

Yours, Sally Hemings

*All water has a perfect memory and is forever  
trying to get back to where it was.*

—Toni Morrison

Everything you collect,  
spring buds  
on the dogwood and the butterfly

that flirts with them, must be  
described precisely—  
named, sir.

In Paris, after those days  
on a sea stirred by memory,  
I walked the streets of a place

called Marais, the French name  
things as they are: *Marais*, something  
not quite water, not yet land.

Tonight your weight, insistent,  
bears down on me. Your breath  
stale. I stare at the moon,

our commonwealth, a sharp  
talon ripping the dark velvet  
of this difficult night.

Yours, Malinalli

The signs burned my sleep  
long before you arrived on snorting,  
glistening spirits. One-eyed fish, spawned  
in the sacred lagoon, foretold  
your coming.

I whispered a prayer  
into my palms and pressed them  
against the temple stone.

Your red-bearded language,  
sweet on my tongue, demanded  
a path between my words  
and yours. In the avenues  
of Tenochtitlan they say  
I am your whore;  
the new word is stranded  
in the narrow canal of my Nahuatl throat.