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, finger ing 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-needled
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.
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.

Gift

The meaning of life is that it stops  
— Kafka
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.