Dawn of Man

By Max Ritvo

After the cocoon I was in a human body instead of a butterfly's. All along my back there was great pain — I groped to my feet where I felt wings behind me, trying to tilt me back. They succeeded in doing so after a day of exertion. I called that time, overwhelmed with the ghosts of my wings, sleep. My thoughts remained those of a caterpillar —

I took pleasure in climbing trees. I snuck food into all my pains. My mouth produced language which I attempted to spin over myself and rip through happier and healthier.

I'd do this every few minutes. I'd think to myself What made me such a failure?

It's all a little touchingly pathetic. To live like this, a grown creature telling ghost stories, staring at pictures, paralyzed for hours. And even over dinner or in bed — still hearing the stories, seeing the pictures — an undertow sucking me back into myself.

I'm told to set myself goals. But my mind doesn't work that way. I, instead, have wishes for myself. Wishes aren't afraid to take on their own color and life — like a boy who takes a razor from a high cabinet puffs out his cheeks and strips them bloody.

This poem is from Four Reincarnations by Max Ritvo (Milkweed Editions, 2016). Copyright © 2016 by Max Ritvo. Reprinted with permission from Milkweed Editions.