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DIPPED IN THE WORLD

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Flame follows flame, and the world is a word on fire that you have to hold.

William Stafford

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Dipped in the World

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Interview Before Acting Public

1. Throat clear

2. Slight eyebrow lift; hold briefly

3. Air of expectancy

4. Lectern? Forward leaning

5. Do not adjust microphone

Mi * cro * phone

6. The air of expectancy is mutual. Do not speak too quickly. Sip the water. Someone raises his hand. You? Simon says black tie optional. So that later everyone greets everyone else with similar pleasure, leaning forward. The media

7. throw their caps into the air, which is blue, por favor.
I. A Capture Nonetheless
Mt. Gothic, Ski Trails Shining

I'm thinking of you as I ski from outhouse
to our crusty hill--old companion,
with the constellations inscribed
on your helmet, who forced the last
of that syrupy port on us
at four a.m., just to charge through to glory
a la harp-thumping spirituals
at the other end of the night's haggling
over semiotics, mine, and metaphysics,
yours. Now there's a moon, another one,
shedding soft nonsensical reply, a mad
April moon, distributing with drunken glee,
rising fuller each night. Fellow
rambler, this one, too, will shrink
and fade in some clear-sung day
rounded off to ordinary.
Meantime, the silent piper awash
in geometrical water and light cavorting

I've no theories, just now, of language, still
less of crisp whys, but I love
an image or two: you adjusting my backpack,
swaying with harp, you incorrigible, playing
basketball in outsized boots, and when
you invited me to dance, twirling
me into searing laughter

--for Mark Friesen
Fever and Water

You see, when I plowed out after you in my shaky Australian crawl, long unused, I had to yank out the moorings. So much freedom, water in my mouth, but I was intent on treading breakers enough to catch a glimpse of you some few times out, bobbing. I tied trailing ropes into a lasso I had never learned to throw. I apologize. To you, the water, the moorings. It was clumsy, and I am tangled now in my own stricken selves, hindrances all. When the lighthouse turns, I'll freeze in the beam's pocket, a thrashing coil suspended in a bead. You can tell it along the other moments strung down your line of sight. A whispered admonition lies in each one.
Putting Asunder

It's a betting game, but
ordinary things, chips, loose
change, have disappeared already--
sucked up through a gash
in the space-time continuum,
or just wagered away,
the moment-by-moment attrition.
We've hedged our bets with good books,
our favorite dinosaurs, a butte
that appears in several photographic prints.
My hand is so good. How could I
waste it? How can you not be bluffing?
Reduced to a graceful economy,
we wager what's left: I add
my armspan, the left half of a smile,
how it feels to rest under heavy covers.
You see me and raise your hearing
and the way your dog howled yesterday.
I throw on my cat staring through a window,
add one cheek and my good knee.
You see me and toss to the world
heaped up between us the rate
at which your hair grows, your passion
for roller-coaster rides, your pulse.
I see you and call. You smile slowly,
some subtle largesse in the winner's restraint.
News of Boon's Death

Winter, and a van on a road at night, and the speed of light. I am trying to imagine the breaking axle from within, from the center of the happening as action radiates from the still watching eye, which sees, still rising to consciousness, something nebular, perhaps--I know he was actually asleep, never knew, as they say, though how could you not know you were dying?

But the sensations, I imagine them impinging with an unearthly slow dignity, as if they too knew they were the last; then the instant of recognition and the final flailing quickening--

How the night looks, dirty and browed out in glares circling the car like monkeys on a chain, reflected feverish waves in the opposite blind window. The precision of ice gives way to girders shot full of holes in rows, and strobed through the chains, eyes straining a corner, the wrench around: pain that verifies. In the heat a single high note; nerves tinder agitated spiders beneath the skin.

But that's not how it is, someone protested, I've been in an accident, and it's not slow like that at all. So I had it wrong, Boon, the universe wheeling broadly over your December night, the fatal glory expanding from your last self, the childish starburst.

But it is still how your death happened to me, and only after the souped-up, tinklingly precise melodrama could I trace the edges of the anger, walk for miles kicking clots of snow ahead of me, thinking conventional thoughts: too much red ice ground onto Christmas roads: darkly satisfied with myself, thinking of death and of good people who happen to die like the rest of us.
Equipoise and Descent

The flesh of my wishes
blurs the bone of what we are.

