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Cassiopeia

Claire McQuerry

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McQuery: Cassiopeia

MILTON KESSLER POETRY CONTEST FINALIST

CASSIOPEIA
Claire McQuery

Once I carried the light
where I went descending—
 emeralds netting my hair—
 the staircase:
chandelier.

* * *

I balanced each gaze
as weight the way the acrobat
lifts buckets at the ends of his pole
walks— his line suspended—
sky that bridges the river.

If I glittered brighter for eyes
below me,
who could lay blame?

* * *

They thought I'd be lonely here,
exiled, arranged
this empty ocean
from rib to wrist
bone to bone.

I tell you
queen or constellation,
there is no difference.

* * *

Once my act was adding
gold by ounces—
circlets, pendants,
hammered thin and threaded for capes
and gowns—until my shoulders
ached with the gaudy weight of it.

* * *

All stories devise a villain.
Try as I might—
the sky dull and seething
 the sea
 tentacled
 thing
 green as rot
the rock
 Andromeda.
Unescapable arc.

* * *

Love a daughter or love yourself—
 say what you will—
the same act:

My eyes, the white claws
of my teeth,
repeat in her.

Kingdoms after all
depend
on queens.
Better that I survive.

Easy to believe a story—
menace
ash heart
ice mother or
the wing-heeled boy
son of a god
my counter.

They thought I'd be lonely
here.
But I dazzle
sized to sky, cast
not of marble
but star, turn
above Earth perpetual
each
bright rivet fastens
me.