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Selecting the Carp & Lichen

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SELECTION THE CARP & LICHEN

for Cary

1.
Below the lichen covered elms,
torn down during one spring rain; the sure factory
of an earthworm's body, churning through loose soil,
nourishing itself & the soil; sparrows & wrens
who hop delicately in the branches,
occasionally loosening a leaf or a seed—

a creek runs, & billows in places, & curves
where land's too hard.

Among such a place,
& younger, my brother & I.

There was a certain time each year
carp would fill our creek, their miserable suction mouths
seining the bottom for food.
We must have speared hundreds,
and never took it to mean more than fun.

One after another, we threw their carcasses on shore.
We thought nothing of nature's charm.
At first, their scales would glisten.
Then they would rot for a long time.

*

When I drink with others, I always
stagger off alone for awhile, take a breather
from mimicry & reprimand myself.
I get sentimental about things.

Well, around twelve years after the last speared carp
wriggled from our prongs,
I stumbled behind a barn. Drunk, alone,
I came across a skunk
you could hardly call a skunk.
The lice within its entrails
pulsed together, swaying like wind
in a high white flag.

If I hadn’t been drunk, I doubt
I would have wondered back at all about those carp—
whether they became soil: mimicking a creek running,
& billowing in places, or themselves,
before death, swimming together under spears,
more than ever coming back each year.

2.
Behind bars, people realize what went wrong.
Outside, it’s not that easy. Suicide, for instance, reminds us.

My mother tracks everything back to religion, for guilt. My father plays golf.
I read, & write things down. But strength is derived in familial terms, from things you can reach with bourbon, remembering where you’ve grown.

3.
In Japan, it’s ie; Israel, the kibbutz.
In America, well, I suppose we’d say home, the nuclear line of production:

a seed keeping warm in a bird’s dung;
the eggs of a spider, overlooked by the broom;
tenements of mildew & weeds; or marsupiums, dark & secure second wombs.

An address, a house,
is where I remember first; where I learned about anger & pain when my father took out his belt.
Cary, Steve & Joannie—
our vocal inflections rhymed. Each morning,
the mirror in the bathroom at 1031
took each of us in turn, taught us the base
of our faces, scars of our various friends.
We barely hung on to our name—

Church on Sunday. A vacation every year.
None of us kids flunked a grade. Mom,
she cried during pregnancy. Dad made
a few brief visits to the courthouse.
In short, a good deal within the legally sane.

* 

For entertainment, cows have only the weather.
Kids have matches & pins, an abundance
of insects to kill. The elderly, their slides.

Everyone has what their cultures acquire: sex, drugs
& Boy Scouts, bowling or miniature golf. . .

* 

There were once good springs for the Eskimos.
Each year, they would gather near the ocean, burn
what they’d come to possess, give away their wives.

What mattered wasn’t ownership, or goods acquired there,
but what they could afford to waste,
destroy or give away.
For Potlatch, today,
only its impetus remains—
the need for some foundation of prestige.

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For instance I'm an anthropologist, studying distinction. I learn that garbage & the use of tools are cultural universals. That language is also common. I discover the grim capabilities of distance. But who can say if kinship ever quits?

The seasons settle around everything: Ceremony. Drunkeness. The spontaneity of anger or cruelty. Two kids killing carp in a creek for no other reason than fun.

4.
The year Iowa lost 40,000 elms to Dutch elm disease is an accomplice of mine. And Indian creek. And the blind man spilling syrup & oranges all over Aldrich, a little girl in a grocery store running her hand through the ashtrays,

rats at the dump in our headlights, my friends lowering their .22s, odors of dog shit following me to class, & apple blossoms, & scents of women I've slept with,

a wheatfield with crows, the little snow white feet of the poet's love, & the dog taking itself & its tail considerably away...
They bring me scraps of themselves.  
They pass me a baton. The spectators  
pull & push like syringes. Among them my father  
is twirling a lasso. Another is covered  
with buttons from thousands of campaigns.  
Snares & fences line the course like coins.  
Others flash uniforms, sports cars  
or the teeth of their purebred dogs.  
Everyone smells of bath soap & underarm sprays.

The oceans breathe; the sun  
still offers its cold heat of night to the moon,  
a little at a time. When I mutter steady  
to myself, the sidelines almost drown me out.  
Holding the baton, I run. God how I run.  
Clutching that damn baton as if it were stolen & mine.

5.  
So; the flowers still open, eh?  
In an orchard, rotten fruit discarded  
makes a difference  
to bugs munching. This year I'm miles  
from my family, from the hen pheasant  
esting in the slough along a cornfield, or the time  
I came upon a rabbit so completely  
it shivered, & would not move.

Out here, it's magpies—overlooking berries  
for their play of flight among the junked automobiles.  
When it rains in the evening, & then  
the new light comes over the mountains just beyond  
dawn, you can see earthworms pulling themselves  
back into the dirt. You can see green lichen
& white lichen, clinging to things that don't move, that will never move alone. And sparrows, always the wrens & sparrows. My brother & I, fifteen years past Indian creek & its annual swell of carp, can still sit down & laugh about the same things. The women we have chosen, who have chosen us, are in a small way the same. Our voices no longer rhyme.

Cary, I suppose a great deal of what we remember could be discarded. We'd still feel hunger, the winter, winds through our thighs with our women.

I don't believe we ever saw the biggest carp, the one who grew old & died on its own.

From each creek like ours at least one old carp swims up a smaller stream; turned, perhaps, by a rock, a log, or a place where the billows pull hard. With the safety of brush, too dense to cross, or great heaps of garbage strewn on the bank, it feeds, & blends with the muddy water, & gets fat.