

The Historian Returning Home

All the lights are on but no one is home
and no one is reading meanings in the perfect
illuminations. Someone has arranged shells
on the mantel along with an ancestor's
pocket-watch inside a dusty glass dome.
Something lived inside them once
though we don't like to think of the snail's
body, the oozing interior of cowry or conch
the way we do the watch in some tweed vest
ticking like something alive. Too, there are
ancient keys from the old market on the
Oltrarno. Their iron gives shape to some
idea of a Medici's secret door or Hapburg's
strongbox. So there on the mantel are keys
to locks no one will ever find across seas
and continents. Days stretch out across amber
and ochre distances where light leans through
windows and dark presses in, as it does now
that he's home and has gone around to flip
the switches off. For now he has found
the true way: moving through furniture
by memory, touching a lamp, a doorframe,
nearly turning over a cup before brushing
his fingers over the cold iron of a lock,
then losing it again in the warm, velvet dark.

Old Woman Raking Leaves: Sonata in A Minor for Solo Flute by J. S. Bach

Fingers love this grip even worn to the same
caramelized striations as the rake's hasp, even
when her joints have the same looseness as leaves
abandoning a branch, even when her heart lurches

with the same clunky inertia as the furnace
stumbling through ignition on the morning of first
frost. Everything here seems to speak of
solitude's slow steep climb down, fingers' curling
into flex, as if they were destined to fit the stops
of an instrument she never played except here on
this November morning combing through these
scorched pages of sycamore's diary confessing
the same pointless romance with blue, gathering
notes that might have described a way to feel that
might have had consequence back when birds
began their colloquia of worms and berries, back
when soil swallowed leaves and memory.

Somewhere deep inside the woman sitting in the
nursing home is a woman who remembers a song
that played through her mind while she raked, like
the woman she sees out the window, back when
she let the world hold her fury in lacework of rake
and leaves and music unreeling forlorn to tell her
what it is to love in return, to hold and be held.