

PLAGUE COLUMN, BRNO

Here, in a town we've chosen
for its white hotel room with sky-lit

rectangle of glass, we will recall
these paving blocks, so exactly plumbed

and placed, the thorough age of buildings
guyed to each other by tram wires,

and shut cathedrals quietly sunning.
Or, in Liberty Square, a Plague Column rising

from its base of imprisoned victims,
past corniced saints and lampposts, to its haloed

Virgin and Child standing on a cow. Years later,
perhaps, town abbot Gregor Mendel,

would explain such penance with science,
but this pillar, soothed round with height

against a fugue of iron balustrades and aerials,
holds no wiser knowledge than survival

as we pass it, returning each night to the square
bright bed where we lie down.

WHAT IT WAS LIKE

In the beginning,
we didn't mind the dirt,
and when they gave us fire
we could stay warm,
which helped us to understand
kindness. We walked around
all day picking things up:
shiny metal rocks, feathers,
what the animals had left for us.
They had been here longer,
but didn't seem to mind our arrival.
The mountains were always far away,
forbidden ladders to the horizon.
We never did learn how to swim.
When we looked up at night,
we waved to all of the blinking
gods above us. We were sure
that they still watched us,
that if we became lonely
they would send someone else.

LEARNING TO SLEEP

Now that you know
that there is such a thing as light,
you must relinquish it each day.

From your window, I watch
the April limbs of the maple
move through the storm-dull sky.

You do not know *April* or *branch*
or *storm*. You know black
harrowing into white

the way you know milk
sharp in your throat
on its way to a place

that has asked for it,
that is unable to hold it,
and so must keep asking.

And this brightness you seek out
in every corner, every hour,
also cannot be held. Loss

will never again define itself so simply:
your eyelids, tendril veins branching
red across them, closing.

THE ROOM NEXT DOOR

In the room next door,
there is a window looking out on an old stone gate.

In the room next door,
your mother's mother is sure—she remembers.

A market, Baltic and cool, and people walking
through a green afternoon

in the room next door,
where soldiers are entering the city,

and the stories have all been planted—wired
along the wainscot in a fractious genealogy.

In the room next door,
someone else's father, someone else's son.

It smells faintly of ash. One voice says *purpose*
another no longer speaks,

in the room next door.
We won't agree on a name for this—

a pen on an empty desk,
a broken-backed chair.

In the room next door,
we have been told, there was a room, once.