Too late I see: what I wanted
slipped into something wholly
unexpected, voluptuous and powerful,
scented like jasmine but a darker purple,
a tall glass fluted,
shielding berries frosted with sugar.

He has drawn this picture again,
looks expectantly up at closed curtains
where windows could be;
cassettes imprinted with every music
in the world lie in boxes,
bellies up, waiting only to be chosen,
the whole world there
lying in wait for the choosing.
What he expects. What he wants.

We are paper trees
in a Japanese courtyard
who have never told on the wind.
The White Horses

The white horses in the pasture are multiplying,
Dappled hocks, lily withers, and all.
I have to decipher this turn of events:
Lucky or no? It may be neither, but merely
Whimsical, and no real breach of conduct.

One, then two, and now three white horses
In unnoticed blips appeared, grazing placidly, confident
They have not outlived their usefulness.
A swaybacked bay, who held the pasture long
Before the advent of the white horses, stands among them
Tethered by the calculating magic, unconcerned.
The white horses applaud.
It Was When You Said You'd

Have to go south for the real Terra
Nostra jazz, the ladies who live
hundreds of years and shrink
at last into dolls. No
combustion in pumpkins and frost—
duende fled with the warblers.
But if the Amazon should prove
to be more incandescent,
why, I ask, and not here,
in these wispier latitudes?
Some days I believe the magic
is all human, and that here
and the Amazon merely guard
our deposits. If it should be,
however, that we refract
this ripeness, and it mothers
itself elsewhere, perhaps the Amazon,
still I shall ask why. If I must
swim to the hot mottled jungle
to be with our stubborn magic
I shall explain to it how
it has bolted jagged through us,
that our selves heated it to steam
on its way, that it is a tendril
of the sly smiles we refuse
to turn in our own direction
for fear of being scattered into color.
A trope on the air, which, after
all, moves freely from here to there.
The Mail From Tegucigalpa

Fist fluttering at the shell of heaven—
if I could explain to its bearer
that her exchange was fair,
was more than fair: good,
that the tincture of days unbartered
and color of privation,
the ermine's winter, gained
eternity: that sliver in the palm,
irritant, latticed guess, the new
frame. That the improbable
speech of a soul made bold
for its very slightness
kept its fear hissing fear
coiled in a cage, electric
for a century; so that
my denial was unlocked
for having come after, so that
facing lissome jeweled life,
facing horses with heads of stone,
double-headed time, I would wait
caught between, freer—
Watching Out

When I watch people dance
closed and open, caught
and sent, something falls away--
"She was fantastic
just five minutes in the bar
on her way to somewhere else,"
you said, "I don't know where
she learned to dance but it
was no soused bar shuffle
was real, had leaps
just minutes it was
stunning"--and I wanted to dance
like Alison Rose, wanted
you to say

while the snow falling
incontinently around me
made me dizzy,
made me think I was on a precipice
while it fell away forever,
Disingenuity

I walked out on myself one day.
Oh, you know it happens,
spring's aloft, you dress
yourself up and instead
of so-and-so, talk to the trees
or bicycles. Now are you innocent
or not when this happens? I know
about myself, the only worry
how long it'll be before I mooch
back in and apologize.
And if I'm gone for good?
This business on my sleeve
mere graffiti? Then the end's
a crabbed smile, false vitae,
the life signed anon. I ask myself
please to duck back in
just to say it was worthwhile, once.
Dusk Motes  

after Wallace Stevens

Unexpected wind  
everything else in place  
except that it is flying  
After I cleaned up the wind  
cleans up but with a different  
idea of order

White tulip petals yolked at center  
lance their particular deaths  
Each curls on itself in singular  
nuances, mottoes for a pattern  
acted out in larger terms, say  
the universe, or burning paper

There is a horse on the hill  
or perhaps it is a house on the hill  
a house on the hill from here hard to tell  
and only a letter difference anyhow  
and a different idea of scale  
and the calling is what is conjugal
Above, the Mountains Shackled

Aquatic light, violet-injected.
Fog and smoke from houses
obscure above us the Rockies' outcrops,
ochre elephants shambled here
some era before,
standing now, shackled,
able only to loom
and bequeath us our veils.

