

The Scabbard of Limbs Means Flesh

In this version of the story, the work
is almost the same – at least in how
it begins. The task of it, the means.

The shine of skin skinned back.
Yet this one omits the muses,
the meager sweetness of the flute

& when what happens finally ends,
the river's dark water, thick with silt,
remains wholly unchanged.

Someone has hand-colored the shot –
its visible branches, the field behind,
the crowd's neckties, smirks. It's postmarked

San Antonio, 1906, & in the photo
a girl clutches a darkened swatch of cloth
she's torn loose as a souvenir. In the center,

in the foreground, two men
have been kneeling for at least an hour
or now more than a hundred years.

One tips his bowler, puffs a hand-carved pipe,
while the other mops sweat from his neck.
With his wooden mallet & a kind

of nimble grace, he is careful not to split
the barrel's staves, to methodically
space each nail. The crowd waits – rapt, intent

– & does not look at the woman
at the postcard's edge, naked & strapped
to a hackberry trunk by a belt & loop

of rope. No one, that is, except
the cowlicked boy who grins & whispers
at her ear, who at any moment,

one imagines, will exhaust things
to say & will only watch in silence
as the nails pierce the cask & the uses

of the ordinary change.

In order to describe the unspeakable
beauty of immaculate light,

Dante calls upon Apollo: *Come
into my breast & breathe there,
as when thou drewest Marsyas*

from the scabbard of his limbs.

Which is to say Marsyas was skinned alive,
his body turned into a single wound.

Apollo leaned in, attuned to his work,
for hours, even after he was asked,
Why do you tear me from myself?

Because this is what he chose to do.

Which is to say in San Antonio
this is how they began, too. They began

at her feet with a pocketknife
but either grew bored or perhaps
understood they weren't quite the same

as the gods. Yet there was time.

There is time & they turn to other things,
& since we have only ourselves,

our flesh, our metaphors for skin,
the myth is nearly useless by now.

What happened was this: they finished

tapping in the nails & sealed the barrel shut
with the woman inside who remained,
for a while, alive. And several times

in what must have been laborious work
a group of them watched or helped roll it back
up from the river to the hill.

Forget the gods & the body as one wound.