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TJ SANDELLA

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for my mom

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ARRIVAL

It could be true—

someone crafted us out of clay, wrenched man's rib
and named the sharp bone
wife. Maybe we were culled from ether, sprung
from the skull of a higher power, or maybe the gods sat back
bemused or aghast

as we slid and slurped our way out of the primordial ooze
and into our skin—byproducts of the big bang that bore us,

but born nonetheless.

If we arrive in our bodies
from somewhere else, then maybe there is
a somewhere else,

and in that misty city
our pre-life kin roam like buffalo
in search of our scent, despondent,

pawing at empty patches of us-shaped sky. Brothers, sisters,
I want the truth, not this thunder

like a telephone ringing
in the middle of the night, like an absentee father breathing heavy
on the other end of the line, *Hello? Are you out there?*

Only an answer could convince me
of a more honest prayer. And if I were to say
we tore away—fled our creator on lightning bolts
we rode bareback out of the cosmos—who could argue? In this version,

imagine those stallions bucked
and tossed their sparkling manes, but we wrapped our arms
around their necks
and kicked our heels into their ribs. We broke them.
We took the leap,

and out of all the possible destinations, the infinite iterations
of inhospitable planets in the vast unfathomable multiverse,

we landed softly here
among raindrops, among mountaintops. Reader,
the earth has been so generous

and the crop of questions
is in surplus. Would we be happier if we let them die on the vine
and shrivel in the sun? If we plowed them under?

Or are we destined to harvest? To sow every spring?

Do we never stop asking?

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*As the gods in olden stories
turned mortals into laurel trees and crows
to teach them some kind of lesson,*

*so we were turned into Americans
to learn something about loneliness.*

—TONY HOAGLAND

ABRACADABRA

Think of Harry Houdini in a straitjacket,
strung up by his ankles, dangling six stories
above a busy city street. Or close your eyes,
hold your breath, and think of him blindfolded and bound
in the belly of a Chinese Water Torture Cell.
He wanted to be an actor, you know,
and all those performances he perfected
were only ever meant to be a stepping-stone
to the silver screen. Did he call it failure—
having spent more time wrapped up in chains
than in the arms of a leading lady? Did he suffer—
knowing he'd settled for a lesser version
of the story he'd imagined?

In one of his most
popular acts—it could hardly be called a trick—
The Great Houdini claimed
he could withstand any blow, and night after night
men lined up to take their shots. He was buried alive
three times, but it was a jab from a seventeen-year-old kid
that killed him. I'm asking you to think
of his ruptured appendix, his organ leaking blood
like milk from a cracked glass.

Tonight, I hope you have someone
you love, but I hope that person is on a business trip
to North Dakota or the moon or at least picking up bread
from the grocery store. For now, it's just you and me
and we don't have to whisper these questions.
How many blows can we take? How many
sacrifices can we make?

And if we want more
than this bubble of escape—a few soundless minutes
underwater, our loved ones
stuck in traffic—then how long before we attempt
those truly desperate, death-defying feats? How long
until we become what we've always wanted to be?