During the Autopsy

“She hid it well,” they say, gathered around the body. Some standing in the gallery think of their god, big as an ox, and are thankful for once not to be the chosen one. Her stomach opened to reveal the tree growing inside her, seeming to take root near the navel, branching out between the ribs. Thick bark falling away under the scalpel. A man worries a pair of bats from her throat. Wings raw from rubbing against the wood, panicky. Flesh houses milk-white bulbs, new life, pale like her throat, a nice one.

A throat to be stroked nightly by some woodsman. And the bats are the most vibrant black the man has ever seen. Their wings seem to be living separately from their bodies, trying to detach. And so he pictures the woman in the same light, tree its own creature, not hers, not her, as he takes a bone saw to a branch, or, with the smaller ones, snaps them off with his hands.

One must, at times, learn to ignore the body. In a dream the man was once patron saint of ships. Not only did he build the most sea-worthy ships of his small town, but he blessed all the vessels in the shipyard. Walking from wood hull to wood hull, he would press his hands against them, speak to them with his palms. And they would speak back. The man would carry their stories with him from sleep, so that, in the morning, his hands were still full with them, seemed to anchor him to the mattress, hands heavy with whale bones and kelp nests. With crates of rotting fruit, the smell of too many men together, skin sloughing off like flakes of sel de mer. And the man had forgotten all this, until his hands were around the trunk, growing like his own thigh,
and he could see each layer of the cut-into wood, which looked not unlike each layer of the thick skin of the belly, the woman not a woman, but a tree now. The tree, with his hands around it, sang into him a high-pitched song, song of a siren, a woman’s voice asking to be returned to the sea. Any sea. And as he washed his hands after, thorough as always, as he walked home in the rain to his wife. As he drank the glass of water she had poured him from a clay pitcher, he could feel that voice in his throat, and that night he woke—suddenly, salt water covering his entire body—to that other woman’s song.