

LAURA APOL

Vanishing Point

If I go back to the place it begins: a black-and-white
tom, trains rattling my crib. When I stand,
I can see to where the tracks disappear. One day
the cat is gone; *gone* they say, but somehow I know
the sad bundle I see between the rails
is what I have lost. And I bury
the memory for fifty years until my own dog
goes missing. She is the last thing
among last things, and I know she has been taken
by the trains. For seven miles I walk the tracks, fingering
the leather leash in my bag. The rails are higher
than I imagined, the ties spaced wrong. I expected grass
through flat fields, not these sharp stones,
not steep embankments; not trains bearing down:
hot metal, the ground shuddering, the whistle's
weight. Pain is a bargain with the gods—as if I can resurrect;
as if that old dog could run the twenty miles, thirty miles, forty,
ninety miles to home, could follow the tracks, the smell
of the trains, a whistle echoing what she heard in her sleep
for so many years. As if that old dog
could follow her love to me. I call her name
across pastures and woods, backyards and empty lots,
picture her running to my voice,
running toward me down the tracks. I can see
to the horizon, to the place where the rails come together,
almost out of sight.

Stigmata

I can't stop finding things
to save:
the orange kitten I feed with a dropper,
a painted turtle on the lane, the brown-needed
saplings in a row along the drive.
Each morning I carry buckets of water,
certain I can bring back green. There were winters
I knocked early snow from the lower limbs
of a 50-foot fir, thinking I mattered.
Last summer it was monarchs, dozens of them —
caterpillars to chrysalides to wings.
There is no end to the ways

pets need me, plants need me,

men need me to make things right
after a bad health report, a difficult colleague,
a lying girlfriend, breast cancer in a true love
— didn't see the headlights or the brakelights
or the semi bearing down; didn't read the currents
in the river. Didn't know the headache was
the heart racing was the late nights or the slurred
speech. And how.

Each week, when my sad father calls, I am the good
girl I have been since childhood, full-on audience
since my mother died. I could have fixed him
if he'd let me. Now I am happy just to make him
happy, to be the rapt mirror for

his need because

I know I can save the listless kitten,
the pencil-thin pines, all those lonely
men — *tell me your story* —
I can hold out
my scarred palms

to the one who misses me, though we haven't
met; the one who's never felt so fully
understood; the one who says
I remind him of his dead mother dead
wife favorite aunt first love. So when he phones,
I answer
and listen, sure this time I can fill

that unfillable hole in my father's heart.

Gift

The meaning of life is that it stops

— Kafka

Steeped in grief,
I longed for even a glimpse
of brightness—
hibiscus chords, hovering;
trumpet vines;
emerald plumes and a ruby
thrum.

I put out sugar water.

Jazz, the calico,
reading my desire
in the morning
laid at the door
a perfect blossom: iridescent
wings,
a clotted crimson throat.

Spectral

My daughter in third grade taught me
about rods and cones, short waves, long waves —
color is just light, reflected, she said; *a sensation*
in your eyes. Back then, I argued

color is color:

the fire engine's red; the sky's blue; sunflower
yellow butter yellow lemon mustard canary
yellow. Only now, some twenty years on,
do I read what she tried to explain:
tetrachromacy, non-spectral color
and the hues between. Ultraviolet range —

bird vision. So when light reflects
on the hummingbird's throat, belly,
wing, I see only what I am made for —
a bull tethered to red, cave cricket, star-nosed
mole, dog napping in a black-and-white
world. The limits of sight.

I try to conjure that fourth primary,

sensation *plur*:

the tingle of fern, brush of apricot, chafe
of magpie. Lilac's sigh. And my daughter,
that long scorch of meteor — burning,
then gone.