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AN ODE TO VISION

Summon the mechanic
to ratchet eye-lids up like a drawbridge
across the skull's dry sockets,

the glazier to fire the frit
into smooth discs suspended
by calipers, slip a moonstone
into the vault of each iris. The eyes

tether us to the names we've learned
to call heaven and earth, oak and fire.

Here is vision's garden:

the bee, the Bob-O-Link
and Hop Hornbeam,
the Lammergeyer,

that magisterial bird coasting the edge
of your perimeter. Let nothing blind

the millimeter pinholes of your pupils,
as you peer into the gloaming
of a day drawn down to rest;
a rowboat bobbing at dusk,
the shining lemons of owls' eyes
blazing in the forest. Invite the astronomer

to marry light to your eyes,
to meet midway behind the ivory globes
on a bridge of lilies, and there
to explode in a flowering of sparks;
an ark that drifts upstream
into the river's soft folds
where the oarsman off-loads
its cargo into your seams. Take heart

in the night hunter's blindness
healed by Hyperion who hurls lumens
across the meadows, unveiling
dawn, a trestle of swallows.

Sight comes with the brush
of pale fingers on feathered lash,
life's first and last epiphany poured
through the waterfall of the eyes.

REMEMBERING KINGS COUNTY HOSPITAL

The compassionate gaze
on Sir William Osler's face
follows me from the cupola of his library.
In these sprawling wards, on beds
sheathed in coarse linen,
I learned to interrogate the heart,
to know the opening and closing
valves, hold an ear to the lungs
for rales and rhonchi, the signature
sounds of a drowning chest, to palpate
with my fingertip, a knobby liver
beneath the ribs, hard as a hickory gall.
To spelunk the body's caves
by headlamp and touch, to see beyond
the eye's pinhole, serpentine rivers running
and the ivory cable carrying the world
into the brain's rutted ridges.
On that journey I became a warrior
armed with Asclepias' staff, bound
by Hippocrate's oath, the serpent growing
new skin entwined around my feet.
I took with me to New York:
the prying ear of a stethoscope,
a white jacket and name tag, the child
inside me who died on the fever's
battlefield. I carried my ashes in an urn,
and joined one-hundred and ten interns
in the contagious corridors of the old
Kings County Hospital that stands
in Brooklyn's blazing desert. Graffiti crawls
its walls like kelp, and the wagons arrive
screaming with their cargo of wounded men.
Once, my feet scuffed these wards,
my hands measured blood pressure
and pulse, compressed the flailing chests
until the flat-lines sang no more.
On Flatbush Avenue the sick pile up
on steel gurneys stacked like boxcars
in a stockyard. *We are cattle,*
they cry. *Help us to die.* And I press
against the nursery glass,
drinking in the puckered, red faces
inhaling life, the bubbles on tiny lips.
A lifetime ago, I drove through Brownsville,

a graveyard of fractured walls,
pitted asphalt and shattered windows.
I ran red lights, averted my gaze
from dark figures warming their hands
over can fires. Their faces vibrate
before my eyes, black as coal miners
pulled from a pit. Misery gathers
this world's dead weight on their backs.
Each night, more babies with cigarette
burns, the elderly, gaunt and cold.
The Lindens' leaves on the boulevard
have turned from gold to red.
My mother arrived in a hard snow
to scour my room in the dentist's office
where I lived, and brought freshly
laundered clothes. In this wasteland
she shone like a beacon, left a spotless
windowsill, this tidied room,
the orchestral bedsprings, anatomy books,
a goose necked lamp and vitamin pills.
No sleek, black monument honors the dead
on Flatbush Avenue where the old men
in the park are fed by the pigeons.
You forget you work in a place
where human life has no meaning,
the hopes of the hopeless are launched
and cast adrift. Lowell said,
the elected who promise to care,
come here bright as dimes,
and die disheveled and soft.
In the autumn I wander Kings County's
corridors again, searching for Miss Sardi,
the Sicilian nurse who tested my mettle,
blocked my exit from intensive care,
with mellifluous voice demanding the name
and dose of a drug for Pedro Martinez,
a dying man assigned to me on my first day.
I relive a chorus of respirators sucking air, red
diaphragms rising and falling in glass cylinders.
The usual, I blurted out, bolting through the door.
An orderly informs me that she passed away.
From the deck of the Staten Island ferry,
my life leans toward a kinder season,
Ellis Island fading in the mist.

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Reflections for April

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