1. *Timor mortis* | The fear of death

They’ve cut them all down on the Christmas tree farm, a late spring slaughter where morning light bloodies each round eye of sawed trunk, raw wood red as sun

Like Noah post-Flood the trees grow drunk, go rolling, wind shaking loose even the memory of water until they come to rest, lighter, in each others’ arms

I thought I heard coyotes cry, dark toothy humor slurred to tears, but three a.m. floodlights show only trees, skirts raised and dried past caring

*Timor mortis conturbat me*, now the stumps have turned graveyard: birds no longer come to these branches and *lux aeterna* is the axe’s glint

2. *Dies irae* | Day of wrath

Somewhere between matins and lauds the world wakes in sheets of rushing slush that rap at doors and windows wanting in, where I stand mid-shuffle, fugged with warmth and recent sleep. These are not the little hours, when a lick of psalm and promise to do better are enough to prop up day’s sturdy sky: this is shallow breath right under crumbling ceiling of night, and you can’t just Indiana Jones the dawn with a bag of worries weighing the same as the dark (as if anything could be as heavy as you, bones bird-hollow to hold the still air of locked rooms, lymph a deep slough swamping mercy’s small boat). When lightning reaches out its hand
and timpani of thunder announce the dance, I remember
how I stole your few small things—shawl, coat, quilt—
to make myself a talisman transferring your want to me,
some warmer embrace by the ghost of your throat, arms,
body at rest; I remember this dance to the tune you’d sing
(you ruined my life, you are terrible, terrible, I wish you had
never been born) and the two of us locked in bruising
waltz: your grip on my shoulder as I spun with small steps
while the blows rained down, your wrath the dead center
of my tight, turning world. Even after I watched you burn,
it all returns in a storm I have no prayer of stopping, dies
irate your afterlife and me still here trapped in the house
of bones you gave me, the gift of your judgment to come.

3. Rex numerorum | King of numbers

In the beginning was the word
assuming a beginning, assuming
a god who surely knew that underneath
everything, even the words
were numbers: assuming this,
say god is a professor of
very advanced math

or physics: for every action
(the blow) there is an equal
and opposite reaction (the hand
print); momentum (force equals
father) sets to work on an object
(your bones), travels through time,
and we all know time is
an arrow (your arm) released
always in a single direction
(me): picture the chalkboard
formula scrawled at the front
of heaven’s class, the arithmetic
proving god’s terrible conservation
of energy, how death transfers your power to the world:

of course the sum at the end (pandemic, hard winter, a year of earthquakes rocking me to sleep) is weeping, wailing, gnashing more than teeth

*Principia mathematica,*
Newton thinks, smiling down from his white steed cloud: nothing is ever lost between us, and he (and you) must sit with god, too deep in numbers to hear the words *salve me*

4. *Voca me* | Call me

Even now my body longs for the benediction of the swing legs out legs in a parody of running and a grip on the chains anointing hands with metal’s scent the rest of the afternoon oh the genius who said let there be flight but let it be tethered by this equal fear of flying, all the gravity stored in my child body oblivious to the voice of the air making promises neither of us could keep the moment the chain goes slack at the top and one eye
squinting as the sun
moves across and up and down
the sky: will one more
ascent be worth
the beating
if I’m late
(her voice never
raised in public, tongue
never sounding out my name
to let me know she knew me and I was
wanted)
I was claimed then
and now by silence
Voca me,
mother;
if not, who will
speak for me and
call me by my name

5. *Lacrimosa* | Crying

The rain began sometime during dark, after we were sated
on Lyrids, an unpronounceable comet, and the space station
swinging from Earth’s belt, so the sun didn’t rise but drown
and, drowning, exhale a pale trickle of light through the sky

Your last breath came the same, unceremonious, without
gasping fanfare; no angels of light unless you count sodium
vapor, frozen in battling constellations across the hospital
parking lot: dark above and below, us unmoored in between

Here, a year on, the rain stays all day; a language whispered
against the glass, a throat full of tears overflowing; relief
and reminder of our history full to bursting the goldfish bag
we are still swimming in, your god the barker of this carnival
I’m out back behind the tents of your finer family, who paid for funeral trappings and whitewashed sideshow; I’ll take rain and rain and rain: what the fuck good is crying when rain does the job, washes away the truth of your hands on me

