

Icarus

The foul funk of filched wax and feathers rises
from his father-built gimcrack jerry-rigged wings
as they unfledge themselves
in the summer morning's heat,
revealing what was known
and what was withheld
in the useless skeleton
of sticks and hide thongs,
in his helpless flutter, then fall
as he tumbles down to the blue
water rippling like wrinkled foil in the light,
and his father shrinks
above to a tiny pair of wings
rowing eastward in the cloudy glare,
his anguished screams fading,
now no more than a gull's far caw,
and now the terror takes him
but he doesn't
die
the water doesn't
open to him
He feels his back break
open and firm wings unfolding, holding his arms
while new bones like spread fingers stiffen
covered with his bleeding skin, raw and red;
burning, he shrieks,
learning the strain of new
muscles pulsing in his chest,
his arms folded, hands clasped.
These wings are his;
the pain of their eruption is his;
he rises on his torment
and on the windy boom of their beat,
flying west.

Tod und Verklarung

Time-rendered
in its slow, cold flame,

I dangle

writhing in air,
struggling to sling
self-spun silk
and wrap myself
in pupal sleep,

waiting

for nature's fatal alchemy
that turns worms liquid.
Self-digested
in their mahogany caskets,
they remake themselves;
they rise on shining wings,
adrift in autumn
sunset's slow winds
while the old moon's
shard slouches earthward,
waning in the fading west.
All the stars seem
bright puckered lips
about to speak
or sing
or kiss.

The Fallow Field

*Cela est bien dit . . . mais il faut cultiver notre
jardin.*

Voltaire

On this crippled October day drags itself westward
when it seems exhausted summer will never let go,
I find myself
driving on my way to someplace else
down a two-lane back highway smelling of hot tar,
arced by maple, oak and weeping birch.
Autumn's firefall has barely touched their leaves.
A sudden turn-off takes me
down a high-crowned dirt road
meandering through the woods
with no more direction than a streambed
bent by granite's resistance and dirt's consent.
In the middle of these tangled woods

someone's carved out a field, fallow,
given over to shining rye, motionless in the sun,
defying burdock, nettles, wild grape and spurge
to stay true to its borders and corners.
I stop and step into cool shadows
among bone-pale grubbed out stumps
giving themselves to the dark.
I could make a sun-warm bed in the furrows
among stalks and beards,
between breeze-whispered rows,
brothering the crop,
tilting and falling in the mower's racket,
turned under in a breaking wave of stubble and soil
sheered left and right under the gang plough's
bent shoesole blades worn shiny with work,
waiting under the snow, dreaming
dirt's circular dream
of bud, blossom and brightening blow.

Domestic Ceremonial

You may well wonder why
I insist on eating dinner with you
every night we're home
when I know
sometimes you'd rather
we threw this or that together
separately, any old time,
and call it a meal.
It's the ceremony
that gives me the measure
of our lives:
the care of
squaring our placemats,
centering our plates, just so,
folding our napkins in half,
lining up our knives and forks, just so;
sitting down together
at right angles
(as we are sometimes)
at our small square table
in a corner of our kitchen
full of the smell of cooking,
as the light fades outside.

and the graying windows
go steamy with heat.
We turn on the light
in a globe over the table
that makes the wood honey-gold.
One of us sits and waits
for the other
before we eat. Then
one of us waits at the table
for the other to finish.
We sit in the shadow of a larger table,
and the echo of our children's voices,
now husked with time.
How one of us waits at the table
for the other
before we eat, then
how one of us waits at the table
for the other to finish
helps me believe
that neither of us
will leave too soon
or stay too late
for the other.

Incidental Divinity

It's late for mowing,
but we've forgotten
an outlying field carved from the woods,
left fallow for hay we'll need this winter.
I'm sent out this morning,
thirteen years old and proud
to be trusted, alone
on a beat-up red and rust Farmall Cub.
At the end of the field
I lower the cutter bar,
engage the power take-off,
and leave a track behind me
like a ship tacking into a stiff wind.
Dust, hay fragments and the chatter
of the scissoring blades rise around me.

The cutter's rhythm stutters;
the belt slips and squeals;
the engine staggers under a sudden load,

almost stalls,
coughs,
coughs,
picks up again.
There's a splatter of blood on my hand.
Cold in my gut, I slam the ignition off,
stumble from the still-coasting tractor.

There's a big woodchuck on his side.
His head is almost gone.
He paws at the air.
From his ruined mouth.
a ruby pool soaks into the mowed path.
I look around for a sharp tool,
a spade, anything to chop with;
I think of stomping his head.
But he stops in mid-stride,
seems to shrink.
The surrounding woods recede and grey.
I can't breathe.
Then I remember how.
The trees regain their green.
I knuckle my eyes,
climb back in the saddle and finish the job.

For days after
I can find the body by its rank stink.
I stand in the mowed and raked field,
staring at the rice-grain maggots
pouring from the mouth like speech
and writhing in the ragged eye-holes left by crows.

With each visit, the chuck seems to fold into itself,
sinking into other dimensions;
hunks of matted fur,
rags of blackened skin,
yellow teeth, ivory bones
in the middle of stubble so sharp
I can feel its pinch through my boot soles.

By late winter there's only crusted fur,
disarticulated bones, scattered teeth
and brittle pelt frost-welded to the dirt,
hard as iron when I poke it with my toe.
One March night I drop to my hands and knees,
nose close to the softened ground:

an animal, maybe a coyote
sniffing the strewn ruins.
There's only the flinty smell of air just before snow.

It comes on spring.
Sent to harrow the new grass
and plow the field for seed corn,
I fire up the Cub.
At one spot there is a greener hummock,
ecstatic with the flicker
of Indian paintbrush,
cornflower, and buttercup.
The morning light picks out mayflies,
a boiling swarm of gnats,
and a hunting swallow's eccentric circle.