Morgan Boyer

It does not hurt

(Pliny the Younger. Letters. 3.16.2. Fannia, a Roman noblewoman and granddaughter of a Roman officer named Arria, is dying by her own blade after her son died. She is being comforted by her husband, Paetus, in her dying moments.)

Paetus, my husband, do not ever fear, for it does not hurt; the dagger is sheep-soft in piercing a lying woman’s skin; filled with the August-ripe hemlock of a mourning heart; the eyes of my son forever shall be my dying breath’s sin

Arria once asked a woman with a husband in her arms how she bared to live;
when could words that passed through a mortal’s chapped lips be more true?
Death in honor, the knife sheds my sinful skin so I may finally feel alive;
preparing for the Ferryman to carry me--his voice harsh yet sheepskin smooth

If you choose for the rigid, kind dagger to pass into your body;
ending a short, forgetful life as you reenter the ground;
Our villas sold as well as every meaningless commodity;
as the blood-river forming beneath your arm is the final sound

Paetus, it does not hurt to take the dagger into an already inevitable death;
for in death, all are of the same gender, health, nation, status and wealth
Reflections on Vesuvius
(The Roman writer Pliny the younger is reflecting on the death of his uncle and mentor, Pliny the Elder, who died of a heart attack during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. He is addressing a letter to the Roman historian and longtime friend, Tacitus)

Tacitus, yes, days go by when I wonder about the other side of the bay, Roaring from the depths of the Hell to the crashing flame-laced shore, How could a man of his age display such courage while I, a youth, only stay? My uncle even though, himself a patrician, cared for something more

Tacitus, yes, I would certainly would have perished had I gone, Though to sit calmly in my study while his throat filled with ash, when my uncle gave me a renewed father’s immortal bonds The guilt that torments me is more painful than a lion-claw’s slash

Tacitus, I sometimes in my Como villa I glance at the night sky, remembering my uncle’s love for all wild beings that breathed, to Jupiter I scream at the celestial bodies for a some reply, but for years the message from the gods’ I have yet to receive

For days I pray to Janus to transport me back, but I know quite well that answering they lack
My hand traces your writing

Like a mouse’s paws across a kitchen table, each syllable I see the eyes surpassed the lake’s glistening crests in the midsts of June; how you touched my neck when my heart felt as if it were a stringed instrument being plucked, whispering to me that my braided hair resembled a fresco of Sappho; and yet your heart and soul must labor on aqueducts for the good of the people of Bithynia, and for Rome; your fingers not tracing the sun-kissed olive-branches, but watching sweat-drenched men cut and lay bricks