

TAKAMICHI OKUBO

Self-Portrait as Grendel

I am the shadow stalker sin-dripping
& God-cursed begotten of the descendants
of Cain. From between the claw scales
of my body seep solitude & words
meant to be scrawled monstrous across
the walls of my cave as war-blood
& bone-rattle. Bored & insomniac
I stand staring outside my den
at the pretty haloes of pine torches
burning in the distance in their disparate pulses
& listen to the singing the bright laughter
& calloused clapping their cackling voices
honey-hued & at home in the brogue
of their own kith & kin. While I

flense the bodies lying 'round my cave
& stuff myself inside their skins & scalps
from head to toe & loping down the hill,
across the moors & through the night, I reach
their mead-hall, trailing blood & strips of skin
to join their wassail. There I toast & boast
among the men I used to butcher, glib
& loud in this loose hide I've jury-rigged
from their dead. My tongue is riven as I fight
the urge to mount the bench & roar in their faces:

Don't you hear the music in my howling
in the hard-struck syllables of this sibilance
in these rough-hewn runes of my roar?
So different from your tongue the tempered cadence
of your dumb iambs like the drumbeat no one
dances or sings to. Do you see the edges
in my keening, their gleam & grace, grooves
& jags brittle in their barbed beauty?

But the rage-cry gets caught in my throat
stays there quivering unsung like an arrow
just struck striving to be more than
itself: a murmur a melody, a hymn.
So I remain stuck in their skin, mute
& enormous with war & words, unnoticed
to the end of the night. Unnamed. Englished.