

Skull-Gift

Staring down the empty socket, I regret not wondering more often what you thought as you tromped through snow-littered fields with your rifle stock cradled in your elbow when a dark eye fixed on you through the whiteness. A cow skull frozen in dirt and silence until you forced it out with an ungloved hand. For me. Now there are more bones to ponder; the solitary beast, the fingers that pried it free. I wonder if you took note of the moment; the sharpness of air and ridged bone, the crunch of fresh snow under boot, the measured tension then sudden ease of release; that it would be your last winter. I think you did. I can see you consider silently the skull a gift worthy of our friendship, then curse the clumsy weight of the present through your smirk as you trudge, dark and small, across that lake of white.

After Reading Heaney's "Bog Queen"

I am frozen
in the moment between
reading and have read; so still
my silhouette could be etched
in bronze, yet the space between

the page and my eyes pulses
from light to shade as if his
waking and cooling suns
are weaving around me

like diligent flies. As prophesied,
I feel the edge of this poem dissect
my skull and a cold beyond the reach
of fire crawl over me. His conjuring hand

plunges into the earth, seeping blood
into her dignified corpse while warmth
draws away from the parchment of my skin.
Shadows of every word I have ever written

swarm at my feet, scurry up my legs,
worm through to the unsure abdomen
and up into the tomb of my chest. They
engrave themselves in shallow wounds,

quickly scar over and erode when exposed
to the severity of his elements. She and I
exchange the weight of the peat-grave; each
line layers mud and turf onto my surrendering

shoulders until she is plucked, decayed and elegant,
from the wet earth. His necromantic poetry leeches
the weak ink from my flittering words until meaning
curls inward; downward; into the soil of me. It tremors

the voice and spirals through to the eyes to a fitful
rest between doubt and awe. I am hollowed
and brittle against such magic with no counter
spell to release me from such a regal grave.

Trailrunning

Regressing into woodlands, every footfall grows more certain. The trailhead at my back is quietly swallowed by shadow. Birds scatter from their cover and dart away. Still, the signal drum of my heart thumps loud and steady against my chest, even as sentinel roots sneak across the narrow path to snare my toes; my limbs thrashing to correct and regain my stride. Deeper into the run, slivers of sunlight scatter across the dirt through the canopy like candlelight. Knuckles sink into earth as I scramble under fallen tree trunks. My palms callous against the dry bark, crawling upon and over the staggered bones of the forest. Birds no longer panic, but flit and observe. The trail thins and snakes as I turn away and away from the last sight of concrete road and toward the slowly loudening drumbeat, always just ahead.

Social D at the Sokol

I imagine my grandmother here twenty years before
on a winter Friday night, her arthritic hands suddenly nimble,
daubing color to number at the steady call of old man Zajic,
racing chance to spell BINGO and beat her sisters to the \$200
jackpot. I glide my sneaker along the hardwood floor, worn slick
from decades of Czech couples swirling in practiced arcs, shuffling
their feet to catch the one-beat on polka nights, Wednesdays
and Sundays. Tonight the beer line serpentine around pockets

of second generation punks, old war buddies lost in rock show
nostalgia. Dates and support acts are as hazy as the sprawling
cigarette smoke, but the memory of venues are as bright as stage
lights. The dark, arching cavern of the Sokol Hall bonds band, crowd
and night. Chandelier light struggles against the dense curtain
and black T-shirted mass. We wait for our blue-collar herald. Ladies,
pigtailed and eyes blackened into rebellion with liner, compare tattoos,
share cigarettes and pictures of their children. The vibration of a power

chord throttles outward; penetrates the slowly opening curtain. Bodies
and emotions surge toward the stage. Colored cans hover over the players,
throbbing purple and red against knee-high stage smoke. He testifies
with a nasal wail; he knows our sorrow and we sing along to his. Songs,
fierce with sweat and truth, roll one into another; the tempo undulates
from frantic to melancholy. An open D chord, distorted and percussive, rings
out. We all absorb its meaning. The opening bars of *Ball and Chain* are equal

parts aphrodisiac and hymn. The casual snarls of jaded punk rock girls melt
away as the guitar cries a mournful solo between verses. Their hips sway. Men
rock loosely behind them, labor-worn palms fanned across their women's pierced
navels. Fists punch the air in time with the sincerity of the balladeer. Vicarious,
we bear his fate and wake with him *in the county jail*. Beer and poetry stir
the throng; we shout out the hard luck romance of the crescendo: *I'm born
to lose and destined to fail*. I am suddenly aware of my feet on the slick
hardwood. They slide and rise; in time and heavy on the backbeat.

Almost Finding Silence

It's not the metered hum of cars as they approach and flee from you as you stand under the overpass. It's not the climbing hiss of the boiler at Castelar Elementary that you remember; only audible when stressed by Nebraska winters. The steady buzz of bees during summer kill-the-man bouts in the gravel schoolyard is just nostalgia. A manic fly around the picnic table is distraction. The purr of your cat, drowsy with cookout carrion is wishful. It's not the sentinel murmur of a powered-on amplifier patiently awaiting the first chords to absorb and report. These things you know. You deduce. They ebb and escalate. Instead, it's the first moment of a blackout in a house in which television is a constant pacifier; the shock of silence that tricks the ears into hearing shadows. It's the drone injected into science fiction movies to imply silence. They know you would not tolerate the buried coffin quiet of deep space. It is as close to stillness as you are willing to get, until the whisper in your head convinces you that you can hear the rustle of leaves up on the hill and the throb of truck engines miles away on the highway.