

AMULETS

Riddled by seaworms, the figurehead's blind
unsurprised eyes gaze past a tattooed sailor's
hide, brindled with waves & fish, spreadeagled
on the wall, this coastal town museum. Clumsy
dioramas, ivory birdcages, the instruments of

celestial navigation. Down gallery,
in her battered leather jacket, I watch Emily
& her daughter kneel to spy through miniature
isinglass windows. An immense dollhouse:
each parlor, bedroom & hallway opening to

surprise, a mansion of possibility, each
salver & bannister burnished to perfection.
The latest t-cell count report crumpled
in her pocket, she points to a tiny
muslin gown draping a chair as if just shrugged

from someone's shoulders freshly risen from
sleep's farthest shore, the shapes that flit
there—a man scarified with tidal waves
& floral demons, a harpy carved to plunge
like a diving horse from the ship's prow

through an ocean of ice. I need some amulet,
those charms we made as girls of locks
scissored from each other's hair
because mere faith did not seem harbor enough
in a world of brute possibility.

Or these pendants & bracelets woven entirely
of human hair. Storms of it—chestnut,
auburn, eternally growing, blue-sheened black,
ashen blonde pulled from brushes, combs, soaked
& dried, combed & knotted, shellacked

with yellow sealing wax. Talismans.
The ill-typed card of explanation warps
through the glass case, currents & bubbles
rippling the whirr of voices diminuendoed
when I close my eyes to watch, like vision,

half-remembered, pulled from dream,
black mares beneath their plumes dragging
a cortege, crepe-hung, through heavy pearly
sands, a stinging hiss of ocean swallowing
one more name, some pestilence, women

letting down storms of wavy hair, though it's only
a sepiaed photo I'm recalling, Grandmother
& her sisters with their jewel names,
Opal, Ruby, Sapphire, posed in a parlor
for tableaux vivante—the Graces

with their billowing knee-length tresses, loose
white gowns, but I should have thought of them
as Fates, the trio set afloat beyond
the farthest shores lofting pearl-handled scissors
against whole skeins of thread. Galeforce winds

rattle locks, breathe ragged around the walls
like black horses laboring through sand, fears
given form, phantoms a child might magically
appease. We did it all wrong. Emily, who says
she's never felt looked over, never been

protected, or spared. What I hear is
her laughter, the child's long aspirant *ahhh*
of wonder. What I need is some talisman, an amulet,
the old cosmology with its crystalline
perfection of shells around the world, celestial

frictive music to navigate by. Who'd want
to surrender? Skies pearled cold, the sea's
lullaby crooned in the shell of the ear,
I know, the houses scrawled by moonlight
down the hill, salted around the bay frozen

to filligree, smooth floes of ice. Nervous
hands twisting, Emily braids her long hair,
rich as a mare's tail cascading, scars
mapping each vein with the addict's tattoo:
her immune system's failing.

How do I place them standing like figures
in a glass case, shore's edge where sand pearls
beneath the dome of stars—a world
safe & comprehensible? How is a spell woven,
like these jewels, through the hours' twilit progress?

Braids ovalling silhouettes meant for wearing
like holy medals against bare skin. Starbursts,
whorls inspiralled as the heart of a nebula,
charms meant to cheat fate, to stay the journeyer
a little while longer, who'll never pass this way again.