

Uprooting

In the blue-gray evening,
the moon is a lens lying on its back,
Venus a jagged spot of white,
and crickets sing to the gravity of April.

We wrap each dish in old news,
and divide the years
into keep and throw away.

We feel the tearing of a root
wedged deep in the silence between us,
and the new-mown grass scents the evening
with the blood of a new season.

Tuolumne Campfire

Phil brings his paintings,
the one from today of the bridge
beginning to dissolve into
a scarlet tinged darkness,
and the one of a mountain
that becomes a nude woman
emerging from the landscape,
and his song books from the Santa Cruz
ukulele society
where we wander among Willie Nelson,
Sarah Vaughn, the Beatles, Johnny Cash, the Mamas and Poppas
but can't get Janis Joplin's Bobby McGee to untangle itself
so pause while Phil's friend with the wooden flutes
tells of being in line to audition for Big Brother and the Holding Company
until Janis's hungry heart made any other voice immaterial.
Tells how she wandered in and out of the house where he slept,
an ephemera that like the woman in Phil's painting
was on her way to outgrowing this world,
says he went on to sing in hashish informed tongues
for a trio of sitars.

We go on to King of the Road,
Peggy Sue, You Are My Sunshine,
until the fire dies to a pile of bright nuggets,
and we turn off the lights we needed for music,
see that the camps around us are all dark,
tell a few more stories in near whispers,

and then dissolve into each his and her own room of this night.

The Map Back

She watched the ceiling recede,
and counted the stars in a single window pane.
She had her irises and camellias,
but she knew gods
had little to do with the mundane,
and that they had never made
the promises they were accused of.
She was starting to understand
that she'd be gone before
what the birds prophesied would be done,
so she tasted just the skin of a plum
that was so deeply red it was black
and she found her map back through memory
in the latticework of the widow's web.

Second Hand Smoke

Irene Price (Cole, Casteel, Pelegrino, Applegate)
1906 - 1978

Good night Irene. I *have* seen you in my dreams,
that girl standing barefoot in the cruel Colorado sun
watching her five brothers take turns dragging
the carcass of a rattlesnake between tumbleweeds.

And then that flame of auburn hair that made
those Pall Mall and Lucky Strike men
who came into the Tip Top cafe on Belmont
drop a nickel in the jukebox so Hank Williams

could ask it for them: "Hey good lookin', what'ya got cookin'?"
How's about cookin' somethin' up with me?"
And you brought them a slice of pie piled
impossibly high with ringlets of meringue.

But they didn't know how cold you'd grown
"to the love" any love "that used to be."
All you kept from the first was my father
and then the second left his smiling Navy portrait

and Greyhound good driving citations
 in that little wooden box in your closet,
 and the third, the Italian whose station wagon
 was loaded down with thick plumbing catalogues,

waited until his roses along the side of your house
 had stems as big as his thumb before he left
 skid marks on the street squealing off to anywhere else,
 and the fourth who was riding his bicycle to pump gas

at the Shell let you bring him home and tried to make you happy
 pulling a trailer of beauty supplies up and down '99
 until he too looked at you through the curtain of his Camel smoke
 and saw the porcelain statue of disdain with dark holes for eyes.

You breathed their smoke
 until it filled your lungs with a fluid as thick
 as the buttermilk and corn bread you liked to blend in a glass
 and that left it's sticky patina for you grandchildren to wonder at.

Then the therapist came to beat an electric rhythm on your chest
 where you lay in the back bedroom of your only child's house,
 and finally to the dying room across the street from the hospital
 where all six of your great grandchildren were born.

There, the smoke that began with your father
 finally blew so thick over your dreams
 that you couldn't reach high enough
 to grasp the nicotine yellowed fingers of another salvation.

The New Alchemy

How many shapes can water take. . .or air?
 And what is earned by wanting even less
 than what you have? And why are angels' wings
 like birds'? And wind through leaves a kind of prayer?

At first you won't believe that light can speak
 or shadows shifting under trees can sing,
 but where the single syllables of crows
 are stitching closed the evening's last blue wounds

and sparrows ride the leaning yarrow stalk,
 a way to rearrange what can't be known
 will thread itself through dream on strands

no law or logic has the strength to break.

Begin with nothing you could buy or steal
and take your place beneath the bloom of sky
where milkweed seeds on parachutes of silk
show how to navigate without intent.

Believe what you believe as if a breeze
pronounced the syllables a god exhales,
and learn to make of nothing nothing more
to hold the dark departure leaves behind.

Remember, though, those priests who killed the girl
who brought them fire because it burned their hands,
and if a shape you've found might serve some use,
begin again with even less resolve.

The best of what we are is what we're not.