The soft gray afternoon lay muffled, hushed,
Painted in a nearby universe.
A milli-millimeter depth of red,
Drenched radiant orange, ablaze beyond the bed,
A transitory door, lit on the wall,
The door I crazed with knocking reappeared.
With blowing ribbons just this moment blown,
Left hanging in a conjured iron ring
A sunset-painted door, with long-lost keys
But where, and to what end, and guarding what—
A sentinel, my vigil overcome,
Though one by one the locks were bolted shut—
Of five, the final one I argued for
And locks from other keys, fifth surgery
Those keys were melted down from other locks
Had fallen from my hand, but never mind,
The password lost, a ring of useless keys
A sentinel, my vigil overcome,
Our hands entwined, my chin sunk to my chest,
I sat beside him, dozing in my coat,
The sunset sank its heat into the wall.

Materialized, and dematerialized.
Dark heaven hidden behind. A nurse

Gjertrud Schnackenberg is the author of five collections of poems. Her sixth, from which this poem is taken, will be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in October.

An act without a "pre-existing I";
Self-fabricating atoms, like a thought
That pre-exists the mind where it appears:
Why this—i.e., existence—why exist?
The universe is self-created where?
The universe is self-created why?
All questions put aside, perhaps for good,
Questions, O monks, that lead not to salvation.
I turned my back on heaven once and for all,
No questions anymore, just say he’ll live,
Bright doors exploded open, closed; O.R.—
Illusory door, but with a real door
Set into it, but both doors bolted shut;
But bolted shut the same as left ajar—
Enchanted knife that didn’t even hurt,
Though somewhere else it seems a shadow-knife
Was cutting shadow-flush, but never mind;
Handleless, the knife without a blade,
Said Lichtenberg; and no one could have known,
And sutures sewn with no one there to sew them,
Yet one by one in perfect order sewn
And sutures sewn with no one there to sew them,
Said Lichtenberg; and no one could have known,
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And sutures sewn with no one there to sew them,
An act without a “pre-existing I”;
Self-fabricating atoms, like a thought
That pre-exists the mind where it appears:
Why this—i.e., existence—why exist?
The universe is self-created where!
The universe is self-created why?

All questions put aside, perhaps for good,
Questions, O monks, that lead not to salvation.
I turned my back on heaven once and for all,
No questions anymore. Just say he’ll live.
Bright doors exploded open, closed; O.R.—
Illusory door, but with a real door
Set into it, but both doors bolted shut;
But bolted shut the same as left ajar—

Enchanted knife that didn’t even hurt,
Though somewhere else it seems a shadow-knife
Was cutting shadow-flesh, but never mind;
Handleless, the knife without a blade,
Said Lichtenberg; and no one could have known,
And sutures sewn with no one there to sew them,
Yet one by one in perfect order sewn
The way that seashell sutures come to be
In painless silence; painless, utterly;
Across a floor of sand we can’t say where,

The speechless needle buried in the vein.
Above, a water-ceiling self-divides.
A scissors cutting through a water-surface;
Surface reflections shudder; self-repair;
Nausea; a bleaching coral reef;

Opiates. The ship of Theseus
The masts broken, torn down, no one aboard.
And bumping quietly against a reef,
Wave-dismantled, bobbing plank by plank,
Touching a shore; disintegration; foam—

The demiurge that forged the nucleus
Had set an injured molecule aside
That broke away midstream, autonomous,
And copied out its secret injury.
A break-site underwent a subtle change,
A hidden break-site in a chromosome;
A break, without apparent consequence,
And no one knew. And no one could have known.
Something smaller than a grain of sand.
But every crumb of matter in Creation
Casts a shadow, every grain of dust;
And every weightless shadow gathers mass,
Though infinitely smaller than a grain;
The speechless needle buried in the vein;
God in the distance lifting up the stone
That even God can’t lift: the nucleus
In micro-desolate eternity.

