

## Curie in Love

*“If a radioactive substance is placed in the dark in the vicinity of the closed eye or of the temple, a sensation of light fills the eye.”*

— Marie Curie, doctoral dissertation, 1903

The sensation of light  
is light. There is no way for her to know it.  
She is so young and so in love, marrying  
an equal, choosing for her gown a navy dress  
she can wear in laboratories. Hand in hand  
they slip through the university courtyard—  
Pierre and Marie Curie, in the world before the war.  
*One of our joys was to go into our workroom at night  
to perceive on all sides the feebly luminous silhouettes —  
the bottles and capsules of our work.* That light  
marbles and embarnacles them both,  
turns their fingers strange and fibrous.  
Soon enough he cannot rise from bed.  
*It was really a lovely sight and always new to us.*  
She loses twenty pounds. Two pregnancies.  
There is no way for her to know  
that her light will soon paint  
gunsights and watch dials, that it is ticking  
through her body, his body, faster than time.  
What she has understood is astonishing enough:  
the atom, active. It is  
as if marbles were found to be breathing out.  
As if stones were found to speak.  
Sick and stumbling, Pierre is struck  
by a cart of military equipage. He passes untouched

under the hooves of six horses. Untouched  
between the front wheels, between the turns  
of chance and miracle, before six tons  
and the back wheel open his skull  
and kill him instantly.  
The spare coffin slaps closed.  
And the deterministic world.

That light.

She has no way of knowing  
it is ionizing radiation, lighting the eye gel  
the way a cooling pool is lit  
around a great reactor. Her hair was thick then,  
and thickly piled. Her fingers smooth.  
Her thighs like marble. She closes her eyes  
and raises the vial.

## The Common Swift

Consider in its turn the common swift.

There is new evidence that a swift can stay aloft  
two hundred days. Scientists are puzzled,  
not over how, but why. Consider the work, they note,  
of sleeping in flight: the alertness demanded,  
the tacks and turns it takes  
to lean on wind. Even a gliding bird would expend  
a small but constant effort.

For such a cost, there must be benefit.

That is the equation of science, which is only  
half a turn from love. Consider a marriage,  
surely no less common, or marvellous,  
than swifts. Surely no less a nest  
built in the air.