

Moths

Asellus—sphinx moths—large and gray mottled, cluster around the outdoor light and leak into the house, burning up in the hot incandescence of the kitchen, leaving an aroma of burnt butter. I gather two in my hand; their gentle flutter is like a child's kiss. Trapped in my moist palms they lie still and let me move them to the porch—I'm imagining how we might carry life at this scale from one place to another, saving not species but this one and that, not from extinction, but from the yearning to melt away in death. One has flown off but the other, its wings torn, remains. There isn't much time: I know something of fate, and wonder if this moment—this *asellus*—was sent to remind me that all life yearns for more of living or dying—no matter—every fiber of it rushes toward something else; now, this one too crosses into the darkness of the lawn, waving madly in the gentle summer breeze, lurching toward some other fire.

Late Winter Walk

Islands of snow lap the north-facing trees,
Stunted piñons and cholla bend in the cold
wind that arrives each year on the first of March;

Walking uphill, I remember my father rising
from the couch as if from the grave of winter,
pulling on his work boots, watch cap, and

The worn leather gloves he wore to church,
the ones he gave me 'to remember him by';
out he'd go into the frozen morning to trim the roses,

American reds, the forsythia and lilac, honeysuckle,
and below the picture windows streaked with frost
the brown whips of azalea still sheathed in ice--

All bore nubs of green that shone like coins
in the morning light. As I push uphill,
I see my father kneeling in the topsoil to clear oak

Leaves from the snowdrops and crocuses—
his head bent over the ground as if in prayer,
coaxing his final spring from the earth.

Urn Burial

“...Browne scrutinizes that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration...” W.G. Sebald

There's a linguistic turn in this rustic acre
half covered by the freeway—not a yard
of graves—no marble crypts resembling
Roman toilets, no headstones worn to
palimpsest by monsoon rain and rot—
the *momento mori* are battle flags that rip
in the morning wind, strips of washed-out color
fit for a used-car lot or a tag sale, furled
about a semi-circle of Doric columns
wreathed in kudzu and skunk vine,
the vernacular of central Florida. A
Memorial Garden more garden than memory,
as if the dead, interred in black sand, were
pitched deep into this wiry fescue
to germinate and grow, to rise again.
And here, under pin oaks, stacked in
lockers, are the three square feet
interring my mother's ashes until
this lowland is submerged once again.
“I want an urn burial,” she told us,
propped up on the ship she rode to dying.
“A simple urn, like a vase, but with a top.”
We carried the box through a rainstorm
and slid a picture and plastic flowers into
the tiny space her life had come to fill.
I couldn't imagine it: her hands kneading
bread dough or tying a bow on my shoes,
gray ash and bone in a bronze amphora.
Thomas Browne looked for signs of the soul's
return: today, grackles mewl in the trees,
and a truck, aimed north, brakes for a dog.

In the Desert

There is nothing to see—the grass,
worn to a nub, broken limbs of cotton-
woods scattered among Apache plume,
the sky as blank as this sandy basin,
granite mountains—what of it? This
was the way the world endured forever:
an unfillable emptiness, a silence as
brisk and impersonal as the wind that
sweeps up the canyons and across the mesas
each noon. Marooned here among
these dazzling fissures in the earth,
skirting mounds of fire ants, the edges
of cacti, rattlesnake holes, other people,
I imagine myself walking that ancient desert,
tempted by pride and greed and a yearning
for the divine. We know emptiness wants fullness,
a spring of cool water, a voice from the whirlwind,
an enticement to leap from this escarpment of
sandstone into the bone-dry arroyo.
You can be anything you want here: alone
at the origins of the world, or at its ending,
you command a kingdom of sand that is
neither holy nor unblessed—it's nothing,
a place you may quietly disappear. I do.

Two Wheels

--For my children--

The problem isn't gravity.
At six or eight you can
find the precarious line
that separates riding
from falling; you ease into
the downhill glide
laughing with fear,
unaware that toppling
on spring grass
is of no concern. You're
too young to know how
often you will crash
on harder ground,
with no one to hold
you or shout advice
as you careen
toward the busy road.
The trick isn't balance,
but falling with grace.