Awakened briefly in a frigid room.
A blue god standing by, blue mask and gown,
Blue gloves, and dazzling water-lights and -darks;
A buried memory-surge: a god’s blue hand
Gestured above the opened body’s rim:

All that could be done has now been done.  
I am the same to all, Lord Krishna said.  
To all beings, my love is ever one.

Then we two, reunited and marooned.
A door drenched radiant orange beyond the bed
Appearing in a wall of cinder blocks
Lit dimly gray. Then gone. And evening came
And took the door, frame, handles, latches, locks,
Even the black cube buried in the frame
With chisel marks around the mortise box;
Then took the wall away,

but all was well,
Mysterious rudiments of our farewell:
Unguarded hope’s covalent bonds entwined
With opiates’ covalent molecules,
A paradox inside a paradox
Of fathomless repose, the selfsame dream
That all was well, and we were going home;
But first it was imperative to find
The house where no beloved ever died,
And when you find it I’ll restore his life—

We slept beside a bleaching coral reef,
The walls around us, creaking, to and fro,
And leaking light, bright water streaming through
From ceiling-lit fluorescence in the hall—
Receding planes, and looming gray-lit rooms
And coral vaults how many stories high,
A rainswept mosque anchored by semidomes,
A distant crown of forty window-jewels,
The windows open to the elements
In transepts north and south and east and west
And rain was blowing through the vestibules
And exedrae and wings under a spell
Of doors that multiply and multiply—

A bleaching coral reef with pockmarked walls
And shining heaps of gouged-out tesserae—
Like seashell litter, slowly ground to sand,
In violet-blue, in white, in basalt green,
Vermilion, mica leaf, along the floors
Like ex-mosaics chiseled from the walls
Or future pictures still to be installed
With drops of Sublimaze. I thought he stirred;
A pockmarked coral reef, my flashlight beam
Sought out a torn mosaic’s chisel-gouged,
Dismantled portrait of the panting hart
At rest, beside a stream, in Paradise:

A tongue was lapping water audibly
Behind the veil of a dreadful thirst.
My magic stag lay in a trance induced,
Driven to panting foam and scrambling
His legs to try to lift his head to drink.
I scrambled to my feet and swayed, perplexed.
Beloved body’s beauty, lying still;
I pressed an ice-soaked sponge against his lips.
He thanked me, even then. Oh say not so.

I thought I stood beside his crumpled form
Holding an arrow broken from his side.
My fingers touched the dressing of his wound,
A shaking fever, streaming flanks; I thought
I held a broken arrow, petrified.

There was an arrow nothing could remove.
A parable crumbled along a binding.
Don’t send to know, if you’ve been arrow-struck,
Whether the arrow’s made of gold or wood;
If made of gold, extracted from what mine;
If made of wood, what kind, what tree, what grove;
Don’t send to know the archer’s name or age
Or occupation, place of origin,
Or whether poison soaked the arrowhead
And if it did, what antidotes are used;
Don’t send to know if you were struck by chance,
Or if the arrowhead was meant for you;
It doesn’t matter now; don’t send to know—

Footsteps, a curtain swept aside, a nurse,
A wave of reassurances: he’s fine;
What needed tending to was tended to,
And all that could be done has now been done,
And all is well and nothing left to do.
All is well and hush and never mind.
Beloved body’s beauty, lying still,
His hand, silk to my lips, no questions now,
Just say he’ll live. My bluest veins to kiss,
Said Cleopatra, holding out her hand,
If only you will tell me he will live—
And felt myself subsiding in my chair,

The puzzle solved: sunset, a rainswept mosque
In Istanbul, the legend of its doors
That lay under a spell such that no one
Could count them all, however carefully
The tally's kept—two hundred ninety-nine,
Three hundred doors, three hundred doors and one—
But always one was added to the sum,
Another door was always added: one

