

Jeanne Wagner

## An Advent Calendar of Rain

At sixteen, my brother is chanting Latin late at night  
in his upstairs bedroom,

that's him lying prone, book splayed across the pillow,  
reciting Virgil out loud,

exorcising his wet dreams, a young Dante without his  
Beatrice.

In the room underneath, that's me rolling the pillow  
around my head, shutting out

his voice, a sing-song inflected like rain, that conversation  
water has with itself,

chanting its impediments. Pelting the leaves that bend  
and nod to its touch.

~

And there's Father Doherty, asking when he can come  
and bless our home,

but I picture the neighbors peering out their windows  
as he walks up the path

wearing his black soutane, sprinkling sacral incantations  
and holy water, the house hissing

and squirming like Dracula in his coffin, suffering from  
a hangover of early morning light.

~

He tells me the story of Noah, randy after forty days and  
nights of rain pounding on the deck,

the saltiness of sea-spray rank on his clothes, sounds  
of rutting animals filling his brain.

He knows it's God's will, when he spills his seed  
inside his wife,

his seeds like rain, her womb rocking from side to  
side, like the ark.

~

And that's my sister sitting on my chest, pinning  
my arms with her knees;

oh-oh, it's her signature spittle-kiss again, sliding  
from those puckered lips:

a rope of pendulous slobber that makes me  
thrash and squirm,

and twist my head from side to side, as if there's  
a good side to this.

~

At night, through a crack in my sleep, I think I hear  
an incantation.

My father used to yell, *it sounds like someone's saying*  
*the god-dam Mass up there,*

and he might be right this time, the shaman's come  
for my mother with a rattle of bones

in his throat. And sure enough, the priest is bending  
over her.

Like a waiter with a napkin, he drapes a fancy cloth  
over his arm, oils the sign

of the cross on her forehead, while she tosses and turns  
as if her brain's caught on fire.

~

And here we are at the Friday night show, watching  
*Singing in the Rain,*

howling over Jean Hagen as she mouths *I love yous,*  
*I love yous.* Every other word

missing the mike as she swivels her head to let the camera  
catch her good side.

~

Finally there's Gene, swashbuckling in the rain, twirling  
his umbrella, slashing at puddles.

I hear they even added milk to the rain machine so  
the light can suckle the water,

so it will look as ropery and thick as Jacob's Ladder,  
a wet trapeze of water

he can climb on; because he's dancing and singing just  
for us, tilting his face upwards,

begging the rain to drench his clothes and soak his hat,  
to wash over him and make us clean.