

Saint Catherine in an O: A Song About Knives

On a page of vellum – *Saint Catherine in an O* – within
a letter made of vine-sprawl, imbricate bulbs, & the scarlet
interlaced whorl of petal cupping calyx cupping stem, a woman

offers her neck. It's a kind of ready-made scene – the saint kneeling
on a cropped wedge of earth, someone with a crown in a tower,
& a swordsman who is only a frocked booted boy pulling back

his robe for his work – & seems carelessly done, as if the illuminator
chose death to be a kind of afterthought to vermilion. To leaf-curl,
areola, awl-shaped stems, his blossoms' dazzling tangle. As if

this were response enough. *O, omphalos*. Meaning *center & navel*,
meaning the first time a blade touches flesh. And meaning here
a frame of plenitude through which we witness again.

There are no limits to our verbs, our forms:

think of the knife
that slits an orange or bundled iris stems, the one strapped
to the rooster's varnished spur. The dagger, poniard, dirk.

Edge that snips the line, whittles an owl, juliennes, traces a lip.
A cut, an incision, a gouge. In Sudan, the story goes, when the slogan
of reform was *The Future's in Your Hands*, men scavenged the streets

waving machetes, hacking off hands above the wrist, asking
How will you hold the future now? The stiletto, the skean, the scythe.
The choosing, the mark, the tool. Beneath a concrete bridge,

shirtless & drunk, a boy works his way through the swallows' nests,
slashing until each mud cone-shape drops into the river, dissolves.
Yet to say so is hardly enough. To say *pigsticker, bayonet, shiv*.

Because in Waco, behind Benny's Gas & Go, a man plays slide guitar
with his pocketknife, accompanying the words of his songs –
one about light, the Lord moving on water, about what will be

by & by; how blood, he knows, will make him whole, & blades
that changed into doves.

Or because this splendor of color ends
on the parchment in a burnished gold resembling a cluster of burrs,

the kind of thing that would have snagged in a cow's mottled hide
as it grazed on grass tufts or slogged its way home. Staring, bewildered
in the stillness, it may survive this way for a few days more

before it is bled & flayed & turned, as was always its purpose,
into the page of this psalm. Here, near the margin, are traces of it still:
patterns of skin, a texture like velvet, follicles, the throat's scalloped curve.