Among the doors that lay under a spell:
Some scraped the floors, with dark-rubbed radii
On marble thresholds, tilting underneath
The distant dome's transferred weight-bearing load;
And some fell open; some were spurious doors,
With curious, rusting keys in rusting locks,
Whose painted marble panels, washed away
By centuries of rain, were nonetheless
Still set in quarried marble jambs with veins
Indelible, however far and deep
Rain-pelted marble surfaces erode—

And some, torn from their ancient hinges, leaned
Against the walls in upper galleries
With chisel marks where vanished bronze was pried,
Transported from the house where no one died,
Perhaps; a miracle, another chance,
The final surgery I argued for—
Fifth surgery of five, at my request,

And some were rubble-filled and nailed shut
And plastered over: ghost doors showing through,
High up, on second-story walls, midair,
Implying long-demolished balconies.
Illusory above them, lasting scars,
In unrecorded times, left incomplete,
Were hidden under black partitions hung
Like drapes, neglected, shredding on their rings—
Black curtains drawn across unbidden thoughts—

And dead-end galleries ahead were sealed
With glowing metal doors that smelled of smoke
With massive knobs in bronze, too hot to touch,
Even for dreamers' hands; behind the doors,
Ashes in heaps, still pulsing scarlet-orange.
And crumbling from its hinges, up ahead,

The oldest door, built from a cedar plank
Retrieved from Noah’s ark and silver-sheathed
But shrunken, only wide enough for one.
I drew him to my chest and carried him,
We stood together at the ancient door:

Among the doors that lay under a spell,
Another door appeared: three hundred doors;
Three hundred doors and one; three hundred two—
I reasoned that if someone swept a hand
And all the locks fell open all at once
And all the doors fell open, he would live;

And ran my palm across the phantom wood—
But phantom slivers lodging in my palm
Were stabbing me awake: futility
Of every bolt and lock and handle tried.
And all that could be done had now been done.
First find the house where no beloved died
In any generation; none, I say;
No father, mother, husband, wife, or child,
No father's father, mother's mother... none;
But if you cannot find it, lay him down;
Lay his body down, and come away—

Covalent molecules of Sublimaze
And other alkaloids and analogues
Took down the wall in which the door I crazed
With knocking reappeared; but in his sleep;
And every seven seconds oxygen
Would slide away, exhaled, and opiates
Broke down the walls in scattered cinder blocks
We slept crumpled beside, but left a door
Still standing, bolted shut where nothing was.

Immobilized, my chin sunk to my chest,
The puzzle solved: a sunset-painted door
That came and went among the galleries—
But then another door was added: one:

Outside in the fluorescent corridor
The elevator doors slid open, closed:
A sudden opening in a concrete wall,
The elevator shaft a hollow tower
Built in the negative. Abolished space
Where bells swept up and past, plunged past and down.
A bell had broken from its rope and fell
From floor to floor to floor, descending toward
A hidden basement room, an unmarked door;
A frigid theater for Anatomy—
But no one knew, and no one could have known—

I felt the opiates touch his bluest veins:
At one a.m., at two a.m., the hour
The weightless, phantom images inside
Another’s mind dissolve inside one’s own:

The apparition of the body scan,
A momentary fabric, seraph-hung,
Across a momentary scaffolding,
One and the Many. Many and the One.

The apparition of the body scan,
An apparition from Vesalius,
The Fifth Book of Anatomy, laid bare:
Beloved body, lit in blacks and grays,
Black-soaked, and streaming in eternity,
The resurrected cavity of Galen,
In antiparticles. In gamma rays.
A visionary study of the veins,
Merely a blurry shadow on a scan;
And overhead a surgeon turns a page:

Black curtains sewn from bolts of consciousness
Are held aside by seraphs in black corners:
A stream of flowing atoms, held aside.
The presentation of a hidden sight:
Anatomy, which means the “cutting open,”
From atoms, meaning the “uncuttables,”
The indivisibles, the Fabrica,
The template of the “pre-existing I”—
Intangible, the fabric tourniquets