The trees in the yard are caught
in attitudes of sorrow.
The elephants are initials
which we lost, we, not the trees,
which lean into the air, graceful
if shot through with ice.

Duskier than we, murmured lower,
an eternally amniotic, undulant world,
the trees, the elephants, who discover
fire together and again, plotlessly,
and again forget--
and who midwifed our own
breach birth, somewhere outside?
I Dreamed I Had To Save The World
From A Monster With Poison Breath

It's the autumn mornings, the strange
selection of dark in the sky
with some light creeping onto, perhaps
out of, the leaves,
with the sense of everything's
escaping, worry that the world
may turn out to have no other
latitude. When color leaves
us in fragments of gray,
we'll move about looking purposeful,
wear red or purple on our sleeve,
fling our bright earnest
questing at the divinely
lifeless sky. And then the dreams
will come true, in a way,
the grenade defused, the monster
slain. People will stop dying
without reason. We'll stand
in a crowd of colorless reasons
then, cheeks whitening, feet
draining away, to check newscast
retrospectives, see where, exactly,
the moment of wrong occurred.
Pandora's Jukebox

It's the bedroom. Just the t.v. radiating blue and two people. What do we know about them? That they are ordinary and tired and sometimes fight, perhaps did recently, and the watching is desultory; and he points screenward, possibly joking; that's where the heartaches begin. She says then, ah, and where do they end? /This bud's for you exclamation point/ We'll be ending like this for was there a line written above this one? ever?

end without end, amen.

And someone rolled over
and someone put out the light,

and those heartaches they
got loose like some figure for a god's
spite and they leached into the room
gilding all the furniture
and staining it inside
ten years twilight.

And the two are already asleep, probably; hear their deep marcato breaths pile like waves on the shore of the body, or is it the watchamacallit, the soul--
Sigh.

How romantic it all would be
on disc, how unbearable.
I, Said the Sparrow, the Thrush, the Dove

From the day he stepped in my supper
and left red footprints on the porch
he was a trespasser, surviving skirmishes
with a tattered left ear, an inflamed foot,
a bullet somewhere in his chest cavity--
coups counted on him in fights I never saw.
My grandmother said Kota is Low German for tomcat.

One day life shook itself and left him, but only
in his own tenuous steps. All the apology
he gave, a look up, surprising
in its mildness, when his legs fumbled
and folded beneath him. What was left?
To lie there and purr. Oh, but his tail
was always his angriest self
and it gaveled the table until all that black fur
washed livid, until past the unaccustomed gentleness,
until the years beside the horse pasture,
the endless wrestling of species endlessly strange
to each other had been lopped away,
even as silently as he.

It was I, the reluctant deity, at ease
with doctors, in the habit of bounty,
who never intended this kindness, gave
one day and took the rest. It was
a choice of deaths. I couldn't
let him die in English.
It must have been a premonition,
the class, foreign words a salve,
the grammar absorbing: meine Katze
ist tote, meine Katze ist tote.

So the logged hillside was grateful to have you.
The blackness of the world drained in, then,
to fill your shadow, and I see
you now as much as I ever did,
I see you approximately in pieces
of shade and sheets clumsily quilted
to the shape of sleep. This way
I pilfer time to make you
stand and pester me where you never could.
What is left? I know where you are,
that you no longer impersonate silence,
the line that connects taking and giving.
Two Histories

I. Having come alive with sentience, an accidental distillation programmed for the enlightening error, we saw each other, saw ourselves thrumming through the phyla: grass to frog to bacterium, splitting and merging, connected without permission—

