

At the Megachurch

Like any prophet, he denies his god
and is his god. These thousands worship him
because they know the soul may be eternal,
but immortality lies in the body,
and even faith cannot escape the flesh.

Tonight the church is full.
The inedible manna of miracles
begins to fall, invisibly. Their throats
are sapped by laughter jolting through their tears.

Limp bodies litter the carpeted stage,
anointed, cauterized, slain by his touch
and the dark water of his voice.

A crutch is tossed aside.
Its owner sprints away.
A blind man shields his eyes
as they fill up with light. A child,
crying, his asthma wheezing through his fear,
comes forward as his mother holds his hand.

Head back, eyes closed, he waits for God
to seal a kiss around his open, trembling mouth,
and blow the ashes from his lungs.

Fishing

To feel without seeing
the force that pulls against us,
thrashing out its strength
beyond our measure, guess its weight and beauty,
and then to know, be certain: this is fishing.

Tradition took me to a secret pond,
taught me to bait a hook and cast a line,
to wait, relaxed, but ready for the strike,
ready to set the hook beyond the barb
deep in the creature's mouth, and not let go.

I felt the nibble first, a spasming
Did you imagine that?
then the plunge of the line and the whine of the reel,
the strain of a living thing bowing the rod
beneath the mystery of calm, dark water;

then above, writhing on my line,
suspended from somewhere in its gut,
the swallowed hook catching and shredding there,
much heavier in thin air, swimming still,
fighting the thing inside it
past all victory and wonder.

I dropped it, rod and all, into the boat.

What kind of fisherman was I
to fear the blood-gilled bass dying in bloody flops,
its belly bulging for the knife,
working its mouth and lying still at last?

Hospital at Night

Something about the background quiet here.
The hum and clank of dinner on the roll,
a next-door neighbor rinsing out the fear
in something shallow, some event or bowl.

Beside each bed, a white contraption hums,
and suddenly a disembodied cough
erupts, but every separate sound becomes
a part of it: this hush you can't turn off.

The doors are all ajar, as if to keep
a child from being frightened of his sleep.
The doctors come and go as darkness falls,

and weary nurses, not one beautiful,
move in a chapel calm down long white halls,
turning off and on smiles like light snowfall.

Wolf Hunting

Like some old fossil on the Isle of Wight,
some baron with a number in his name,
my grandfather kept a stable of hounds.
Like him, the dogs were poor Americans
descended from a place they'd never been,
a little taller than their counterparts
in Wales and England, built for taller game
and more wide open range, but with the same
look about them, sad but clean, saddlebacks
of black and lemon, spots of black and tan,
comical floppy ears and short rough coats:
not beautiful in any special way.

And on a weekend night, or any night,
since they were both retired old men by then,
he and his longtime sidekick used to wait
for nightfall, then sink slowly back in time.
They didn't go on horseback, and a kill
was rare as murder. They'd just drive around
and talk and listen, breathing in the stars.
Maybe a little whiskey in a sack,
or maybe not—I never saw the stuff
in action, just the bottles in the fridge
on the back porch, there with the silty brew
that tasted like a cellar, and the wine
as sickly-sweet as Kool-Aid.

But those dogs,
you could hear them far off, their voices wild
but somehow mournful, like the highway sound
that drifted through the window late at night,
a faraway life. My grandfather claimed to know
what they were after by the sound they made—
a rabbit had a certain sound, a coon—
as if the soul of the quarry had entered them
and all they did was give it back again.
What they were after were the little wolves
called coyotes, mostly scavengers, that stayed
and flourished when the bison disappeared
and deer were hunted down. The greater wolves
were all long gone by then, they'd blown away
with the dustbowl, or about that same time,
after a hundred years of poverty

“Wolf Hunting” and other poems

and degradation. But to a young boy
they were still there—everything was still there,
it was just hidden. And none of those good dogs,
or even three or four, would have a chance
in hell against it. Something engineered
and driven in the blood might chase it down
and corner it, but then they'd have to fight,
and out of nowhere others would appear,
the rest of it. It would be like a bunch
of prep school boys against a prison gang.
They'd all go down like lambs.

Which never happened,
of course. It couldn't happen. Now and then
a bitch went missing or a wound appeared,
but there'd be no deep mystery in that.
The countryside itself could slash and tear.
Each year the busy highway took its share.
And then—a fact you wouldn't so much see
as hear, when you remembered afterward—
their bodies had this tendency to turn
on one another, out there in the dark
they had no business in but still longed for,
with nothing left to guide them but the moon.

Sighting

The deer, a buck and doe,
appeared and stood
on the stage of the road,

and my father slowed
the Oldsmobile, then stopped it
completely, to wait them out.

Noble, aloof, undeniably
beautiful, like swans with hooves,
they craned their necks

and turned their gazes on us,
patiently, without apparent
curiosity. What did they see?

Two fully grown men
with boys in their eyes,
a father and son,

an old couple of sorts?
Or was it only distance,
something else, a thing to be

appraised and moved away from
carefully, without words
or thought, at a gingerly trot?

Look, the moment said,
receding all around us
like the future after love.

And then they leapt inside it,
fleeing, tender white bellies
over tight-strung thorns.