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A Row of Eagles

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A Row of Eagles

The cop beside the plugged cannon pulls a ticket book
from his pocket
and turns toward a row of parked cars.
How long it takes him to see me double-parked
across the square, to wave me on
is the time I let myself remember you
sitting in the lawn chair in the red haze of maples,
holding in your swollen and useless hand
the ball of hard rubber
that never rebuilt one ounce of grip.

Grandfather, in the memory's shop clouded by the dust
of Tate marble, I walk you again
down the long alley of stone taking shape,
stand you by the righteous shoulder of a statesman,
the wing of an eagle,
put the chisel, the hammer in your hand,

but you keep turning on me, hobbling out
of my childhood and into that yard, into that chair
and the risky tilt of the maple shade, waving
me home from high school, from practice,
with the one good hand that meant
to me, at sixteen, another afternoon of chores.

The eagles gray more every year, the exhaust,
the layers of soot darkening on their shoulders
like the grand indictments of the memory.
Grandfather, if we are ever worthy
of the years that know enough to change us,

why does my memory search for you in the musty rooms
of the house run over by the road, in the woods
gone to office space around the dog lots,
to find you only in that one place,
the invalid's chair tilted in the shade of a tree?

And why does it bring me back to the only thing
left of you in this town — stone birds
on the roof of this courthouse —
to feel again the justice that keeps them so aloof,
that keeps my hand from tracing
in the carved grace of a wing
the pardon of a life's wrong turns and turnings away?

—David Bottoms