

Party Conversation: A Quarto  
*for Damiana*

if nobody hears  
in my head am i  
still a person maybe  
& even thinking is  
the way a tree rots:  
inexorable & deadly  
brackets flabby & white  
i'd like to say i have  
an answer but i don't  
& the rot keeps growing

is this the way sanity  
can fracture like old bark  
splitting under age & stress  
prolonging the slow  
drying into nothingness  
fit only to be broken  
& used by someone  
who needs the shell of you?  
who needs the heart of you

what i say  
still terrible? well  
words do matter  
poison for the brain  
decay spiraling out  
the saddest thing to see  
how do you prune spite?  
the way you search for the way to  
know the language it's in  
without ending without

& you will fail & find you  
have no choice in your demise  
no answers left on your tongue  
heat-death of the universe:  
nothing without someone to witness  
burned to ashes themselves  
& finding no one else  
left to speak to yourself  
left to put voice to your thoughts

CW: disease, epidemics

## Under the Skin

I'm sitting down to write a third poem about yellow fever. I was just saying I've always loved disease stories, studies mapping deaths black and blue and yellow. [Let me identify them: *Yersina pestis*, bubonic plague. *Vibrio cholerae*, cholera. *Flaviviridae*, yellow fever.] I can't forget my fascination with the Red Death too, holding his illimitable dominion. In fiction. Illimitable. Ill-limitable: most of the stories are about vaccines or scientists' efforts to stop the spread, mitigate the risks. They all show the suffering, of course, give symptoms in [sometimes] bloodless detail. The anguished faces of the sick, the precise descriptions sit innocuous in monochrome. They scrape like a scalpel over an open wound, shock surely as insufflation, suffocate: *Darkness and Decay* and all that. I can't watch slasher flicks, so I'm not sure why this gore is not only acceptable but absorbing. But it is. It's the distance, I think. I'm looking at the faces of the dead and thinking I don't know why I'm drawn to things that would destroy me, only that I am. Diesel fumes and a dancing flame. Bacteria dividing in a dish, in a body. You don't need to tell me I'm morbid; I know. I'm just glad to be drawn to things that cannot love me back.