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Three Poems

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OUTCAST

The wall has entered: I must love the wall.

Roethke

I found your face in mine. Once
you kissed me in public (or did not)
dreamed me (or did not)
and I was. In your one slipping of love
the day, the night you wanted me
I scarcely saw.

So much is needed: that lie
masquerades a dire principle. Lonely,
all are afraid. Home
crouches before them, lion or dog
and still they climb.

You do not willingly go, yet I
am shamed. I think you go
toward me in some other life, some country
where scars are beautiful. Here
we save ourselves for graves, withholding

love. The day that word was wrong
my mouth turned blue. I turn back
the mountain. None
gives truly to another. The long
hill, skull and rose.

CALLED SLEEPING

I am called out. The leaves
are letting go.
A man steps up for his hanging
and the dead woman cannot forget
the day she let him in,
the cloud of maples, burning.
Some may never turn
this way again. Some
are naked already.

The falling is everywhere, so gradual
even the trees have forgotten
the pewter gaze of sky, unflinching
through miles of snow.

It is Sunday in October.
The maples accept me, losing
their leaves the way the mothers
who lost themselves at birth
lose again at dying. Once you left me
at the foot of a mountain
to bring up a day's water. Immortality
of gesture is all I have, the particular
straws of your being.
Do the eyes dream? Memory,
you ask me less and less
of my life. This age
collects like autumn,
even the small-boned plum
and lilac. Through the haze,
the brilliant skin of the birches.

CROSSING THE LAKE

1

In clear light of summer, I gather in
armloads of soft purple, white.
I dream a river, the cloud around my body
a lake of ash. To see you clear of death
is not enough, the bridal wreaths
endlessly braiding, the lover-swing
gaping. The forgotten kiss, forgotten.
All the purple cut from the trellis.
Flowers drop their petals and night
slides its bolt clean into our bones.
The door opens in, out, and we are alone.

I see you as a young man saying goodbye
to your brothers. A hand moves the blood's
full weight, open, waving. You planted your feet
like corn, your right arm swinging high.

2

Old women, their freckled hands, exotic shellfish
in the sea of evening. When storms move down
the Gallatin, they perch like crows,
shuffling their ancient cards. They never forget
the chair not empty, when war brought
its glory wreath and all the boys were men.
You are there, under the dripping birch, wrapped
in a kaleidoscope of leaves. A day of dedication,
the bandage hidden. Beside the Nazarene Church
I make your bed, press the soft white robe
against your mouth.

3

Memorial Day. A storm threatens the parade
and out back, Mother takes pictures. Then
we are moving. You, the sailor, buoyed
up by a cloud of flags. You told me secrets.
Aunt Olive served potatoes in a flowered bowl
hand-painted by a German. The way we carry blood,
slow. The invisible shock of snow. The fall
through a century, a steady ghost, the even
touch that never melts the tongue.

I believe I belonged in the car when it crashed,
the white line frozen in my mind, your words
a river I still drown in. You are always
on the wrong side. Now a lake. Now a letter
mailed across an ocean. I lose you again,
the sea exploding in your brain, the alphabet
gone mute as shrapnel.

4

Father, I was the unfaithful one. The long
grass sweetened for your mowing.
I played only hymns when you were dying,
the motion of my hands like birds
on their lake of keys. We lie humming
in the deep. Now walking on water.
The sleep in the belly of the whale.
Shells of our former selves hug
the shore, breath
and lap of lake water, slow
river, the subtle slap
of midday bath. Listen.
We are crossing the lake.