"Shared knowledge is true creation, always fragile, maintained by many desires, errors, jubilations, fears, unexpected losses, and sudden discoveries" So the world's stem was broken in the fall, someone lying about the tree's end; things lay here and there, waiting a conjunction, waiting a meeting of odds, the flash of blue light: humanity flushed from its primal hiding in a signal flare. Stories configured precise, mutable as equations, tumbled the centuries. And the sparks fly still, one bulky hemisphere stubborn to learn how creation began in the interstices.
II. In a fury of attention balanced
like goldfish nibbling their reefed world,
suspended viscous delicacy
but not so languid,
my patient lover, my cartographer,
spell history from this eroded
fossil record, our preterit selves:
shallow seas, insects—
thrashing gargoyles in amber.
What a plateau was bared to beneath
purring, kneading weather: by turns
desert and waves, every continent
an Atlantis, and we too somehow there,
encrustations, holding patterns for gray
matter. And now a swash of gold,
fantails raveled in the current,
through open gills the pulse
that drives a pinsliver wedge
into time. An unequal task, to live,
to contravene the unreeling spool,
and then to exhale hopes
that balloon like bubbles rising
from sifting mouths of goldfish.
Accomplices

We live together in the basement.
In my room's before-bed quiet
I can hear spiders' feet flailing
at cardboard files, hunters
angling for a way out of the lamp.
Next, to tap the desk, unrelenting pine,
and on around, until some furniture
shows its age and hospitality
and opens to their knocking.
My bookcase is their haven against
the storm of light unleashed
on them in their unsuspecting
prowls; I glimpse one's shimmer
across the rug and know

how in that thoughtless flutter
my shudders walk the bedroom openly.
Is it myself that clothes them in witchcraft,
my prattling, projectile fears
that keep us both in thrall?
In darkness, then, my ear figures,
elaborates, certain I hear a wolf

spider lean back on three haunches
lifting a fourth to scratch
its own nonexistent ear.
Why does fear fox me
with their skirting, that gallop
doubled, each a matched pair
in himself? I've never told myself,

nor rendered it to fairness--
instead cringe and curry news
from the dark, of the vicissitudes
of that heartless, mindless skitter
after the lamp's raw flash,
snared in my own hulking torpor
senseless to vibrations that serve them
for sound, serve my careless demons,

shareholders in this sketch
of a cobweb titled life.
And, Aside,

I always liked the gesture
drawings best, as if
the image were still rumpled
on the cranium when it splashed
out of an eye, the pores, the
leaking pen and hit the paper
in an unsteady wave precisely
akin to the real flickering subject,
there the perimeter of the drawing--
a tuft of air and the mind's carving,
a feast, a tentacled epigram
and not maudlin, not false
cherry color, but bitter
black and white, not like
the flamingoed world but a
capture nonetheless.
II. Feats of Engineering
Feats of Engineering; a memo to Cortazar

straw hats
casters
the jackknife (all forms)
Easter eggs
some pottery
snippets of:
  a) conversation
  b) dog hair
paper bags
town councils
dream
overbearing landlords
garbage

In all what is this cleverness worth?
"if love is not to wind up as a pop song,"
come on, Julio, don't be dour
because you know how it is, it's just
an anxious cipher for a purer desire,
you and we writing letters
that stretch in to frisk people's guts
"Big Divot Baffles Officials"

A hole, six feet by ten feet, two feet deep in some Washington farmer's field; 75 feet away lies the sod plug, torn up, deposited neatly, if turned a few degrees. It weighs a ton, probably. No one we know has tried to lift it.

That's Washington.
That's newspapers. Marvels to be had daily for the asking. Lucky the farmer--does he know?--Lucky his sons, who came across the marvel while chasing cattle. Lucky cattle!
And lucky, lucky you, privileged reader, chocolate candy square poised at mouth's rim,
read on. The baffled officials swear on affidavits. These things did not bring about the marvel: it was not the small earthquake, the slip and buckle in that area on 9 October; it was not a meteorite's impact. It was not--this is sworn testimony--the work of a giant cookie cutter. They do not know whose work it was,

and you, teacup in hand, though this marvel of everyday requires your attention--else why the affidavits, the bafflement, all that extraordinary luck?--you, nearly finished now, putting down the paper, you couldn't have done it without the cookie cutter, you needed it all, the divot, the earthquake, the meteor--as well as the unsworn guesses, the things only cattle may have seen:

The Chinese, burrowed through at last, twenty of them, a team, all dressed alike, lifted the sod like a manhole cover, looked at the cattle, looked at a field littered with glacial erratics, nobody home. Turned silently, and went back.
Operation

