

Mars rotates on its axis, completing one revolution every 24.6 hours.

—NASA

Think of something you wish we had
a word for, I tell my students.
If our experience flows through the current
of language, then how do we live
what we cannot say? What would you say
if you could? A student says, a word for longing
for someone who is in the same room.
A word for the particular quiet of the house
just after loved ones leave, the spare bed
disheveled, extra cups by the sink,
alluvial silt of tea still warm in the porcelain.
One girl raises her hand:
a word for the way we feel when people sing
Happy Birthday to us.
Yes—that annual blend of pleasure
and embarrassment, the sombrero
tilted on your head while the other patrons
look up from their salted rims,
the birthday candles beading blue wax while dad
pans the camera around the glowing faces.
I last heard the song four months ago
just as my daughter pushed free of me.
Dr. Wilson began to sing, the surprise of his baritone
rising in the midst of both our cries,
happy birthday, dear Eloise . . . her face purple
and swollen, the slick curling cord that bound us
then cut. I have often wondered what the doctor said

when my sister gave birth to twins, one alive
and one not. No song or word can sing
into that abyssal joy, that sorrow. A word for the prayer
of pure praise wedded to sheer anguish. A word
for longing for someone who is in the same body.
How often I'd longed for my daughter
those nine months, even as she turned and stirred
beneath my hands, only as far away
as my skin is deep. Perhaps there is no word
that is not longing. When my sister and I
are silent together on the phone,
I can't help but think of the Mars Rover,
280 million miles away rolling slowly
through a crater of red rock and dust,
singing Happy Birthday to itself.
This is how my sister will always feel
when she sings that song to her son—
both elegy and ode, a tune that rises
from the dark depth of a place no one can go
with her or follow her out of, even if she promises
not to look back. A word for praise
struck from the flint of sorrow. A word for longing
for someone who is in the same cosmos.
A word for the look of the earth
as glimpsed from Mars, twinned in its spinning,
unsayable and green in its faraway light.