

# XENOS



JOANNA VALENTE

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*For Christine*

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## SUMMON

Sometime in August  
I had been  
born no one  
remembered the exact day  
so I chose it  
myself.

Each morning an ironing board  
splattered  
with pencil  
shavings spilling out

of my throat                      white  
   sheets no  
longer blank  
                                 like my legacy.

                                 In wicker baskets lay  
   unwashed  
clothes  
                 from nights I no longer remembered.

                                 Dreams grew  
   from new  
nerves.  
Breathing was the same

as escaping  
the life of my parents  
now  
in Woodlawn cemetery.

My husband & I bought plots  
alongside them.

Waiting for an age to give up.



## WHEN I WAS A KOUTOULAKOS

i.

I ran away from home. I barely got away  
with it—my sister was thrown out

of the house for helping me. Imagine her  
on the streets with a newborn.

I said was eighteen when I was really  
seventeen. *Who runs to a war?*

Well, it was supposed to be exciting,  
it was supposed to be romantic. I guess it  
was.

I fell in love with a sailor, an Italian—

I had no business letting myself.

We were supposed to get married, but  
instead

I ate his stomach from the inside.

That's what he told me as I left.

ii.

The war ended. I was waiting  
somewhere in Brooklyn, rode the subway

with someone

I *could* love. We told the same stories  
about the old country that left us

dead parents, a missing sister, a step  
father who drank himself to asphalt.

We never wondered what the point  
of it all was. It's only air that drives

the lungs. Makes us human.

Our families never had any money  
but we were never bored.

They all thought I was crazy—  
I'm not even close.

MAINE ATTRACTION, 1935

I put a high premium on myself.  
*Fuck you*—that's what I say to men.  
I don't need you.  
You know, I'd rather be alone  
than with a man I can't stand.  
As a child, I'd look in a mirror  
see *beautiful*, a black swan  
draped in ivy in still blue light.  
I still do, as a matter of fact.

## *RIGOR MORTIS*

When I was very young,  
I collected beetles. That stopped  
once we moved from Maine.

In Brooklyn, I discovered men.  
There, my room was famous  
for its butterflies.

## CHANGING NAMES

He made himself older  
I made  
myself  
younger.

We didn't know  
our real ages  
until we saw the marriage  
license.

His name was Constantine  
but he changed it to Dan

so he could be more *American*.

Can't say I blame him  
I did the same thing  
*twice.*

The first time, it was Goldie—  
I wanted the Midas  
touch.

him                                      The second time was for  
it only took a year  
before he bought  
me a ring

and a dress

lifespan

with a long

worn twice:

first in 1950

then 1975

when it became

my daughter's.

She is the only person

to have come

from my

body.



She came early

*this little thing*

convince

It wasn't hard to

myself I was looking

at heaven squeezed

out of my

body

my body

that was too small.

We were both too small then.

*BASILIE*

Voula says she doesn't understand  
my Greek

[ but can feel it anyway ]

She was the one to close  
my sister's eyes when she died

Said Basilie saw Yuri, kept saying  
his name

[ chanting ]

For sisters, we seldom saw  
each other

[ only once ]

I travelled to Greece, saw  
my mother's eyes as hers

Those stories about siblings  
separated are only supposed to be

for the movies  
On a boat back to Greece,

my mother left Maine—  
my sister barely alive

[ in her ]

Now I'm at that age  
when it's not about my whole life

[ ahead of me ]

Everyone around me  
is dying—it's not that I want to be

last but I sure as hell  
don't want to be

[ next ]

## *I LIVE IN A HOUSE*

I live in a house  
full of ghosts  
where empty  
cupboards refill  
veins like clouds

Silhouetting the sky  
a burst of color, the use  
of perspective to grab  
our attention

A man said he would  
rescue me  
deliver a plague  
of locusts straight  
to the heart

cut holes for new  
aortas

& build underground  
tunnels in my thighs  
paving roads to a garden  
where feelings aren't  
colors  
& maybe I'd believe  
if I was born  
a believer

## *MY DAUGHTER IS A FISH*

She would run  
high temperatures—  
her abdomen dry  
as fish scales.

Everyone had to wear  
a mask around my  
baby—my vigilance  
knew no bounds:

milk bottles boiled,  
clothes warmed  
in the oven,  
kitchen counters  
cleaned with vinegar  
& fear's god.

## *DIVE STRAIGHT INTO THE WRECK*

The past few nights, I've been dreaming  
of my dead but they do not have faces,  
but I know they are mine. That I am theirs.  
And there's nothing I can do about it.