Oh, he was a fine surgeon, yes such a tidy one, and every day he made another neat incision and, almost finicky, you might say--wasn't he a good surgeon, though!--as delicately, as tenderly, sewed her up again, and so it went, the jigsaw apart and together, and between, new, thoughtful arrangements inside; such relentless cleverness, the dainty parting of flesh and revelation of proud buds of blood lined for their moment on the hoarse stage of the skin; and then, more painstaking than a tatting of cobweb lace, the stitches infinitesimal, so dedicated was he, so--eager, actually, for the process to begin again; and she supine, watching, immobile, each day almost unchanged.
Explanatory Note in the Dorian Mode

What I was groaning for in the seize and rupture of each stride was the torch, goats and their bleats rocketing away, scrabbling at the heights of dust, all pointing with the flame, scarcely visible, I pushed into Hyperion's reaches. I was alone, but clouds of burning gods and the huzzahs of men drunk on them were waiting somewhere green and olive-stippled.

And with each puff of smoke away I felt an eagle's shadow, and my liver writhed.

You'll find our race typically overdone, celebratory mostly to ourselves and you're right this far: the men who fell by the sea, the sons of the strong-greaved Achaians, can be counted one by one like any others falling anywhere.

But understand, I'd seen the bowls of Exekias the potter, that etching of Achilles and Ajax cocked over the gameboard coiled against their chairs, and those spears, the gods' own, careless against the near wall.

I'd stood molten myself when a priestess revolved in the haze of incense; all of us breathing in the evening rose and ochre, the gods' retort the lucent swirling riddles at Delphi.
Trevor in the World

He died holding a glass of sherry. Had big lips, tried on paintings like underwear, you could tell, looking at him pose in the gallery.

Bet he was one of those babies in a perambulator with a bulbous head and a place on the nose where the glasses would be

How did he vote? Later on, I mean, after the measles shots. Yes, that's the question, with his fondness for silk ties and fraudulent teeth

Bet he got knocked down at recess once or twice

Desiderata: glass doors at the office, a meerschaum at the club, pint of bitters at the pub, arms to wave--

and a little time at the beach, flannel skies spitting, fascination with the rocks and anguished spray, toddlers oblivious to his toes--

He wasn't such a great statesman, said the Times, just this guy, you know?
What the Crippled Said

We are the defective ones
on all stuttering fours;
the ache in the lumbar
of the universe, we are;
in the speckled conscience
of the world, its dreams
greasy on our lips,
we stand apostate,
glassy surface of change indifferent
to the din of our crooked stares.
We forage at the edge of self,
riddled with the world
like a stump with termite tunnels,
the failed broadsides of genes at play
and let us tell you, it's no joke,
to imprison the world's mysteries,
we tell you this, on our cracked honor.
News From the Front

The monkey tribe has settled down at last, and taken up farming, albeit in sometimes witless ways. They are so many together, though, and so easily charged with fury, that we remain in the forest, looking out from its welling rustle, powerless to save our gardens.

These loose-lipped howlers have made merry in our plots, yanking out shoots with tweezers, leveling the elegant raised beds. They track garbage into the house. They run the washing machine in endless cycles: it foams and churns while they watch, jumping up and down, hooting, and we are powerless.

From the trees, between the green spaces for breath, we might have snuck in to snip the wires, silenced our housebound toasters, music boxes, but at a risk, and--perhaps the apes will electrocute themselves. We are waiting, in this forest exploding with vines, to see. We've taken nothing with us; it screams with its own high voltage.
Memsahib Gathers Flowers at the Well
And Retires from Empire with Grace

The children cricket-thin,
reddish because we lack a rain
to settle the dust and the letters
from Bristol all stout cheer again

I'm growing indulgent, I fear, let
the housegirls exchange the frocks
I sewed myself, or nearly,
for a wilderness of saris I don't
understand, can't
understand the feverish designs
their wanton temple friezes, the riot
in one elephant's tusk it all
makes my head turn
a little to fan this breeze, dear

that cloud of rickety children
like gnats on the far bank My hat
arrived last month and already
impossibly curled
along the edges. Thank God--thank God
for something. Braid
these stems nicely for me, Rosalie--

