

Her parents gave her the purest name,
and apparently she was never wooed.
So why would it matter if Mary lay with Degas,
both of them removing their clothes
brushstroke by brushstroke, both of them
tilting their heads to change how light
turned the other's skin from biscuit to roses
as with a well-drawn hand both of them
reached beyond their failing eyesight
to press imperfect flesh to imperfect flesh
and for a moment abolish art. Love
may have made them do it.
If so, it never showed. Childless,
her hymen a private drum, she painted babies
with women, independent of beard or sperm.
She tried to be separate but equal.
There, as she lifted a bare arm
to tie back her shimmering hair.

Because I cannot live
this precision of your death,
I still insist on sightings,
some signal
in the angle of a man's hat,
or the uncanny shape
of a laugh
lapping the bisecting air.

You are the sign
I watch for,
the message I transcribe
from otherworldly code—
the dropped clock resuming
its seconds intact,
the phone sounding
fathomless intervals
through the hollow night,
the voice pulsing
along the wire my own
sleepless longing.

So you remain
incommunicado, a shadow
flickering along a maze
of light I drift beyond,
your specter the pearl I have carved
from living tissue—
a perfection of luminescence
frigid as bone.

So as not to say what has to be said,
having Chinese just by the cathedral,
we make fictions, biographies, cantos
for those who are encountering tonight
the persons they had hoped to be,

walking afterwards in the old town,
we make diaries for the divided selves
who are engaged there in the tavern,
in the cruising sedan, the executive suite,
who some era, some season ago
fled, held on, drifted rightward, eastward,
by happenstance mutated,
insensible to the nuance of the uncle,
witless of the test quite casually failed,

so as not to say what has to be said.