, the dead man
is dressed as Marilyn Monroe as potbellied men in chaps