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## Sentient Being

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## *Sentient Being*

—Tibet, 1986

In a land that breaks a spade, too scant of timber  
to waste tinder on a body,  
necessity brings the dead to tablerock where  
alluvial sands knuckle down on valley—

where a campfire heats milky tea  
and the circle of well-paid pariahs  
sharpening their cutlery  
for dawn. It is this light one approaches,

uninvited, hearing wrath  
in the distant baying of monastery dogs,  
more sure in darkness of the path  
than of those curious thugs

known as motives. It is here the foreman takes up a bone—  
the conquered's wand—and points to a rock  
and a smashed camera, the line  
not to be crossed, and demands the backpack

as if to say "You have come to see?  
Then you will see it all."  
It is here, without more ceremony  
than the tying on of coveralls

and the unbundling of shrouds,  
the first cut along a withered flank  
sends the newcomer's eye toward clouds,  
clinical repose in the blank,

momentary escape from its own fascination  
with insight. The flesh falls,  
becoming meat, the last incantation  
from three hammers mixing bones and all with *tsampa*, the meal

on which it fed daily with its fellows,  
the staple, the life. In a land no native climbs  
but in duty, where foreign souls  
lie entombed by icefalls, the flesh drops one last time;

the foreman glances upward to its future—  
his face blinding as a single dandelion  
sunning on a summit—upward to the first vulture,  
tentative, discreet near ridge-top cairns;

the remaining spine with skull  
dangles like the headed club that once simplified  
encounters; then the skull  
is crushed, emptied, something from inside

removed and presented while hammers  
pulverize the rest, and blades honed, at last, for the morrow  
ring like ancestral iron first mined from meteors,  
the teacher of how in woman a child grows.

It is here the dead become no more.  
Here one is reminded of his place: “Hey, you, breakfast!”  
And the men, retreating toward sweet, smouldering juniper,  
call the sky down to feast

quickly, so they may go home.  
Come gorge, belch, lounge—the struggle to rise  
to ravenous nests, the only resurrection.  
In a land where ink thins, the heart, unacclimatized

to these specializing furies,  
clicks in the roof of the mouth,  
frantic yet steady as the surveyor-spy  
who posed here long ago as a pilgrim seeking truth,

who tallied on prayer beads his forbidden, measured steps  
and fortunate escapes, botched  
rememberings forever kept  
among the mountains that roam, watch.

*Donald Morrill*