

Permanence

Desert Road

Desert road, sand beneath sore feet, the horizon
curves full circle,

 great arc,
 like an ocean,

but dry, hot, lost.

Nothing moves save the wavering heat and a dust devil
in the distance who swirls himself
into nothingness.

Far-off gray-ocher mountains striated with ancient pigments,
etched by rain, scratched by wind, heat,
by the scorings and scuffings of time unbound—
the guttered remnants of a prairie
of bluestem, dropseed, coneflowers, once undulating, amaranthine
to the horizon, once thriving,
 ground down.

 Weather-trammeled.

I pause to speak with it but it is too old,
or I am too young. A phantom wind mutters
furtive warnings. Scattered cacti stand
like petrified traffic cops directing dust. Impassive blood-red boulders
sit in defiant congregation, lithic trolls manifested from the underworld
by the receding of the erodible earth. Prickly pears jut
from the hardscrabble like tobacco-stained teeth,
desecrated monuments who guard the scoured gullies of the dead.
A rattlesnake eyes me
from the shade of a blistered creosote bush. I pause to look at him
but he shies away, recoils into a ball, tongue flicking from a stony grimace.

 We are not friends.

On the horizon, a plume of dust builds, approaches,
gathers around like a shroud.

 Do I need a ride?

 No.

 Am I sure?

 No.

A buzzard traces spirals above our conversation, amused.
I walk until I am.

A Life for a Life

Is this how Tibetan peasants feel
at a sky burial as their meandering
procession shoulders a rough-hewn
wooden litter high onto a mountain crag,
beneath vultures who gather in expectant circles
waiting for the body to be unwrapped
and exposed to the screeching
cold, returned to a ravenous world,
at the prattling of the birds echoing down
off impassive cliffs and bluffs, at the squabbling
over entrails, as they wend their way
silently back off the mountain?

The pine was dismissed as ill suited
to this austere Lancastrian valley.
The mountain ash made sense, namesake
of the town where he was born and raised,
after all, and a pretty tree, delicate pinnate
leaves, clusters of glossy red berries,
but not a canopy tree—a weedy colonizer
not adapted to the long haul. So the mighty
beech or oak, then, two grand old men,
and, around the kitchen table sipping
peaty memories wrung from an unfinished bottle
of Laphroaig from his treasured collection,
we decided the oak was the grander,

so his urn was upended into a soggy hole,
dust swirling out on a stiff breeze
catching on coats, in hair, brushed awkwardly
aside, or drifting on gusts up into the windswept
moors. Roots massaged apart like the stiff
fingers of an arthritic hand splayed
into the hole, soil spaded on, a little drink
of water, and that's that. We step back
and there he lies, or, now, stands. No platitudes
to the supernatural for this man,
no lifeless stone to mark his passing,
but a living thing that says Here Is David
Hallett. A life for a life, settling into the soil,
new roots poking into his ashes,
embalming him in the moldering earth,
drawing him into the rising sap.

And how he has grown. Fifteen, now,
thickening into adolescence, knotty limbs
reaching out for their share of the sulky
northern light, roots delving deep
into the living earth, those fertile ashes
long since swallowed, seeking out
the remnants of the more recently deceased,
and he will grow on this afforesting slope
overlooking the choppy waters where the boats
sail on without his ludicrous cries
of "Lean out, you fool!" stretching out beneath
the wind-battered hills where his faded
olive jacket and ridiculous, dirty
white wool hat, perched jaunty above
a gap-toothed grin, no longer roam,

but he is there, and his leaves have scattered,
and will scatter still, rustling across
the valley floor, over the water,
onto the slopes, fickle gusts worrying
them into hidden corners among the boulders,
up onto the Dovestone or the blocky,
weathered regoliths of Indian's Head,
and the heather will absorb them, and the wild
grasses and bracken, and acorns will ripen
each autumn, squirrels thriving in their turn,
leaving their own bodies littered
by the wayside, or seized by a roving fox,
secreted away to a hidden lair to be shredded
by the urgent teeth of squirming cubs,
or a hawk will swoop down, snatch him up
and carry him over the escarpment,
this grand English oak, on and on.

On Time

Time present, time past, time future
might flow like a river
along an inflexible path,

but watch with your mind's eye
some old man, back bowed, legs buckled,
cane gripped in a gnarly fist, peering
out through the window contemplating
the garden, or gazing beyond the trees.

How did it pass so quickly?
And how little remains.

