

Kathryne David Gargano

Pentimenti

there's a house in this museum. on the top floor,
more stairs than i ever care to climb, but i climb
them. past the wing of medical instruments &
musical instruments & instruments of torture.
arrows remain where the words have been scratched
away. at each landing i pause to catch my breath—
exhalations tucked in a rucksack, sweat bottled
with rose petals for perfume. my hair grows,
uncontrollable. the sparrows build nests
with my braids, carry their liver-spotted eggs
until they hatch & some die. at the 230th floor,
the air grows thin & it begins to snow. i don't know
how many years it's been since i set out, my sights
on the hole in the roof, so small from the ground floor
i could blot its light with an eyelash. the bear
that lives & hunts & mates & sleeps in the hall
of origami leads me to a shallow lake in the back
stairwell. fish jump the stairs, believing, still,
in spawning. i slice their bellies with what might
have been excalibur. probably not. it was too easy
to pull from its stone. this says nothing about me
& everything about fairy tales, the burden of accepting
gifts from the water. when their hatchlings die
in the nest, the birds feast. a form of sanitation,
regurgitation. pale wings beat frenetically at my scalp,
their tinny cries for food, for their sibling, carry me
across the seasons. when i run out of stairs, i climb
the redwoods. bark cuts my palms & the sticky
blood ensures my grip. i don't know what or who
i expect to find, so high i might fall
for days. the last time i fell from such a height,
my stomach erupted into monarchs. millions upon
millions of wings. i am terrified of creatures that flit.

the way they blink in & out of sight, out of existence,
their bodies so briefly swallowed. i am terrified
someday i, too, will be swallowed. spit back out on dry
land, as if the backs of teeth aren't tremendous. the eyes
are windows & the light a pearl & g-d too is in the mouth.
as if i can be forced to change, to swell with acid,
covered in sick, & not beg to return to the ocean. i'll never be
a prophet. i don't ask enough questions. i just want one thing
to keep still. this close to the stars, i cannot see stars.
this close to the house, i smell strawberries.