

From a Traveler Who Does Not Speak French

With prolonged drowning, I have developed gills.

W.H. AUDEN

I have not yet given up breathing,
but I have fallen out of love with words.
Their wild resonance in my chest
sounds more like a heartbeat now,
less like a vowel-and-consonant-shaped voice.

I have fallen in love instead
with the ravenous tones of a saxophone at dusk,
the morning scent of lavender on the stairs,
the almost-still skin of the river, fracturing trees
with its own rippled light.

I have fallen in love with days so clear
you can see Corsica from each hill,
with bougainvillea and laurel blossoms,
smooth Bordeaux, and night swimming as thunder arrives.

In silence, I feel sentences settle
years after they were said;
my skin dampens with Mediterranean mist
even here, miles from the sea.

Now the memory of vespers at Notre Dame
peals, wordless, in my blood.
Chopin, played in St. Julien de Pauvre,
speaks once more in the language of tears.
Rodin's *Kiss* moves from my lips and tongue
into muscle and bone, where it will stay.

Drowning and drowning again,
I inhale mute planets.

I exhale the names of hushed stars.