Evening Entertainment

After *The Pathetic Song*
Watercolor on off-white wove paper, by Thomas Eakins

There is nothing like singing to teach us about the body,
two-parts breath, one-part will. Or vise-versa, depending on
the décor. Once, entertainment meant gleaning pleasure from

the talents of friends, moderate or otherwise. Meant gathering,
as in this painting, around a piano in a suitably serious room
to hear an after-dinner song. We are meant to gaze at the awkward

woman in lilac, *awkward* perhaps not as accurate as *limp*,
her body a beacon of scorn, a column of light meant to illumine
the droop of her shoulders, the puddle of her dress,

the pallor of her skin and pinkish eye, suggesting weepiness.
She has not yet found herself in the score, or it has not yet
found her, and the viewer's questioning gaze is mirrored

in the telling tilt of the pianist's head, her expression part
uncertainty, party pity. I know that tilt of a teacher's head well,
the ever-so-slight shifts of the body as if in pain, subjected

to pitch ship-tossed, that moment before the moment
of correction. In art as in life, disapproval is an accessory
to growth, failure a kind of mnemonic device, a hat-feather.

Twice Smitten by the Hand of a Woman

After Judith Beheading Holofernes
by Artemisia Gentileschi

During her rapist's trial, Artemisia was tortured
with thumbscrews, just to make sure her testimony
did not waver.

So that gazing at her most famous rendering
(because there are several) of Judith taking

the life of Holofernes with the deliberation of an artist,
we are struck by the sheer effort of the women,
their sturdiness undiminished

by the size of their victim, the beguiling smoothness
of his skin. They are not depicted as overly dramatic,

dainty or mad, but determined, as only women
who have been wronged are.
Perhaps Judith's maid is Tuzia,

Artemisia's female tenant, who having ignored her landlady's
cries for help in her moment of crisis,
is forced to help slay

this enemy. His fist is nearest her face, so that if
he lands a blow, it will be on this witness/accomplice.

Meanwhile, the deed is absolute, undecorated.
There is no time for second thoughts.
In art, if not in history, she has her revenge.

She who is Praised and Beheads: Lessons from Apocryphal Women of the Old Testament

After a miniature from *Bible historiale*

(Bruges, 1470)

The Death of Holofernes

We could be looking at a carnival
in this deuterocanonical depiction,

no army green for these soldiers,
but victory red and royal blue and

perennial green, the general's tent
embroidered to echo the towering

grandeur of a castle or cathedral
on the hill. And Judith: steadying

her sword, Holofernes' head still
warm in her hand, blood blending

into the red of the draperies of his
bed, her sleeve and underskirt,

carefully chosen, no doubt,
that very morning, *intentional*

here meaning *I am ready* and not
I am a woman. She is as regal

in execution as at breakfast, or court,
so that her female companion—

servant or friend—betasseled
and heavy in the finery of need

for admiration, gestures as if
to say, *she is on her own in this act*;

then again as they ascend the hill
her hands reach as if to guide/grasp

the triumphant avenger, hopeful
perhaps, for a wisp of her dress, glory.

The soul chasing the soul on a sunny unchurched Sunday

I hung the waffles out to toast—the line strung
between porch and walnut tree—

then sipped a cup of lion's mane
while a hummingbird raced its tiny chariot

from wash/line to nectar to treeline
and back again. The clouds baskets of

bantams hung to roost. I have
hidden myself well in this farmscape,

middle-aged legs finding muscle
again to kick out from an innertube

on the teaming pond. Muscle
a kind of homophone for *must-sell*,

that expiration date for friendship, or
marriage, or fruit or flour. Nearby, a plate of fire-

roasted squash reminds me of last night's
grilled supper and stargazing;

fortified now by coffee and a gingersnap,
I am ready for a walk in this scene of my life,
Ars longa, vita brevis,

the catch-all animal pasture, home to lambs,
wily barn cats, a red fox, and two fattening pigs.

If Eve had kept a (moleskin) diary, she might have written

This is/not a turn to daguerreotypes of memory so still in copper and smudges

a dragonfly's first shimmering dip the body always caught between

survival/rebellion, a beginning to walk. I dreamed any beginning could be found

in fruit-gathering a wedding or funeral of frostbit fists; next, charcoal rabbit.

I dreamed any beginning could be red apples, their skins bright as a thicket.

(Desire for flight a second skin.) I never dreamed its wings: an *I* in the girl

a hiding place a language of limbs a harvest of herbs for every ill.

This is not a small beginning— {{{*echo*}}}. This is not a small beginning—.