

Pieta in Red

I found a liquidambar tree,
blazestruck with autumn and sunset.
Among its five-point leaves,
a red-tail hawk
pinned a sprawled dove
to a branch.

She dipped her sickle beak
to shredded pink meat.
The naked dove didn't move,
complicit in the slow
tearing toward its heart.

In the windless evening
the red light died
in night's slow slide
up the flaming tree.

When the Red-Tail gutted me
with her eye.
I filled
with the icy consent
of lichen, mushroom and frost.

Then she closed
her switchblade talons
and rose above
the leaves
with the lolling dove.

Report from Planet Senex

Whoever is afraid of death will carry it on his shoulders.
Lorca

Oh, but this is a hard land
to love.
Grey hills slump
and thick rivers
sprawl in deltas
splayed like dead hands.
Tan sand's strewn
with flakes of flint and chert.

No steel to strike.
No kindling.
Nothing to slice
but brown lichen,
rags of dead flesh
on empty skulls.
The shambling wind skins
dust from the ground.
Sunrise is a gray smear,
and sunset stains
the sky with spilled ink.
All night
in the dark
sick fish wail
from a stagnant lake,
tearing the clouds.
In the black gashes
a few stars dim,
their voices growing red,
like opals sinking
in thick oil.

Seagull in a Snowstorm

She dozed, through
the afternoon,
rosy as the Renoir
nude trapped
in a plain black frame
bolted over the bed,
one shoulder bare, uncovered
by the gold-green satin bedspread
while I paced
the high hotel room.
Outside the window,
a snow-storm muffled
monochrome city streets
side-to-side, buried cars,
wind-wearing them
into white lenticular dreams.
A gull rode the gusts,
gale-pummeled; it swerved
into sudden swirls
or turned slowly in the lulls.
Feathered gray and white,

the bird was
contrary snow and clouds
veering counter to their whirl
or wheeling against the williwaws,
its dagger-tipped wings
spread in their bent, broad M,
or hovering and balking the wind,
blurred where my breath fogged the glass.

Dead Reckoning
For Beth Buxton

Well, you died by inches
fighting the filthy crab,
surgeons carving important pieces
from you,
always one step behind.
Tell me:
when you lay
together with your lover,
though your desire had become
no more than an echo,
and when you let him
uncover you
and reveal the gnarled landscape
your body had become,
did you turn your head away
in the slant lamp-shadows,
like a child believing
not to see him meant
you were free
of his gaze
while he read
the chart of scars,
some red and purple and new,
some tallow-yellow and settled-in—
that odyssey of agony—
could he squint through the map
and regain the territory,
and navigating by dead reckoning,
did he lay his cheek by your tender navel
and breathe you in,
honey-sweet as an infant?

Bolus of Flame in the Sistine Chapel

The moment after Michelangelo
finished
the Sistine ceiling,

he cleaned his brushes,
snuffed
his lanterns, turned and walked away

for wine and a lover, needful,
stunned
by completion's void,

leaving the room, leaving God
swaddled
in a cloak red as sunrise,

by pink, cloud-rounded cherubim
lifted,
with his finger almost touching Adam's.

In the reeking dark,
filled
with snuffed candle-smoke and drying plaster's smell,

life's bright unruly spark
leaped
from God's finger to Adam's,

and like sunstruck oil
flowed
and filled his palm, while God

rose into the night and
faded
indifferent, leaving

His orphan reclining on bare rock. Adam
raised
his burning hand to his mouth,

swallowed the bolus of flame, then
stood,
staggering under the weight of conscious flesh,

found his fiery tongue and
spoke
himself and all his get into time.