

Chopping Wood

I liked going out in the rain,
so much rain in that land
of green hills, evergreens

and infections of the lung,
liked stepping through
puddles in my once

water-resistant boots
as I made my way
to the woodshed where

I'd pull the rusty light-cord,
check for spider webs,
then eye the piles,

one of oak, several of fir,
and pick the next casualties
for our old-fashioned,

wood-burning stove,
or the next sacrificial lambs
I should say—there *was* a sheep

farm down the road, a field ripe
with wool and dirty faces
come empty one day

when I came home—then I'd
carry the logs to the chopping
block and drop them

on the ground beside it,
not carelessly,
but less concerned

with the way they'd lie
than the way they fell,
and wonder how

the woodsman thought
who felled them, in general,
but also how he'd ponder

bringing them down
from the sky
and selling them by the cord,

whether the land was his
or he bought them
from the owner,

walking through and showing
which he'd take, splashing
paint on the bark

to remember, and then
I'd pick up the logs
one by one, heft the weight

of wood in my hand
and place them on the block,
this time with care so

they wouldn't fall
and would offer me
their broadest face

to swing my favorite
axe down into,
and then I'd begin

the work that took me
out in the rain
in joy, I'd

measure my paces
back from the block,
a bigger log of its own,

a two-hundred fir
by my quick reckoning,
and then I'd lower

my hands along
the shaft, send the heavy
head along its arc

and throw some
muscle into

the slice,

and if the wood was placed
right and the swing was
hard enough, if

hand and eye, mind
and muscle came together
in perfect concert,

the wood would split,
nearly symmetrical,
and the blade

of the axe would embed,
ever so slightly, in
the face of the block,

and I'd lift my foot, place
my sole on the edge
of that old fir,

grab the handle and use
the leverage of
my body to loose it,

and if any of those things
was off, the axe would get
stuck in the little log,

and I'd lift it,
axe and all,
over my head

and come crashing down
again and again
till it split,

or the blade would
stick in the block deeper
than I'd intended,

and I'd have to work at
loosening its grip,
widening its incision

by teasing it side to
side while I tried
to coax it out,

and eventually out it
would come
and the wood would

be split, and I'd pile it
in my arms, careful
of splinters, then

carry it in to warm
the bodies, the lives
of my wife and children.

Once, I missed the log
and the block entirely
and the blade glanced

off my shin, but made no
damage, no cut, not
even a bruise,

and I thought of how
easily the bone
would have splintered,

I felt pain at
the thought of
being a tree

subject to the woodsman's
expertise, the loss of shade
that was so much respite

to so many creatures,
the nests
that may have been woven

high up
in the swaying branches,
the resting spots

for migrants, playgrounds
for squirrels, the haunts

for owls that screeched

over us in our beds,
the cats alert with God
only knows in their ears,

and I thought of the grave
I dug on that property,
larger than a man's grave,

the size of a woman
and child I thought
as I dug through dirt

into grey clay
that didn't want to be dug,
the mother lama looking on

and moaning low as her
young lay under
the tarp.

Then I stepped
out of the rain
onto the doorstep,

opened the door
and saw those
dear faces,

and was glad all that
thinking and chopping
was behind me.

The Bird

I

She looked over and saw a bird
on one of those odd but welcome
squares of earth underneath city trees,
its head sunken, folded into its chest
at an angle that meant something
wasn't right, its body so still and low
we thought it dead. Then it moved,
shuddered, struggled to lift its head
and broke our hearts even harder:
one eye swollen, an inlaid marble,
the other swollen and crusted over,
the beak grotesque with infection.

It wobbled its head like five-hundred
pounds, shook as though it were
trying to undo a break within itself,
and it was. Her heart leapt out of her
and I felt it and mine followed.

I grew impatient then—unusual for me—
felt burdened on this, my birthday,
then recoiled with immediate shame,
admonished myself for having
so selfish a reaction, and felt pain,
in my shoulder because it was injured,
at the suffering I saw in it because
it was worse, and the suffering
I saw in her, bent over its struggle,
the suffering I knew I could not ease.

