

Margaret Gibson

Black Snake

1.

When, in the darkened room, I hear a clatter from the mantel
of the central chimney with its many chinks,
and turn to see why a plate has leapt to the floor on its own,
I freeze

 as a sleek thick ribbon of snake
slides like rain
over the rough stones of the chimney and into an opening
I swear is no wider
than the eye of my wedding ring.

And I understand Persephone at a standstill, just before
she swallows the single seed
on her complicit tongue—
 and Orpheus, as he
turns and stares into the retreating pour of dark mist.

I have seen a black snake loop from an oak limb,
as cursive in the air
as a Chinese acrobat.

I've watched one meditate in the shade of the blue mist bush,
the thick lump in its long throat
slowly shrinking.

And in a corner of the summer attic, I've held in my hands
a snakeskin, torn at both ends,

rumpled at the head where it split and the snake
tugged free.

What is a snake,
that it casts off such transparent trappings? What is

this skin, in which
I find a nature that's empty, not unlike my own?

2.

Were I a loose swirl—a black water ripple—one continuous, long
throat,

what would be
the song I'd inscribe on stone, on ground, on grass?

No beginning to it, no end, snake comes through winter,
its tail in its mouth—

and a coil of song
issues from the deepest trance of its body.

*I am not what I was in the cold, in the dark.
Neither the joy*

before grief, nor the joy after.

*Only the inflected
spark at the base of the spine.*

Half-conscious spark. Indifferent spasm.

*The spill of night into flesh gone nameless,
sliding and flowing
into nothing as real as this pounding of the heart.*