

## *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*

The daughter, roundly praised by experts in the field of folly, starts to swell. By the time we near the building, she's outgrown me, my umbrella no more than a smart cap atop her distant head. *Apostrophes*, they said, *like no other child. And that smile.* Now I'm drenched and trailing, an ornament, a poodle, a fob.

Still, she's my job. We're hours greasing the door, and a crowd forms. With a raised hand she keeps them dry and blinks away their compliments like mites. She is now so quite literally above the fray.

I say she's difficult in private, that she won't eat frozen peas, corrects her grandmother's speech. With her thumbnail she carves the letter A into almost everything. *A gourmand! A grammarian! A scribe!* There is no subtling them. They adulate endlessly, the way obsessed French lovers blow kisses on TV.

It occurs to me she may only be full of hot air, and I stop struggling to shove her in and begin to search for the sort of rubber valve through which you blew your breath into those plastic jobs from the county fair — Bugs Bunny, Betty Boop, and once a wrestler three feet high who, weighted by a bladder of black sand, wobbled when you punched him in the head.

But no — she's as seamless as a cloud, even her own mug smugged shut by now. I worry she'll burst, and as the crowd begins to climb the ribs of her big socks, as they reach her dress hem, I panic. I poke her with a pen nib, which peppers her with a circle of tiny holes like the speaker of an old-timey radio, and the tinny voice says *don't*. I can't stop stabbing, though, and it's for her own good — the French lovers climb and clamor and her skin grows tight. That's when I decide to bite.

For a moment, she flies, shedding little citizens and shooting skyward till she's nothing but a scrap, some kid's red kite unmoored, a cardinal. But all too soon she takes another shape, looping back toward us, she's a dress, a shoe, an empty head, and now instead of the daughter (once so robust, full of punctuation and promise), a spent balloon, a wrinkled hide with spit inside settles at my feet. Though I always do the best I can with breast and hand, with peanut butter and unit blocks, with timeout and fairy tale, with pen and teeth, I fail.

I know I deserve to be eaten by a whale, but here we are, landlocked, so I say to those still gathered, their fingers pointed and their mouths agape, *Just wait*. And I *will* try, to smooth the hide, to seal the rent that vented hers and blow my own sad air in. But here's the thing: since mother means to mistake, I have known for many years it is too late.