

After the blizzard I followed my mother

the drifts hip-high as we pushed stiff bones through the cold to plough
a path the cows could follow, single file, into the bush for shelter –

obsidian flanks vanishing among black beech trunks so
when I stared into the abyss, it gazed back with bovine eyes.

Morning had thrown back its lid like a chest freezer to reveal too much
bleak bedazzlement. Snow filled our boots until the frost felt hot.

My mother said our service to the cattle came first, although the power
was out in the house and the needs of all the rest of us formed a torrent

like badly stacked firewood tumbling towards her, heavy enough
to crush. But the cows on the mountain relied on us; our gloved thumbs

opening gates to survival. We abandoned our candles and log burner
glow to slog through the snow and haul wet straw sheaves uphill until

the cows came home. On breaching the forest, my mother, the heifers
and I stood at the dappled sanctuary's edge, steaming under the leaves,

sweat defrosting on our bodies, in an onslaught of feeling that may have
been love (if we were allowed it) or something else as pure – sour

and insistent as the smell of silage, extreme as the glare of sun on snow.
Can you ask my mother, was she seized by that brightness?

And what if she dies while we are still angry with each other?

Sparkling bucolic

it's not real cottagecore unless you're up to the elbow in it
blindly groping down the blood-slick canal
as another contraction ripples around your knuckles
the cow is lain on her side kicking a mud angel

your hand clutching at the calf's limp hoof
head torch slipping over your brow
as you affix the chain and brace yourself
to pull and pull until an amniotic spill

when the calf's head breaches unbreathing
still you pull and bring the whole body wetly
into the cold world you drag the whole darkness
drenched newborn around so the mother can lick

caked salts and membranes from her motionless baby
as you rub her tired sides and say sorry girl I'm
sorry you're alright you're alright but somehow
the calf's ribcage has started flaring a pitiful bellows

for breath so you kneel again in the sodden grass
to feed a stalk of hay up one nostril until it sneezes
and smack its sides to keep the mucus moving
then leave them to it snuffling to learn each other

wipe the afterbirth on your thrifted silk slip
your garden strange in torchlight the red flax bowing
like a cow to her newborn the wisteria blossoms heavy as udders
loneliness collapsing on you like a waterlogged tent

Dairy queen

you're the other shedhand on the early milking shift
and you work shirtless
under your heavy rubber apron
 which I appreciate from behind –
 muscles moving under your tan
 perspiration glossy as a cold can of golden pash
unfortunately the overall effect is ruined
by your bleach-blond dreadlocks grinch fingers
died greenish by weeks of cowpat splashback

the splatter of digested turnip this morning has a smell so strong
I can hear it
as though my teeth are thirty crystal glasses and somebody
is tracing a finger along them with skill and ease
 maybe dear colleague this could be you
 oh when will you snap off your latex gloves and oblige me

nobody would hear us
over the rhythmic chug of teat pumps with their fake baby suck
musical lactation fleshlights syncopated with radio blare
Lana Del Rey wailing
her popular summertime sadness
 I am troubled that some sadnesses are more adorable than others
 I am tired of loving people for theirs
 I resent asking to be loved in spite of mine
I've been in this mood all summer
skittish but gentle like a puppy
saying hello by resting my whole mouth around your hand
without biting

this is the only responsible form of tenderness:
hands limp with trust in each other's mouths
but rehearsing secret reflexes just in case

fangs clamp sharp don't call it cynical
even though we are all secretly untrustworthy I still advocate
for getting vulnerable
 particularly when I'm 4am-shift delirious
 highly caffeinated ripe with morning

through a slit in the corrugated iron
the moon is bright pumice bobbing in a dark bathtub
I want to shuck off my gumboots and scrub my feet on it

I want to climb into the feed troughs while you pull the chute
so I am bathed in barley seed and spurts of molasses
 it would be the gushiest ever
 the cows could lick me clean

we milk the sick girls last
their udders so sore and swollen with mastitis
that they jog pendulously to their places by the cups
to hurry us
 their milk comes out mixed with blood
 the safe lurid pink of a strawberry milkshake
frothing into a bucket
 it looks so gross
 but so sweet

Poem about my heart

you have one job
which is to hold

this disturbingly large moth
battering the woven
basket of your fingers

every instinct whining to
close your fist and crush it

or open your palms
set the fluttering insect loose
free your hands for other tasks

but this is your job
the having and the holding

the moth beating scaly wings
moonstruck dust tarnishes your skin
putrid silver as you do not ask

how did this thing get in here
just maintain your grasp

on the fragile lunatic alien
that flew to your light and would not leave
until you caught it and kept it and it became yours