What little light there is takes its cue to leave; rain departs with it and what’s left behind, as the sky closes eyelids bruised blue with sorrow, is a swaddled new land soft in its blanket of cloud come down for comfort or to smother us all

6. *Libera me | Free me*

Some take to god the way a duck takes to water and, knowing what I know of you, it’s easy to see why: the tale written twisting through your DNA and your father’s and his mother’s goes so far back the letters shrink, unreadable except where they find bone, braid it to rope for hanging the thread of your story on, and on it goes until I snipped one of us free. We are all loose ends tangling in the abyss’s breeze, so who wouldn’t want to write a happier ending than this vertigo, the only anchor years gone, the saving hand a fiery one to burn the whole tethering tree. Tonight the wind hones its voice to a howl through the trunks packed tight right up to the house; I wonder do they think *libera me* and beg for the mercy of standing still—or the greater release,
roots ripped up and the world
tipped sideways before coming
to rest against solid ground.

7. *Agnus dei* \ Lamb of god

I wish you’d been born on a farm full of sheep
with shears the sharpest tool fitting the hand
and only their empty fleece shapes piled deep:

blood bathed each acre of your father’s land—
the cows tonguing windfall pears off your palm,
hogs grown from wriggling piglets to grand

spotted sultans, chickens clucking psalms
for plans laid but unhatched—all met the blade,
bullet to the skull, or drowning sack’s balm.

This idea that sacrifice must be made:
little *agnus dei* on patent leather hooves,
wide-eyed and bloodsoaked trying to wade

the killing field of your childhood, and who’s
going to save him from the altar, too?
You look up with hungry lips made loose

by his fat rendered in the pan; you grew
up knowing to eat is to kill, each bite turned
ashy with entrails and skin; you knew

these were offerings on the fire burned.
I stood outside those gates till the end
waiting for you to feel you had earned

release, hoping your terrible god would send
something toothier than this lamb—
or was it me leading us, limping, deeper in.
Mercy is molassesed chicken feed
chuted straight to the coop, warm from the mill
that you crept in unseen to steal
each mouthful the day’s only sweet on your tongue

*Pie jesi,* the animals were clean,
      knew you from gathering eggs

Mercy’s a hazel twig pocketknifed free
from the arched clump fizzing yellow in spring
its whippy length tested between two hands
before striping the bare backs of your legs

*Pie jesi,* it could’ve been
      the buckled belt, the barber strop

Mercy is the drink in the blood
that dulls your brother dragged to the barn
draped and tied on the cold metal gate
where cows huddle humid and curious for food

*Pie jesi,* if his hands were free
      he would’ve broken the old man’s neck

Mercy is your sister’s nightgown
unbuttoned, collarbones wings in the moon
and your brother’s swollen face pressed deep
to her belly that later miscarried a son

*Pie jesi,* the things you can hide
      when your prison is a working farm

Mercy’s the old man crying into his bed
*no one loves me* while his daughters, three Fates,
heave his white flesh to one side
off a bedsore where you could bury a fist
Pie Jesu, they never thought
to eat his heart before it stopped

Who knew that mercy could look so like
the back of a hand coming right at you;
the mopped brow, the gentle touch for lesser folk
who can’t bear the halo of a harder love

Pie Jesu, the bones are gone
carpals, metacarpals, phalanges
nothing touches you but memory

9. Lux perpetua | Perpetual light

If there is joy it must be light,
bright memories gathered as beasts in the barn:
let lux perpetua be your night.

Close your eyes at last to the sight
of the butcher’s pain, the blood-dark farm:
if there is joy it must be light.

Bloom in it as a flower might
lean into the hand that means to harm,
let lux perpetua be your night.

Drop the weight of holding what’s right,
discover wing folded under your arm —
if there is joy it must be light.

And riding it, may you rise in flight
above all shadows’ petty swarms:
let lux perpetua be your night.

We saw each other as enemies might
or lovers who part before they learn
if there is joy — it must be light:
let lux perpetua be your night.