

## **Winter Wanted Blood**

It almost killed me twice.

Trying to escape stinging sleet, bounding onto mistaken ground, comical feet-lifting, laundry flying, unconsciously smacking square, naturally bracing so I wouldn't snap and break into the brick, that later in the shower when I stare down the drain and belated vertigo sends me tailspinning, I can only grasp, reach inside and not let go, that for weeks after, everytime I lie supine and roll along my spine, the stinging echo of almost, those two extra inches to a broken neck, that fatuous mistimed step across a frozen puddle reopens and screams, scolds, that for all that I've done to myself, not wanting wet socks almost ended me.

The next morning, the sun blazes heartily for the first time in weeks.

The jimmy legs are worst during the shortest days—reassurance, enlivenment, taste is deeper, smell is dizzying, touch is survival, all reminders glow, open-eyed, and I find myself climbing down an ice chute 2500 feet up and timorous dirt crumbles and I'm sliding down the mountain, dragging, grabbing frantically, finding a wisp of roots, toeing flecks of stone, a body length away from a half mile drop, laughing until I see my jimmy leg laughing along without my say, until I gingerly flex my feet, watch the footing flit away, spring skyward, clamber off-trail bent at a 45, tap over crags to solid summit and can't help but sprint with the vim of someone who found home, because no matter what we do to it, the wild will always be mother, welcoming but willing to let us leave.

Two indifferent jolts in twelve hours.

Whether it was pedestrian or masochistic, it wasn't the how of death, but the mutism, the neutrality, the dearth of bloodthirst, that when the dizziness of existence almost stopped spinning, there was only an apathetic shrug, whereas we always hear some endtimes associated with crushing shadow, some with being spread through, stretched back into a contradictory void, a nothingness that could be everything, but I only tried to catch a final thought—dirt will be cold, sex is binding, fire burns bone, people ferment—I wanted to grab them all, not for some supreme answer or to know the end, only to hold one last second and find something deep inside that alters an idea long held to be true, because I can stick and spackle deformed amendments to my personality, but what it really comes down to is whether I'm loving and ruthless enough to kill parts of myself, feckless ideas of control and grandeur, and accept the bitter side of epiphanies that no one ever mentions: how pissed you get at yourself for not noticing earlier.

It's spring, and I'm three miles in on an unfamiliar part of a familiar trail.

The woods are cracking, stretching, shaking off the winter, streams break and kick a redolent spice into the air as I stumble along offtrail and follow the hoot of an owl, she sees me, bates her wings, and begins hopping from branch to branch, tree to tree, always just out of sight until I find her on a skinny ridge, halfway up a dying pine, surveying me the whole time, she lets me come within twenty feet before widening her neck, jutting out her head and beginning a mechanical call, an unavian polyvocal display, she stops, gazes

downward, I follow the gaze and find myself locked into a black bear's eyes, male, juvenile, standing, reaching up the dying pine, we stare only for seconds before he turns tail and scurries down the ridge—the bottom of the barometer drops, lets out a deflating squeal, and after seven years of mountain want, after finally reaching a bear, the most stolid silence surrounds me, an unsettling purity that I want to bottle, but I know rarities can't live as prisoners, know I can only palm the dirt where he stood, scrape off the bark still fresh with the tang of fur, break both between my palms and slather it from tuft to hairline, secondskin myself, and yes, I was almost shuffled along, but those two inches, that body length, only made me look up from the page and toward an inquisitive bear, toward shining stones in creek beds, toward others, the only mystery that can answer my calls.