

ALEX MOUW

## EXAMEN

*You take memory like a wriggling sunfish  
and you hold it to the light.*

*Note every spot and ridge, each scar  
of hook. That's where God is,*

the monk says to me. Prayer neither  
the coyote's ecstatic yip  
nor the methodical cat running his grainy  
tongue from shoulder to haunch.

My eyes close. My hands lie knuckle-down  
on my thighs. *At the back of your mind  
do you see anything? No. Good.*

What am I to do with anger?  
*Hold it up. It is an iron skillet warped from use  
and crusted with burnt meat. The handle  
is how you wield it. You must cradle it like a scalding  
bowl or let it drop.*

And disappointment? *Saltwater.*  
*Bathe, scrub your skin  
like the flaking wallpaper it is, but do not drink.*

*What is a memory that consoles you?*  
Two trombones and a keyboard, a singer  
kneeling at the guitar amp, his forehead  
against the cabinet. *What moves*

*through it?* The microphone in his fist  
loops a high squelch that flails a thousand watts  
from rows of hanging speakers. The cup of wine  
at the lip of the stage trembles.

The kick drum hammers hard and fast.  
The cup tips. Cheap Cabernet fingers the black plywood  
and drips into the front row. *What does it mean to you?*

The taste of sour blackberry and oak. The guitar's last  
wailing hook that reverberates amid a riot of applause.

## DEATH DRIVE

Plotinus believed that inside him was a pelican  
and that in its beak filled with steaming bathwater

he would lie down, the long tongue rough against  
his naked back as the bird took off. That's how

he planned to reach The One. What I've seen  
is the body prone and discoloured. A doctor

with her back discreetly turned. A plot of ground  
bought mechanically. Without second thought

a steel excavator procured. My grandmother believed  
heaven was an airport baggage claim she'd wander,

patiently peering out the dark windows until  
grandfather found her. One night my widowed aunt

drove to a railroad crossing. Magnetized,  
she stood up straight on the tracks, hands firmly

at her sides as the train unspooled towards her  
like a reel of film. Maybe after buckling up

in the flaming flying chariot, Elijah got lost  
coursing Saturn's racetrack. My father wants

his body cast into Lake Michigan on an idling  
dinghy, or to be cremated and scattered over his garden.

*Whatever you do, he says, don't bury me. No reason  
to hide the dead so shamefully underground.*