The seraphs tie and tie with anxious hands—
But when they turn, to see it for themselves,
Atoms unbind, down to their nuclei:

The mortal body, spectral to the core.
An image no one made, or made by God,
Or self-made, self-dissolving, self-aware.
Who then, or what, hallucinated this?
The tragedy of being only this,
Aristotle’s thisness, nothing more

Among the crowds thronging the frontispiece:
The Renaissance physicians, crowding near,
Distinguished faculty, apprentices,
Ambassadors, and workmen of the trades,
Students of medicine, nobility,
And clerks of law and church—and all alone,
Above the throng, a rearing skeleton—
And some sway on their feet, some hold their own,
Some turn away, some snuffed out at the sight:

A table, heaped with tools of the trade:
The cutting table, instruments arrayed;
The knife of the anatomist, beheld:
An iron scale sinks: the heart is weighed—

And standing in the foreground undisturbed,
Philosophers, who weigh hallucinations,
Are questioning students of medicine:
What is the largest object in Creation?
The whole of wholes, Ein Sof, Totality?
What can’t be stood outside of, looking on?
What is the all in all in all in All?
And its circumference?—the brain is weighed
Without its weightless, phantom images—

Anesthesia’s curtain briefly lifts:
A chaos-surge: a frigid basement room
Without locality, and massless, drifts—
A distant vacuum cleaner vacuuming
The surface of an undiscovered moon,
Perplexia, revolving upside down,
Orbit-knocked, but holding to its path

Above our room, above another earth,
Where other moons are tugging other seas;
Black troughs, white crests, black troughs, directionless
Successive walls collapsing, every wave
Torn down by its own foaming edge that pulls
White fringes down from transitory walls—

Water divides-repairs, before-behind;
And churning pre- and post-chronology
Where everything is happening at once—
A curtain lifted, white; but falling, black:
Black sails appearing on a distant rim—

There will be other ships of Theseus,
Mirage-like, on the rims of distant gulfs,
Gliding in silence under other cliffs;
Other Aegeans, other nameless seas
Dissolving oceanic memories
In other future ocean-vanishings;
And other drowning and emerging coasts
Where long-eroded outcroppings of rock
That once upon a time were continents
Are cliffs; then jutting fragments that divide
A shoreline where an ocean opened-closed

On other, deeper mid-Atlantic rifts
Where other, higher Everests, submerged
A mile below the surface, came and went
Where other chains of mountains come and go—

And other earths with other molten cores,
Other beginnings, other long-lost ends
In other times, in other firmaments,
Before-behind;

A ship of Theseus
Mirage-like on a distant rim, appears,
Black troughs, white crests, black troughs, directionless—
Touching a shore; disintegration; foam . . .

Wherever sleep has taken us, we stir,
Surprised; the sunlight raging in our faces,
Recalling where we are, but both alive;
His smile igniting, happy: Let’s go home.
And drowsing near me, reaches for my hand.
The room alight.

Weightless prisms spill
Across the ceiling, scattered from my ring,
And quiver: multiplying, self-disclosed,
The chains of planets flow, and disappear.
Fan out. Then disappear. Fan out again.
Eternities released from snares of djinns.

“Only if a self, located in
One possible world, can synthesize itself
Long distance, in another world, to be
A nonself there . . .”

The morning nurse arrives,
All gentle comfort, asking how he feels,
And hangs a vacuum sack of liquid drugs
Above his head, and double-checks the line,
And brings fresh ice with soaking sponges fixed
To plastic wands for me to swab his lips—
And says: No sips allowed. And says that we’re
Awaiting lab results, no word so far;
And scribbles notes; and says: he’s doing fine.

Trembling prisms hang among her words,
Venus-Earth-and-Mars: The surgeon can’t
Be here until tonight, to meet with you.
I twist my ring, and weightless prisms spill
Across the ceiling. Gathered overhead,
The planets tremble. Trembling violet-blue.
And trembling yellow-green. And trembling red.