

Wasn't I happy once,
gripping the swing I had cleaned
of dew with the dish cloth,
the air foggy with sun?

And didn't I mourn but leave
mourning behind, my goldfish
buried in the matchbox?

And wasn't I brave and sad and afraid
when we left that house behind and
moved and moved for jobs?

And wasn't it grown-up of me,
Mother said, that I became expert,
so good at packing bags?

And was I not cheerful then, was I not
cheerful as blacktop, hills and yellow lines?

Imagine I am the woman in *American Gothic*, a garlic knot
for a bun, her severe expression one
I always wear when I have a fork in hand
for survival is serious business, especially since
so much between meals is empty—
now we are forced to stay home
and I wonder how I can bribe you
to take the man part in this farm tableau
so Calvinist and tidy behind us,
though I know we'll always be

Catholic with guilt. Or I can pretend
myself a victim, Nell trussed on the tracks,
our Christmas train set on destruction,
until you as Dudley Do-Right sweep in
to save me. But we're both high-risk,
the walls we stare into blank as infinite space
we thought as newlyweds

God might let us shape. How many mistakes
before we threw up our hands and let the years confetti
at our feet. Now, make-believe is how we pray.
You watch the *History Channel* make sense of history.
I watch *The Crown* put misery in its place. But I can't
forget. On our almost-sprung sofa, let's trampoline—
happy as those sad-faced Windsors in Paris
jumping skyward with their pugs.

Mary Eberly Talks to her Coverlet
Pennsylvania, 1864

2019

I beat the living day
out of you in spring.
You spent the winter
wintering in my bed.

You were a dowry gift
from me to him, from God to us,
in each warp and weft a promise

and with it thrift, an all-season blanket,
married in a central seam to bless us.

I buckled down to progeny: the wait
and wake: #1 a perfect caul
of everything, stillborn;
#2 taken by a cut that bloomed
to rot; # 3 lost
to a high-water sink hole.

In winter's dark waking, I take no relief
in your blue, neither in summer
your white reverse, white-hot as flame,
nor from your designs take gospel comfort:

Where poinsettia guide the Holy Men,
I see cradled ghosts.

In the vine that promises eternal life,
what is Providence, but the twisted rope
that holds my bed to emptiness—

every border flower an asterisk
in our family tree, every star
a graveyard compass.

Here the season warms to sop.
I dust to earth what never leaves.

I took turns
with my wife and mule,
their sweated flanks—
one to yield, one to till,

her belly a rock-hard season
beyond crops and weather;

the ones born runts,
breath unfeathering,

I buried deep
beyond
root and claw. Never told her

the regard I had. How I placed it so
to keep the mouth
dirt-free. How I strained

the soil to soften.
Didn't look. Pushed in
clay and rocks after the hollow
sound filled.

Where black walnuts fell, she would stoop
until her apron bulged.

The mule unscarred
where I yoked him.

I hang where dolomites descend,
my head an icy outcropping, my eyes
seamed shut, my hair an extension
of stars where they froze,
my torso a solid mist
every name I screamed, a ghost.

Here my mouth is prisoner,
my arms raised as if in surrender—
(how the heat of grief can make a body cold).

I am the one she chose,
the Valentine stabbed by fourteen arrows.
How do I staunch the bleed? I hold tight
my children as leaves snagged
in ice; they are emblems
as all children are, for what we know too late
of love and custody. Here I fall,
here I catch, here I wait.