

After the Tsunami

After the tsunami
we cleared the dead
from power lines
and basements
and everywhere in between
you'd never figure
to run across someone's neighbor
or a loved one.

Those unaccounted for were the hardest
because no one wanted to believe
they were gone
without bodies to prove it
so people posted signs
all over town—
in laundromats and churches,
on every blank surface
wiped clean
by the receding waters—
and even
three months later
no one had the heart
to take them down.

Some said *Missing since morning of*—
giving details of the clothes they chose that day
the last place they were seen
and any birthmarks
or tell-tale tattoos.

Some pleaded to God and neighbors
people towns away
to help them find those they'd lost—
surely shocked and
hiding but
not gone.

Candles burned for months through midnight
vigils,
hot coffee in urns to keep
spirits up as people passed
scratched photos
to and fro through the night.

One sign,
just construction paper and glue,
tiny stars
surrounding pictures from a wedding
long ago,
a couple dancing in black and white
old fashioned clothes
with block letter print,
said simply
Please come home
I know you're out there
swimming,
I'll wait by where the house once stood
I'll build us a new one
If you just swim home.

Place

I had a friend once,
we were nine,
running through the kitchen garden
side of the house chasing
loosed rabbits.

His daddy, uncles, grandpa
drinking and laughing,
bettin' by the fire,
the older boys missing every time.

My friend spied one tight
against a low bush,
dove and caught it by the ears,
everybody stunned but still laughing,
brothers pissed, uncles smiling,
his daddy said *Aw yeah*,
his grandpa said *You pounced on that'n aright*,
collecting bills from the others.

My friend held the rabbit high, beaming
Said, *You mean pounced, Grandpa!*
I pounced on that damn rabbit!

His grandpa hit him so hard across the face
he dropped him silent to the dirt,
said *You don't correct me, boy,*
you learn your place.

So we called him Ponce
all that summer and the next
till it stuck.

And he was Ponce
through the spring melts and autumn
harvests
and all through school
to the day he left town.

But he was Corporal Ponce
the day we carried him home
over his grandpa's fields to rest
from always running first place
toward the enemy.

Ants

I fixed a point in my memory
once
when I was a child:
the bluest day easing into itself
peace reigning over the house
like silence falls below water
torn screen door glowing
serene and beautiful through
the arc of the afternoon
caught in the irresistible gloaming
shadows bending through trees
crickets twitching
in the damp hay
ants filing through the grass
the most dutiful lines—
predictable,
perfect—
my face hovering close
a long pine needle
between my fingers
tilting toward disaster.

WAR GAMES

Men met for months in Monday morning meetings
minutes taken second opinions given
memos sent
but nothing quite right sat
between them
so they split the map
into meaningless meadows
and retired to country homes
in their heads
stacking stones in their sleep
as they lit gasoline rags
and prayed to the light

On Tuesday nights the women came home
and danced their souls
into the ashes

Playa

There is only one street in this town
and sooner or later
we all come tumbling down it
sunburned in thin summer cotton
oblivious to the famished dogs that run a
parallel path along the shoreline
to scratch and tussle in the sand
while they wait patiently to greet us at the end
of the next long block where
the last echoes of the Mayans try to sell you
painted wooden turtles that fit in your palm
and bob their heads from hidden strings
or a rose for the woman across from you
you don't even know
or at last offering
a begging palm in response to our
continued invasion