Amie Whittemore

PANDEMIC PANTOUM (Desire)

I sit at my desk and try to memorize “Falling and Flying” by Jack Gilbert, moving through its truth like scent moves through a room—today, grapefruit

falls through the air, gilded by a fly-shaped vessel. No, that’s a lie—the only scent moving through this room is my cat’s, her dusky animal smell, nearly leather.

Like a vessel or a lie, I feel empty today. It’s hard to feel new when rain grays morning like it’s dusk, like worn leather. I try to limn bird calls again—finches,

I feel, though rain grays and smudges their sounds like an eraser blurs a mark. I can limn jay and mockingbird now: one for its simplicity, one for its complex

palace of sound, erasing and blurring my heart. Haven’t driven in days, haven’t limned a body. Desire, a mocked bird. The cat heats my lap and keeps me here

in my driven heart. The days haven’t lent me new garments, new visions—only the cat, her heat. Keeping her happy & isolation: today’s good deeds.

Lend me new vision, push me into new clothes—shake up this swollen time, happy as it is, safe in isolation, good with food and clean water, electricity—

It was a swollen time for Jack when love faded from his beloved. Reminder that food, water, light enough and not. I memorize the lines, sitting at my desk.

Commentary: Early in the pandemic I began writing pantoums, which seemed like the perfect poetic form for this crisis. Pantoums have a variety of rules and I admit I followed only some of them, and at times loosely: in each stanza, lines 2 and 4 become lines 1 and 3 of the following, for however many stanzas you like. The poem should then end with the
line with which it began (if you’re feeling particularly ambitious, you can also employ a rhyme scheme to this maddening form; I however, couldn’t handle that challenge).

I was drawn to this form since my days, now, often feel maddeningly uniform in their patterns. This structure allowed me some release from the frustrations of these days, a way to turn their sameness into something new. The pantoums featured as part of this project are part of a longer and ongoing sequence.