

## Elements

When my older sister stops using vowels, she is treated like an invalid. Served bowls of brothy soup on a tray, as if she'd had her tonsils out. My mother continually ushers me from her room swatting my rump with a dishtowel.

*Is she contagious?* I touch my own throat.

Experts drift in and out. My sister placidly opens her mouth allowing them to gaze into the blackness.

Before all this I couldn't be bothered with a non-tomboy, a girl who had learned to fold intricate hors d'oeuvres for my parents' parties. Instead, I attended to spiderwebs, transfixed by the gore of a praying mantis devouring a grasshopper.

Vowelless though, she grows compelling.

I try to lure her out into the sunshine, the creek the soft grass out back, but she languishes on her canopy bed, replying to all my entreaties, *Nnnn*. *Nnnn*. A nasally, monkish sound. All wrong without its long coyote *oh*. Cloistered in her room, her hair grows.

My mother calls her matted hair a rat's nest, and sometimes takes a comb to it. Afterwards, I cradle my sister's head, as round and full of promise as an ostrich egg. She is Cleopatra. I, her sexless and guileless

hermaphrodite. The things she knows are different now.

*furcula means wishbone*—words gutted of their vowels, we found something else  
inside. The way the wind wants to rush into a tunnel.

Her tutus squashed in the back of her closet, I free  
all the specimens from my jars.

Painstakingly, I learn her secret language. It drives them mad.  
The scraping angular screech of consonants through the house  
vents, the sound of something hard against something hard, like  
stones ground together and from that friction

sparks.

There is no going back. Our elements have been changed. Inside  
our skin, if you hacked us open *gypsum corduroy girders*  
A pure, welling usefulness.

We will become women who know how to mend  
the backyard fence or who step forward to administer  
CPR when a kid gets drowned in the summer  
lake. If walked in upon while dressing,  
we won't reach for a towel.

Only in my dreams sometimes the lonely train whistle sound of vowels.

In the saddest ones, a long *o*.