Then I acted out of pain and frustration,
that sobering, sorrowful uselessness,
told her to get up, I wanted action,
said sitting there being sad was doing
nothing to help it, and that was true,
or maybe it wasn't, but whatever
its validity, it was the wrong
way to say it, the wrong way
to harness this energy between us,
this tandem hovering over a life
that was broken and breaking apart.

We left, carried our groceries
upstairs, found the phone number
for the rehabilitation center
and left a message. I got down
the cat carrier and we made a nest
out of socks and an old t-shirt,
a nest we'd made before,
and told the cats to be good.

Then we went down and she
picked it up and spoke to it
in warm, soothing tones, carried it
to the kennel, placed it in the nest,
covered it with socks because
it felt cold, far too cold,
and bony—even less of a chance.

I found some hand warmers in our
emergency kit, opened the packages,
shook them to activate their warmth
and placed them over its wings.
She filled a Japanese iron tea cup
with water and dripped drops along
its beak with her finger. We couldn't
tell if it swallowed, tried to decide
what to do, turned to the internet
and its stores of experience for help.
It didn't offer much, and what it
did offer didn't seem promising.

Then I heard commotion in the cage,
saw it flapping and called her over.
Maybe the warmers were too hot,
or maybe it wanted freedom, from here,
from its body, from life, just—out.
I'd seen a pigeon flap that way
ten years earlier. She held it in love
and tried to give its heart calm
and it settled for a moment.
Then it flapped harder, flipped itself
over, scrambled its claws in the air.

We saw the gash along its body,
its open wing, how wasted its flesh,
felt its inability to eat, its neck
the horror of suffering made plain,

and she made the call. I had
no doubt in the right of her heart.
Something in me knew this was coming,
forefelt the tears in her eyes
and the dread in my limbs.

I found the sharpest, largest
knife I could and hid it along
the arm of my sweater. She asked
if I was going to break its neck.
I shook my head, said I wasn't
confident that would be as quick
and painless as it seemed, what
I had in mind would be quicker
and sure. Then she asked if she
could carry it to the roof, and I said
yes, picked up a plastic bag for after.
Then she asked if she could help
and I said no, wanted to spare her that,
and she didn't protest or ask again,
walked to the other side of the roof
and cried the grief a mother should.

I held it down on a flat rock, its head
drooping on that mangled neck, felt
the strength in its muscle as I pinned
it down—so faint—pressed the blade
gently but steadily into its throat,
its beautiful, purple-green, feathered
throat, and sliced, quick and hard, in one
swift motion severing spine and head
and leading its blood toward the light.

God, how that headless body writhed,
bucked for minutes against the stillness
that called it out of this world, or down
through its seams into the underbelly
of existence, and no wonder it shook:
a whole life's energy leaving the body at once.

I walked over and hugged her then,
saw her wet, red, swollen eyes
and felt pangs I have no words for.

I asked her to get napkins and two more
plastic bags to clean up what I'd done.

She did. I cleaned, kept the head
with the body and wrapped it with care.
She saw the knife on the way down
and knew. We placed it in the freezer,
with the others we'd found on our
walks through the city, so many
avian deaths dotting the sidewalks.
We'd bury them soon, before winter
and its hardening made the ground
and the task even more...more what?

I don't know. But she thanked me
then, and that—that I understood.

II

Later that day, she said a good
man is better than a great one.

I know what she means. And
when she says it, I believe her.

She said her heart felt better, lighter,
at ease in the release—its,
the relief—ours.

III

I went up there the next morning
to check the spot. All that was left
was an already fading, poorly wiped-up
pool of blood. That, and something
I couldn't name, something that passes
between us in times like these,
something that made my whole body
tingle with affection when I went
back down and watched her sleep.
Something that stirs deep in this being,
deep where we are no longer merely human,
and spreads its wings, and flies with me,
flies through me now here to you.

IV

Is this sufficient? Have I made the life
of the bird and our involvement in it

an honored thing? Is this good enough
to put down the pen, bow my head to life
and its ways and let nature take over?

I don't know, but it feels good enough
to sleep on, and, at the moment,
that's good enough for me.

V

Goodnight,
dear bird,

I'll say hello
to your fellows
in the morning.

VI

And thanks, world,
for whatever it is
I received today—

I don't need
to know its name.