

CLAIRE MILLIKIN

Rite

That winter, I wanted to stay cold.
You asked why
I would not buy a coat,
not seeing how

all summer shut in the hospital
of remembrance, like losing a language,
I'd sought a window back
to breath and nakedness.

That winter I shivered, too thin,
fearing substance almost
too much to put food to my mouth.
I'd eat by a doorway, next to sky.

The way a room is cleanest when empty,
I wanted to be emptied, to carry nothing
between the doorway of breathing
and my wrists.

Like the broken panorama of childhood,
I wanted to stop seeing all things
and see only one thing clearly:
sky pressing clavicle, shoulders, wrists,
washed by light's pressure as penance.

I didn't want to freeze
but to taste what freezing could bring—
the stilling of things,
water stilling
in the always fugitive body.

Half-House

We will inhabit a house half-sky,
half-ruined, at the edge
of a pinewood, the damaged rooms
opened to weather:
a bed, a window, a painted chair.

Doors with broken locks, windows tilted outwards
to catch our breath, we'll share
a pillow, a few books, our hands.

The way that memory breathes
and finds doorways in sleep,
when we've been released
we'll come and go like leaves.

Neighbors pretend not to see us;
we're squatters, our inheritance lost,
just our bodies drinking
the last light of fluent things,

astrigent water carried
through pipes sealed in lead,
its taste of relict stars and bitter pines.

Plastic

Winters in Georgia, my aunt lined her windows with plastic.
Flushed and crinkled, like white poppies,
the windows glistened in numb light.
Winter never lasted long that far south, but her walls,
thin as a girl's arm, kept nothing out.

She survived by such tricks—
coating panes with film, drinking still
from the cold family well, that puncture
deep beneath red-clay bedrock.

From inside her windows,
plastic made the world look used-up,
like a sheet of paper balled and pressed.

She stopped every wind-eye, after her daughter's death,
encasing the house seamlessly, ceasing
to run the furnace, burning instead
any furniture she could spare
in the wanton fireplace.

Of the daughter, she'd left
just a small cedar chest, clothes inside
folded smooth, without wrinkle.

Claire Millikin currently teaches for the Studies in Women and Gender program at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. Originally from Georgia, she has lived and taught in New York City and in rural coastal Maine. Her poems have appeared in journals such as *Iris: A Journal About Women*, *The Recorder*, and the *North Carolina Literary Review*.