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Two Poems

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APPROACHING THE SUMMER SOLSTICE

for Helen

1

Stars have returned
to positions we're
familiar with.
This is night
when only beams
beneath the plaster
keep the sky
from breaking in.

Today we staked tomatoes.
The run-off from the river
has been good fertilizer.
The water gets deeper
and blacker with sun.
Reflection of form:
eyes, nose, shoulder, calf
return without a ripple.

Now the neighborhood idiot
prowls the banks
for young girls.
What is brown besides
your eyes
is a home for mollusks.

2

You'll wait for birds
or even light
to wrestle my arms loose
and tell me
you've dreamt me
back to water,
a scaleless creation,

slimy, eel-like
without vertebrae,
with eyes only large enough
to see shifts in light.

3

The season's without center;
too early for cicada
too late for tulip,
the rose still spinning
inside itself.

*

I come to ask why the heartwood
of the birch
tightens in the wind,
why on this edge of land
there is only a rubble of moss
and bent necks of weed
sucking water
from the center of rock.

I come to a point
close enough to see
the eye of a gull,
to an edge where the length
of my arms
and the span of my back
lose their measure
and the imaginary arc
between earth and sun
disappears.

4

The retina
finds the sharp rock,
the sea sends the sun

back through a choroid
and loses all current.

The pulse of heart
moves to the throat
expands to the jugular
and rises behind the eyes.

*

For a moment
even cormorants are still,
their foot scrawl
dissolving without a scratch.

I let water in,
take the sharpest shell
past the soft tissue.
I walk with a slow wind
and hear only names return—
a town, a woman
a bush that gives berries;
the sounds die three waves out.

In this air
flat rock glistens,
gulls swoop for fish
waves rise white off black;
my legs turn to weed

what I learn from the first fish
is how the fin yields
to a change of current,
how the color on the underside
reflects a tint of coral.

5

When there is wind again
land is not easy.

Flies crawl the dead crab
a weak wave cleans the last meat
from the mussel

algae change color
the first birds move
without sound

it's the inner ear that hears
the sand breathe.

6

This land is not as you said,
rocks jutting high above water
a sun turning the sea to a bed of diamonds
and one woman finding me
still on the sand,
foam sifting my flesh
back to bottom.

*

On this beach
the sun will be overhead soon;
bring enough vegetables for the long haul.
Bring the greens
that can stand the heat,
rhubarb because it grows
in sand
carrot and potato because they know
where the earth is cool
and can find water
without light.

7

I'll wake you before
my ears have recovered
from the pressure change,

before my eyes have returned
to white
and salt has left my neck.

*

In this moment before the eye
accepts darkness
and a wind through a low shrub
leaves the skin silent

I'll tell you that scales dissolve
at dark bottom
and return with coral in the shoal
and even a stream
the width of my foot
becomes a current.

FACING THE REMAINS

I wake to tell you
the cows have returned to the roadside,
the flax is like silk
around the ankles of planters.
I dreamt the carcass of our horse
picked clean by buzzards
glistened in the late sun.
The wind was yellow
and farms on the far hill
returned to shadows.
The hills were low and vacant;
light waned to a single line
and left us shivering to our thighs.

It was not the carcass
but the absence of birds
that left you hands limp.
If there had been one crow
to accuse, one distant vulture
circling in the haze,
I could have consoled you.
As it was the two of us
stood there
in the early corn
motionless and separate
in the night air.