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The Sense of Calm Hours

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THE SENSE OF CALM HOURS

for Cathy

Once I wouldn't have noticed
how years seem single moments
when strewn across
such vast mud plains
where winter's turned over
its white belly
and pigs begin to roam again
for bits of stubble corn.

But my sister took
my hand and pointing
with her own hand
showed me Brueghel's
Wedding Feast, the piece
an indoor scene of outdoor people
and lacking the landscape
of his many other paintings
though years of unseen field work
filled those meatless pies,
filled those pitchers with beer.

O.K., I said, I understand.
One day's work at Coleco's
wood shop and I end up
at Luba's Tavern.

But no,
she said, no, you mustn't
think of wood only
but forests with owls
hooting, black-winged
woodpeckers banging
their heads against
oaks and maples. And not

just fields but rivers
that feed them and us,
that empty to estuaries.
These, these are in your beer.

She thought I understood
the silent sea's tearing
and mending the land.
Or why we returned each summer
and lay down on the shore
under the quiet stars
which she told me
were neither full nor empty of me,
neither like nor unlike
driftwood fires charring sand.

Now near monotonous fields
flocked waxwings fluttering
can make one bush
in its winter barrenness
more than alive, less
than green;
 and yet,

today I heard my mother cry
across one thousand wired miles:

*your sister's growing
unchangeably pale
they dye her feet blue
in the Philadelphia hospital
and her hair falls out
like permanent tears.*

I answered that dawn siren,
sunlight spilling through cracked blinds,
the neighborhood waking to coffee and work.