Why not the blessed rain, why
no satiety, ever
and our lights only keep it at bay

Funny the afternoons go corrugated,
spotted the heat affects time too
so that the far bank and 4 o'clock
mind tea's ready sharp at four, and some
letters, from Bristol perhaps,
--or the interior--
I remember when Marsha asked me, is Ellen cynical? And I said, yes. Marsha laughed, she'd have to be, living with you, wouldn't she? And I said, yes. And later I was thinking of this and of how you and I once spent the sun lavishly taking the Fiesta up gutted mountain roads, whinnying and gasping over that most desirable campsite, the one at the eaves of the range, capped by blinding air shredded with sunlight and insurmountable? We never found it; were never uncertain of it, that it was there.

--for Ellen Voth
The Tree Needs Only Wind To Sing

Not slick. These Czech musicians aren't slick. It's all still an experiment to them. The band isn't tight, they haven't heard of drum machines.

Capitalists, not even fit for recycling, says the politburo. No one is served, these creatures treat the gallows like a musical instrument, they can't sing, they can't even sing.

Febrile dreams, demons, says the band, "but careful thought won't harm even a chicken," and they plan a show: What it means to lead a horse.

Some locals get through the barriers; the police are there too, not to dance this time, nor to give musical advice. Nor consent: Call this a concert? not even one love song, and entirely too much passion. Modulation is the great deceiver, children, cross yourselves and avert the evil eye--gentlemen, may we show you the border?

The band has kept an exit clear. They salvage an electric piano, wood blocks, commit halting melodies to vinyl in an old farmhouse, intonation still imperfect but the woodwinds' kaddish for Mandelstam equal parts sonorous and wavering hangs a long breath longer in their forests, silence and blackness older than regimes.

The record is pressed in Canada, available in the U.S. by mail order. I stumble in dark forests over Slavic modes, throatlocked consonants unclaimed by those other tautly tuned ears.
Lullaby to the nth

Pigs, frogs, other things with wings
ants in the pudding
red livestock on a green field, rampant
Huzzah, huzzah!

With musk falling the outlines sink
and all's away--air so porous here,
custom got caught in the updraft
tea's gone, the trees have sucked in
the daylight, no more, no more,
we're all nocturnal now, blotters
for night and its heavy air;
we lurch to the rhythms of the millennia
like sunk cargo. Among owls
in the woods' ribs, born
into their own strangeness, toddlers,
leggy storklets, dragonfly nymphs: the babies
of the world caper beribboned.
Woman at the Lunch Counter

When Effie sits at a table
with her coffee cup, our
focal point, I have trouble
Keeping the rest of her clear.
I think it is a mutual thing.
She won't pin her eyes
on all of me, reaching with effort
for the cup, as if her air
were more viscous than mine.
And eyes conspicuously wide,
neurons smoking at the junctions,
smile gripped in a pair of incisors,
she's a case of brittle delight
over the shower she's planned,
the one for some young woman
she doesn't know, who's pregnant
by Effie's husband; over her birthday
coming some day soon,
a fancy coat she asked for--
we waitresses look at each other--
I offer her more coffee. There is always
more, and she always wants it.
Blind parable

Sammy done twice the wrong it was possible to do.

(Voice 1: Well, that takes the wind out of my spiritual sails. Voice 2: Quick, give the muse a breath mint and never mind reading him his rights.)

They waltzed all around the rigging and out onto the gangplank before anyone knew:

- vertigo in high and public places
- "guilty of" bang bang
- can't bang
- dang judge's gavel
- bang
- "in high and public seas."

(He was still smiling, that lumberjack
- that wisecrack
- that nocount diseased dog)

Voice 1: So here we are becalmed, positively metameric, and he's out there on the mizzenmast, the poop deck, larking about, blowing bubbles— Voice 2: ...and no, I don't want...palely... Muse: Hhhaaaoorr (And everyone blew over.)

