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Greg Pape

Remember the Moose

She must have come down from high
mountain meadows where bear-grass
blooms had dried and fallen, paintbrush
put away its colors, and mud-wallows
begun to freeze and stay frozen
past noon, down along the creek
through aspen, alder, and willow thickets
to high grass along a road
leading to town.

Why she kept on coming you can only
guess. Rich green smell of cemetery
grass, muted bellow of a distant bull,
old path imprinted in her genes, deep
doubts, simple curiosity? Maybe
she was lost, or came as a reminder
of something lost. A moose grazing
among the graves on Sunset Hill
is an image one might hold for years,
turning it over and over, working it
into a story or finding it, strangely lit,
inverted in a dream.

Remember the moose outside the tent in Idaho,
the moonlight and mosquitoes, how she looked
like a boulder in the creek
until she lifted her great head from the water,

big worldly angel, and turned to look
at you with ropes of weeds
hanging from her mouth.

By day she strolled among the park's
swingsets and jungle-gyms, stopping
to sniff the dull shine of a slide
or stopping, high as a house, in some child's
eye. Parents, sensing danger, tried to shoo her away,
but she followed her own calling.
Nearly blind after the sun went down,
street lights and house lights surrounded her—
a confusion of moons. She must have picked
one to lead her on. They found her
on the Newsomes' front porch, snout pressed
against the wall, back legs splayed. Terrified,
someone said, as neighbors gathered to watch
the wildlife officials load their darts
and end her urban visit
in a sudden blur of drugs.

Think of Golden Gate Park half a life ago,
a day of dancing and chanting, thousands
of hairy kids, men, women,
dogs with beads and dirty bandannas,
a fog of breath and marijuana pulsing
around black banks of speakers blasting
the twilight with drumbeat and guitar shrieks.
Someone smiling hands you a hit of something.
You walk off across a baseball diamond
toward some tree or siren or patch of grass

looking for your country. A shock-eyed man
marches barefoot mouthing a manic recitation
like a fuse burning. You walk and walk
into dark and lie down and stare at the moon
until it comes down and covers your face
with its bowl of white light.

After the drugs took hold the drugs wore off.
They loaded her on a truck, gently as they could,
drove her out of town on dirt roads,
lifted her down into high grass,
waited to see her waken.

Think of leaving and coming back.
Think what you have nurtured and betrayed.
Think of the towns and cities you changed
with your absence. Think of the country.
Remember the moose turning away, lowering
her head into the water, leaving you
the afterimage—unspoken words, weeds
hanging from your mouth. Remember waking
in a colder place, glad to breathe
and see your breath.