

If we weren't knocking on wood

or spitting our way to safety, we
were always busy looking for signs
from our deceased loved ones
who still cared enough to visit.

A branch hanging crooked meant
a missed connection. We developed
a mystical lexicon for our secret beliefs.
“Unfounded” implied: *A stronger signal*

from the afterlife is yet to come.
“Groundless” confirmed: *Look to the sky.*
The dead always had our best interest
in mind. All we had to do was ask.

My mother died on August 30, the same
as my father, surviving him by 29 years.
One night, recognizing her imminent death,
my sister and I prayed to him to come

and escort her into the next world.
My father was a resilient, good-natured man.
And he played the guitar. Maybe my mother
remembered his body as song.

He would settle in outside her window
and chirp, wings raised and rubbing. But
I never understood why a frog; there was
something in that appropriation—

imagining his eager thumping forward
in the grass—that made him seem
excessively soft and vulnerable.
I don't know how he appeared to her

the night she died. Or what transported
him to her bedside. Most likely, it wasn't
a Carriage—or something fragile as a cricket—
more likely a bird, or just a feather.

We looked around on the floor
and found nothing. But we knew
his heart was in it—by the way
the phone rang three times then stopped.

Without Makeup

—for my sister

I didn't know your late-in-the-day eyes,
cool, easy, calm lake of tired eyes.
You would say a *nothing green*.
Nothing anyone would notice.

I'd never know you hadn't slept—
face as bland as a manila folder
without the smoke blue pencil
drawn along your lower lids,

silver pewter smudges
running like paths of winter rain.
I didn't know your eyes set
the dinner table, made the bread rise,
turned violets into jelly.
I didn't know your eyes had candles.

Maria, we are the only two
left of our first family—
our parents now streaks
of bygone stories
even our mother's brightest
shade of tangerine lipstick
can't bring back.

Something has washed the mascara away,
Vaseline-rubbed your lashes.
You call it tired, unmotivated, grouchy looking,
apologize for apologizing,
I'm just beginning to see—

spring grass under snow
deciding which green.

War

How many deaths must it take to be considered a war?
—1,000 lives, Google

But the first 100 are only fooling.
They've saved their caboodles from drama class.
Death makeup is a breeze.

They clear their throats, step into the spotlight, center stage.

A mother applauds.
Outside, moonlight carves its solid world.

* * *

The second 100 are children again.

They run through fields of daisies,
fingers interlocked, index fingers pointing.

Ra-ta-tat-tat!

We're safe!

Migrative imagination,
pretend machine guns

execute a pact.

* * *

The third 100 drag their feet, lost,
heavy with song.

Song is healthy for the soul.
But who will listen?

Fearful neighbors
slam their doors shut.

Surely you understand, they whisper.

* * *

cont'd

The fourth 100 never vacate their apartments.

They're still there
lying quiet in their beds,

their bodies packed with prayers.

A concrete city block disintegrates
between earth and air.

* * *

The fifth 100 simply refuse to die

until they find their daughters'
favorite stuffed bear,

the one with the black button, blind eyes

that keeps her safe at night.

* * *

The sixth 100 press their ears to a hollow wall.

Who is shouting in the dark?
Not everyone who hears voices is unwell.

* * *

A plastic view master, a last luxury to be held
in their son's hands,

the seventh 100 cry a creek—a stream—a river

* * *

The eighth 100

don't remember first words,
don't hear last screams—

their mouths open like that of a toddler
gasping for air.

cont'd

* * *

A living heart!

Here!

The ninth 100 believe they are still
warm inside,

the way a burning forest believes
it's a perfect metaphor for the spiritual world

even after it's ash.

* * *

999

. . . are missing one
who got away.

Praise be!

Dzvinia Orlowsky