The Ohio State University Press/The Journal Award in Poetry
AMERICAN HUSBAND

Kary Wayson
**American Husband**

O, Empty-of-Hours, the doctor’s a clock. His hand is a serrated knife. Heavy his books, his medical meanings,

his pharmacological eyes.

Father Infallible, Doctor Indelible, Goat you’ve got, my goad–You, and your malpractice suits, your wingtips and tuxedoes.

Doctor Parenthesis, Father for emphasis, Stepmothers Must and Because: Doctor dismiss my dire diagnosis—my god’s a blot—of implausible pause.

Dear Doctor, Dear Proctor, administer my test (Your office assigns your affections.) Dear Doctor, Dear Forceps, my Father, forget this— I’ll ration your attention.

I’ll wait and I’ll wait. I’ll compile and I’ll plate an unending compendium of juvenile complaints:

American make me, American take me with you when you go. You do not do, you do not do— Faster, Bastard! American Fetch! you do not do—you don’t.
American Father, My General Boss
I am your lather—and you
are my loss. Professor my lecture, mother
my tongue—I live
with a desk where nothing gets done.
Inhibit my habits and dress me in gauze—my god’s
a clot. Of unsolvable cause.

American Husband, American Head, nobody
stopped me, nobody said Surgeons
must be very careful/ When they take the knife!
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THE FOUR CORNERS OF FIFTH & LENORA

I timed my arrival to make an X.
At the intersection you were on the other side.
I smiled like the city bus between us.
A sick, fluorescent smile.
In that moment my coat blew open:
half-slip hiked around my waist,
my hair I hoped a wave of grain. This
is not a weekend feeling.
I am holding my heart against my chest.
In the city of just me you made me like a guest
and I gave you how many tries.
More of the Same

But even with my mouth on your thigh
I want my mouth on your thigh.
At the center bite of bread I want the whole loaf toasted, and an orange. On a sunny day
I want more sun, more skin for the weather.
I’m in Seattle wishing for Seattle,
for this walk along the water, for her hand while I hold it:
I want to tie my wrist to a red balloon.
I’m counting my tips.
I’m counting the tips I could have made.
I want the television on, the television off.
In the ocean, I want to float an inch above it
and when my father finally held me
like a stripe of seaweed over his wet arm,
I was kicking to get away, wishing he’d hold me
like he held me while I was kicking away. Listen to me.
I want to leave when I’m walking out the door.
Cruelty Made Me

Love came along and said what: What?
without even a single word.
Said wait by the far side of the river
and when by the black limb of the crow tree
growing through my kitchen window.

Love came along and said let me
(and let me say she’d let me)
but cruelty made me
with my back turned. Grew me
according to a twisted line of light
so I’ve grown twisted, like the light,
shaped
like a staircase
and run with a long red rug.

Love came along and flashed me her badge,
said her name rhymes with test
and keeps to the meter of bare legs
in a loose dress. But cruelty made love sleepless
and sleepless, made me cruel:
each tooth in the tracks
of all my zippers latched, belts all
buckled and button
by button, I’m done.
SNARCISSUS

Pretty thing, to have gotten you by the bulb collar
tonight, in limp lamp light—to demonstrate your neck
with my thumbs.
Any transparency tries what light there is this late.
Tries it like you try my patience. Wears it
like you wear a dress: skinny skirt
stitched to your skinny hips, the frill
to the bodice of the bloom.
Silly thing, to feel
disheveled in front of a flower.
The sun set you up on the west-most crest
of a city divided by two hills.
I am embarrassed here, dirty
in a clean chair, my hair
like someone took a steak knife to the piano. Still,
I can say I’ve known you well and I will.
My hindsight possesses the sense
of your smell. A wedding dress in a cedar chest so
there—you happy?
**Regret Red**

This is slow going, this paling
of what’s worse than purple
into some dumb lesser version
of lavender or black:
a much less lustrous pick
of what could be called my color
if I were better bred. Red,

as if regret were in love with love
and rejected it,
bound the bare foot I kicked hard
through your guitar until it bled
blood red, as if I were a river running
on my river bed.

I choose the hours between dread
and dread, when I’m free
from feeling anything, like an extra finger
I forget and remember. Regret

as a red crab holed up in a hot rock
half in and half out and goddammit
cursing quite a bit, that word worse
irritating the inside of his hot head.

Red as a red car
irrevocably in reverse
on a day that drives away without a back bumper.
That moment: as many times as I can make it. The black fabric
of the convertible top pleated in a neat pile
in front of the trunk as if

regret were the age
my daughter would be.
Red as a bee-keeper’s face.
Red like a lot of things.
Poppies

Hair in the brushes, in the bread bag, snagged in my bracelet

and clogging the kitchen drain. Your hair and how it hangs, your face and how it falls

—your throat, how thick: your feet. Your fuse.

Your body and my body and the mark on the wall above the bed—one crow sticks

and cracks—a black sip from a flask. How the grass grows geese

from a goose. Water

and the way it floats the gulls and bugs

and boats. Your will and what I want—which words when, where, and whether or not I’m home.

You’ve got me ringing like a neighbor’s telephone.
ECHOLOCATION

I am at home. I am
interviewing the telephone. She says hello

when I say hello: Hello.
The front doorknob fits against a gauge in the wall.

I cough and stop and scratch and stop and listen—
when I listen for long enough I’m lost.

Voices of men recite the radio news. Time
is a travel advertisement.

I hang on to the telephone like a handle.
Fastened to the wood wall of a boat.

She says what I say while I say it.
When I listen for long enough I’m lost.

The light’s got rice in it, like after a wedding:
me in my ambulance, you in yours.
The Embolus

Time’s ear
is infected. It itches
and hatches
a pocket.
She turned herself out.

I was sixteen
when she miscarried.
I met her

four doctors. She harrowed herself
a hole from a scratch. They scraped and they sucked
and I coughed it all up. My mouth
is a basket of examples.

Time’s ear
is inflected. It pitches
and catches
a ladder.
She pulled herself out.

She looks like I look—
but I’m getting older. She harrowed herself
whole from a patch. God Himself
must have glanced away

when she was digging around in her purse for a match.
I TURN MY SILENCE OVER

I am in the tenth month of the ninth life of my silence.  
My baby’s grown fat enough to feed me.  
I turn my silence over. I turn it towards my mother. It wears the expressionless face of an oscillating fan.

Each day, at intervals, a bell brings enormous horses to the middle of my alphabet.  
I turn my silence over.  
I’m not speaking to my mother.  
My mute has balloons for hands.

O Underbite!  
With your mailbox of a jaw.  
O Nothing! When I ask what’s wrong.  
I turn my silence over: an astronomical number.  
O, How I could go on!

Market to market I go and come home.  
My silence runs parallel to the direction of my travel.  
My silence makes a district with just one constituent. I am the legislator of my mother.

My silence doesn’t ask, doesn’t eat, doesn’t act.  
I am sick on it, celibate and exhausted. Each night I am up with it: Sublunary Thing! My silence is an insomnia.

Let’s ask the throat what the mouth wants tonight.  
I’ve grown fat on my refusal to say a word. I turn my silence over and there’s a doubling of my mother. I’ve been doing little sit-ups with my sense of reserve:
I'll wait. I'll waste my turn. I have my way—my one!
I turn my silence over. I’m not speaking
to my mother. Like God, I guess
I’ve already come.