

AMY PARKES

Three Ghosts

PLEIONE MARRIES ATLAS

Delicate spindle balances the problem of two bodies. I tell lies often.
Here: my mouth, half-knot slow. Tributary to a delta's copper
song & in my hands the feathers of seabirds killed by hard weather.

Concaved, whaleboned, you saw a figment in wedding-white, not
me. For you: my mouth a knot, tribute to our delta's copper hymn
& its alluvial mumble. My feet worn raw by sediment, by the tide.

Cave of veil & lace, you remembered whalebone-white, not me.
Said, *Anchor*. What if there's distance between us? Said, *Vow*, in

your alluvial voice. But my feet are still raw from broken seashells.
I'll be my own cartographer; I will walk alone to our marrying altar.

Into the gulf between us I promise, *Anchor. What if. Say, I vow.*
Small freckles pattern the back of your wrist. A delta fills with sky.
I walk alone to the altar where I married you, their cartographer,

& hear you voicing half-knots & a tributary's slow coppery song.
Clouds pattern your wrist, your flank. Our delta fills with rain
off a delicate spindle. The problem of our bodies: I often lie to you.

LE MAL DU PAYS

Northeast faces naked on jack pines, red
pines, the silver birch & tamarack trees.
Shredded limbs watched the hollow-eyed granite
lakes, streaked strange & bigger than the hidden

dusk. Unbalanced colour, smeared muskeg, grey
gneiss reminded me of every dead thing
I have ever seen. Now my old home in
every frame. This exile the loneliness:

one more thing I have taken for granted.
Seven pairs of hands painted what they mourned.
Lost between the palette and the canvas,
I want to go home. Once, I crawled into

the National Gallery for escape—
I was careless then.

DEAD ANIMALS ON OLD NUTTBY ROAD

I was foolhardy & selfish to burden the cat with the name of a god.
Yesterday I watched her tear the sky for a taste of morning.
Strange voices said to lift my boot or a hammer, the knife
that once belonged to my father. Strangers said

let the dying dove sleep
alone & cold in the backyard. We struck a whitetail deer
near the Nuttby Mountain House when I was small.

My brother said, *This is mercy.*

Said, *Don't look. Don't watch*, like unknowing would be mercy
for me & I believed him then. Is there any one among the gods
without a taste for bloodletting, who will not sacrifice

whatever is dearest?

I guess I'm not thinking only about the mangled mourning
dove I took from the cat's mouth, though I did nest it tenderly
near me when I went to sleep.

Not even in dreams could I open my hand; hold firm the knife

as if the bird wouldn't be cool & stiff under new sun.

I regret my knife-
less hand, but I feel no braver. Whose obligation to perform
these lethal mercies?

If my father—*my father*—had begged I carve out his gentler sleep
& another faithful love from my chest, could I have been that god
for him? Listen to me. After all, this was just a cat & a mourning
dove. Just the empty stretch Old Nuttby Road & half in its
snowy ditch, a shattered deer.

Listen to me: I'm lying like always. This is my brother, too.

For him, hunting deer
was both rite & passage. My brothers wore silence & uniforms
& knives,

their father woke them early for the long trek. Cold dark morning.
I was older when I learnt that killing animals was his gift, a mercy
after battering my brothers. They still obey their father's God.
I don't need Him. Old Nuttby Road's dead animals stalk my sleep.

But my brothers will never hit their sons & my cat keeps me
safe when I sleep,
even on nights I dream her dead. Dusky feathers in her mouth,
body strung through the sharp rack of a deer.
We try to forgive one another. We're trying to find better gods;
I know nothing holy is hiding inside me—I used my father's knife.
I want to find the ones who slink & grant brittle nighttime mercies
& commit strange acts I can't fathom or hymn or even name
in the morning.

The cat brought me another bird today. Small, unwounded—
& not a mourning
dove. I folded down its wings, wrapped in a soft shirt & let it sleep
off the shock. When it recovers & flies out of my hands I will
wonder who is responsible for that mercy.
No thing's dying gets easier. Not someone else's father. Not a deer,
though my trunk is stocked. Flare. Steel shovel. Foil blanket. Knife.
Ten metres of rope & candles, but this list sounds like last rites
& I'm not one for old gods.

I'll grave dig in the morning & for yesterday's tattered dove
I'll invent a new god.
One of sleep & soaring & one who has never bitten a slick knife
just to taste the blood on its teeth. A god with merciful hands, a god
for roadkill deer.