Now Sammy got tangled up in the sailcloth. Strange things kept falling from the muse's mouth and wings and she really did have halitosis

He played the waltz and danced it too all at once and the muse was jitterbugging around, clodhopping, lariat-tossing

- yee haw!

statues and totems sprang up hugely
the mast sprouted a carillon
it was a madcap wind, jingoed timing
nothing abated: Now look what you've done,
in a rising peal of anguish they were begging him
tell her a joke, put her in the hatch and oh the stench
what happens when your ship comes in?
but she wouldn't fit, the ship skittered and bucked

(stanza break)
So now she's really loose
Sammy, in these high and public times,
and no matter how ruddy and giddy,
there's always a twinge
even in gale, full force, with all the world rushing by
you reel a little
gulp, and the air's a bit nauseous
you're telescoping in and out to keep pace

Still.
Still, it was that or becalmed.
Thanksgiving

After the carving we boiled
ligaments, skin, rib cage
rising from the swamp of its marrow.

Fifteen pounds, and
who'd have thought
we did it for the bones:

from the stock I took
a few of them to translate
their voiceless glyphs.

Scrubbing beneath the cartilage,
emptying the hollows with a pin,
the bones bared at last:

on inspection they proved
too intricate,
too simple;

those smaller, taken from the back,
I set aside for earrings--
I might hear it, a translucent message
clean as a dead man's palm, the lifeline fled.

--for Karen Reimer
III. Keeping the Faith
When the Time Comes

Part of the town is reticent most of the year, smells of oil and gas, but comes to the fore here in the grinding summer when trucks slough in from fields anywhere far. Brought to queue on Main Street highway through the slanting evenings, they leave every concrete crack overcome with kernels and chaff. In three days this year the wheat turned; I follow a green bowl of a bullfrog sliding belly-down on ditch grass in his foppish haste, after rain.

Even the endless wind feels weary just now, sweeping this part of the town out from under the inadvertent wheat. Harvest spooks pigeons from the elevator towers again and again, and farmers rise at 4 a.m., move like ghosts to their dusty machinery, don't kill engines until the next dark. I think of springing up to bear burdens; I think of early peepers' nightly calls, each new weather an urgent rumor.
The Bass Creek Commune

The deer have forgotten, no longer
nuzzle the soggy newspapers on the floor.
We come upon the valley in snowmelt, in twilight

to the burnished undersides of clouds,
a giant, rusty can of pepper, the charred
remains of a sauna, animal droppings;

trace the erasing terraces, a moat
of broken glass on every side
and the blankly octagonal, puzzled windows.

Part of the structure itself, solid, still insulated,
black gaps where the solar cells were sunbared,
imposes itself on the southerly updraft

with singleminded patience, but is confused,
its northern half pulling away uphill,
resentful, as beetles will drag

crushed bodies after them: the labor
of retirement, the geese a season
away, and deer coalescing

on sudden feet, apprehensive,
their ears scalded by an acrid cry,
infinitesimal settlement of dust.
Half a Year of Dawn

The ankles of caribou click
force time to focus into an instant
and tick it away as quickly--
is that a tableau there,
or an action shot? The caribou
are claim adjustors, eaters
and eaten keeping the faith, and they stop
for a word with the rivers, giving up
to the wolves, the balls of cysts
in their lungs, parcelling out
what is not gratuity
Jazz Steps for Renunciation

Cedar waxwings, the most dapper of winter visitors—catch those flashy shades, the oil-bright wingtips and tails' edge. And their gigs in sudden flocks—they emerge in a tree and it springs twittering leaves. Their calls the wind torn on signalling bills. It's the flocks of waxwings that pull the weather in slim harness, slim as a fact, over the mountains, into this smoky valley. Their going, twitters and leaves winked apart and together again, draws the weather along. Their spiral heavenward draws a blank.
On the Translation of Species

Black and white, suspended in the dilute sky,
swallow-tailed kites, trim falcons,
survey their Everglades nests and come down
when they will. Sensitive and stubborn.
Catch one and he'll outwait you, die
intransigent, without asking.
They wouldn't trifle with civilization either,
and so their range diminished as centuries
and people clattered by, until the swamps
enclosed raptors who'd once flown freely
across the south and plains.
Their less fussy, drab cousins, Mississippi kites,
increased where swallow-tails could not,
across the prairies of the midwest,
across the Kansas flinthills. But the swallow-tails,
could they remember that windswept sky?
Held and hung there in some memory's vestige,
watching wind shake tallgrass prairies
in chains of light, grasshopper
feet trampling sod to dust...