There was a night when I believed I could  
escape, live like a woman who gets  
what she wants the way men

get what they want. Claim a body, a land,  
a myth, a legacy. My husband told me  
to get inside our Ford and I wasn't sure if  
this was him or a dream-him.

He said the world is ending. The grass  
glowed like gold sludge. Basilie's voice



echoed far away, maybe from a phone,  
maybe from across the hall. We were little

girls again. But I never knew her  
as a child. I told her to pack up her things  
and come

to Brooklyn. She couldn't muster enough  
breath to talk anymore. Throat gargled  
with salt and black muck,

a twilighted cancer raged like red  
coals and I could tell she wished  
she was already gone.

*THAT TIME I ALMOST KIDNAPPED A CHILD  
AT CONEY ISLAND*

You stood in a body  
full of atoms & boney dreams  
quivering like time

stepped out of our bodies  
outside of the cosmos

and winter had fallen white  
while you still wore a wet suit.

Mommy, you kept saying  
holding my hand & pointing

toward stairs leading to road,  
sand masquerading all over

your skin, tiny mirrors

full of many futures  
where all you have to do  
is choose, run or stay

until a police officer comes  
along, chooses for you,

a complete world  
crystal ball ready to spill  
& officer takes you

by the hand, says I'm free  
to go, as if it's a choice  
as if Noah's arc has arrived

& we've all been saved

as though the streets were paved  
in mirrors, your many selves—

all of which dripped with family  
picnics, a mother's unlimited  
heart fund.

## MY DEAD

Basilie was raised by cousins  
who barely knew my father.  
Country lines & oceans

couldn't cut our blood line:  
diseased lungs moving us along  
—flock of bluebirds rollicking.

Here was this new family, and me  
loved in the deep marrow of so many  
bones. Bare bones wailing

for the breath of my father  
whose lungs howled blood. After  
mother died, my father followed.

Maybe of his own accord.  
No one ever really told me.

## *LAZULI*

God told me he wanted to create  
a lovelier girl of auburn and ivory  
laying her feet in an apple orchard

near a house on the hill where bodies  
float in the heart and lungs of her family

channeling lavender soaked memories  
and the uterus' of virgins who have  
too many "feels" & now

I'm standing outside a restaurant  
in the cold and a man comes up

to me, says I wouldn't keep you  
waiting. He has always kept me waiting.

## *FEED THE HEART YOUR LUNGS*

During the night, I sometimes  
wake up to heat a glass of water;  
I crave everything hot.

In 1998, D's lungs filled with water  
after a heart attack. No one  
was with him—

I was on the way, expecting  
to be called darling. Now I play  
the waiting game.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joanna C. Valente is a human who lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is the author of *Sirs & Madams* (Aldrich Press, 2014), *The Gods Are Dead* (Deadly Chaps Press, 2015), *Marys of the Sea* (2016, ELJ Publications) & *Xenos* (2016, Agape Editions). She received her MFA in writing at Sarah Lawrence College. She is also the founder of Yes, Poetry, as well as the managing editor for Luna Luna Magazine and CCM. Some of her writing has appeared in *Prelude*, *The Atlas Review*, *The Huffington Post*, *Columbia Journal*, and elsewhere. She also leads workshops at Brooklyn Poets.



The "stranger" in Joanna Valente's *Xenos* writes herself into being, sifting through the detritus of a life that spans Maine, Brooklyn, and a boat to Greece. These are poems of sisterhood, motherhood, self-preservation, desire. In verse as dangerous and illuminating as berry-stained lips under a clear Aegean moon, *Xenos* reminds us that we are at once self and not-self, invention and memory, family and exile.

**SOPHIA STARMACK, AUTHOR OF THE WILD RABBIT**

Joanna Valente's *Xenos* is an immigrant narrative, but it's not simply about the transition from one country to another, one homeland to the next--it's the narrative of the heart that finds estrangement wherever it goes, the body that does and does not recognize itself, and the way family disinherits us even as it claims us. In these poems, we meet the strangers who we know all too well, and the loved ones who remain forever inexplicable, and we, too, are them.

**GREGORY CROSBY, AUTHOR OF SPOOKY ACTION AT A DISTANCE**

Joanna C. Valente is a gifted storyteller, crafting a deeply humanizing and expressive narrative within the pages of *Xenos*. To read this collection is to travel back in time, to be reminded that even then there were fires, even then so many of us were burning. Unifying and spirited, readers will find themselves returning to these poems over and over again.

**AZIA DUPONT, EDITOR OF DIRTY CHAI MAGAZINE**