Jim Parker knew enough to see the rest.
Anxious for press in Audubon and obsessed
to recreate the new world, and reestablish
swallow-tailed kites, he used
an old deception to tease Mississippis
into raising the Floridans as their own:
it was his reclamation to smuggle in
young swallow-tails from Florida and trick
their homeland into readoption.
For this he slogged the glades, shimmied
its tallest trees, and snatched four dusters
of newly-hatched, dirty gray anger,
the parents helpless, beating the air above.
A chartered jet flew the chicks precociously
two time zones and one harsh climate west.
In Kansas Parker raided porch eaves for starling chicks
to feed his nervous, growing swallow-tails. One
survived, the plains' newest immigrant,
and an emissary from the past. Parker
named her Nordica, invoking a century
gone, a singer from Maine who'd fled to Europe
to return the opera to its native realm.

(stanza break)
The fledgling kite was like any hawk's child, the color of pussy willows, with a greedy beak, and gorged on self-importance. They eat to live, and don't forget it. Nordica didn't know how strange she was as the black primaries grew, pinned her to a new sunlapped state. Staid slate Mississipps, the functional midwesterners, looked askance. They hung above the town all day, flung down soprano daggered cries, kittering wails the starlings imitated lewdly and sniggered at in numbers.

Parker watched Nordica off in fall, migrant to south of Mexico. A story of a flashy pilgrim, trailing black streamers, filtered in from New Mexico: it flew with other falcons, so many flakes of soot escort to a roughened, anxious vapor. But the source was uncertain. Who admitted seeing the swamp-born stranger fly across the Arkansas river—where was a witness to hail Nordica if she shocked into the Guatemalan sky one morning, early in the brazen tropic winter?

There was another report: in western Kansas people don't distinguish much the birds of prey. Every year some are shot. Nordica had downy memories to lure her into farmers' fields. The spoor of the news grew cold, the sheriff reluctant to raise hackles with requests for carcass or identification. No one knew, in the end, who, if anyone, lied.
Dipped in the World, Keeping the Faith

1
Fighting sleep these nights
a taste for lateness on the radio
I listen, nod, reading about a winter wolf kill:
the moose's blood spangled trees around and froze,
spendthrift at the last, strange
tinsel witness to an old eucharist.

2
A slow explosion of sun, and time commences;
the woods and I exhale.
A moth with frayed wingtips lands on my arm
then crawls to the crumpled
trenches of my jacket and jeans.
And so I carry his shadow
nudging unlit folds with
care. The delicacy of the dark's things.
House Call at Low Tide

Before you go, before you go
see what the borer mussel
left at the end of its tunnel
in this fistful of basalt--
only the tip of a world
can be seen: his twin pearl wings
make a high airy chatter
inside the rock's sudden mouth--
their puckered chimes release
a wash, convulsion and swallow
left by the most soft sand's heart
ever to invade the earth's cast iron.
Before melting in salt it was
a round word: payment for Charon
tangled in kelp before the sea's
throatlatch unhinged and gulped
down its children. And for us
these leavings:
a wishbone of lime rattling
improbably in a skull of stone.
Thoughts Run Like Weasel Tracks

Fox and deer met on a mountain; 
it was snowing and they had chosen 
the same bush.

I am standing beside the cabin splitting rounds. 
I am standing beside the stove, the window 

there goes Peggy on skis 
snow so hard can't see across this valley 
her dog rocking in, across the snow 
ptarmigan in the willows?

Irish reels played on a violin.

Deer brown eyes, do they know whiteout? 
Think of the red tail, a bush, livid in snow:

I saw coyote tracks meandering 
and you, meandering, saw the coyote.

On a mountain, fox and deer; it was snowing 
and they had chosen the same bush.

--for billy barr
Frogs Answer Spring

A dog barks and barks: dry heaves.
Thin plaints of chickadees--
cat winks, sniffs the sun's twin
in his eye. I record our complicity.
What are we straining our lungs for?
The meaning of a need--
across the wetlands' tufts,
from swollen bruises
made of bubbles and mud,
the season's processional sounds,
in dirty water in ditches
a thousand thousand requiems.