A grandchild scampers into his picture
chasing a terrier (or a cat, if you prefer),
whiling it away, wasting it so freely
in skips and smiles, impatient
to spur it faster forward.

His gaze turns to the linden tree,
her bole thick and fluted, her hoary limbs
arched down to the ground.
He remembers the planting,
those present now passed,

and beyond the tree he sees
the buttressed mountain rise
pushing up from the earth's crust, whipped
by winds, whittled by rain and snow,
crag, ridges, and bluffs scoured
by its eternal cut and thrust,

and beyond the mountain the sky,
the stars: it arcs around them
dancing with the light, dancing with gravity itself.
He watches it spiral among galaxies,
plunging, swooping, converging

to waltz him through the cosmos
with his people.

Recurrence

How the light refracts through
the pristine water, luminous curves dancing
on the sandy bottom flash
like twirling skirts across sculpted
limestone fissures and channels, glinting
fringes and ruffles pirouette across
a wide fan, gilt-edged, a bulbous cushion
shaped like a swollen brain, a giant clam,
green-frilled mouth agape,
now a thicket of antlers
whose brown fingers, yellow-nailed,
jab at the sky.

Tiny mouths poke
from the very living rock
stirring spirals of food, daubing
calcium to build their homes,
layer
upon layer.

See the fish:

What reckless abundance!
They nibble at polyps,
peep coyly from behind
a sponge. Watch a multitude
on the move: a synchronized shoal
of silver sides shining, a hundred
thousand spinning mirrors.
A squadron of cuttlefish morphs,
shape-shifts, iridescent
as it meanders by.
Now a crimson-emerald angel.
Now a clown who flaunts his hot
orange stripes perusing anemones
who flop from side to side,
drunkards in the pulsating waves.
My breathing echoes in my mask.

My blood pulses.
I suck air from my world, above,
and my head is a cavern,

which draws me underground
to some distant future. Still here,
still in this place, but deep
in the earth, now, standing

in a cave, ghostly, like some haunted lithic womb,
breathing clean, cold air.

Water drips all around. This water has dripped
for a hundred thousand years.

One precious droplet coalesces at the tip
of a stone dagger catching the light,
 blue, green, sparkling,
 in suspended animation,
 a miniature world entire.

Suddenly, loosed to fall, it splashes
down to an emergent spire who reaches up
to make the catch. The light is prismatic
in ribbons of wet rock
striped yellow,
 ocher, orange, red.

A tiny waterfall. Thin curtains of water
dribble over lace-pattered curtains of stone,
drip from sculpted limestone fissures and channels,
through this clandestine echo chamber.

Rebounded, blinking, breathless,
remembering where I am—and when—
I emerge from my phrenic cave chilled
and exposed. The wind has risen, erratic,
fierce, gusting up the scarp, flowing rampant
through the peaks,

 cols, cliffs, screes,
I lean into it, coat flapping furiously,
eyes watering at the view,
these great, grey, erumpent mountains
crumpled by the restless, rumbling continents,
heaving up from the very living sea,
weathering,

 eroding
sculpted limestone fissures and channels,
 corrugated reefs,
of solid, unyielding permanence
that undulate to the horizon
and dissolve back
into the sea.

She Remembers

She is old but she remembers
the coming and going of people.

She remembers
how the lively brook once stanch'd
beneath lines curbs and layers of tar
pounded by multitudes on a restless commute
pip'd channeled culverted dammed—damned—
to a retention pond a constructed wetland and
diverted downtrodden amputated
bubbled again
over age-smoothed stones.

She remembers
mountains scalped by grating yellow scarabs
shorelines rutt'd with harbors breakwaters piers
rivers dredged by barges stretched into canals
flattened with dams marshes drained
for endless lawns of
 corn
 beans
 wheat
 rice that were
resculpted by floods
reshaped by winds
restored by glaciers
renewed by the ceaseless bump and grind of continents.

She remembers
bacteria fungi crawling and burrowing things challenged
by Barbie dolls baseballs styrofoam peanuts batteries
by paint cans fridges razor blades pesticides
by wrappers and zippers and gizmos and gadgets
by a million tykes bikes trikes mics piled
as mountains landscaped even or floating
on the wide ocean or blowing in the wind
skies opaque oddly thick strangely hued billows
of darkness from oily flues water streaked
creamy frothed slicked of surface upturned fish
ocean gyre plastic island island sanctuary
of net-throttled birds a turtle choking
on a plastic bag a pelican heavy with oily goo
how with new enzymes evolved deployed

slowly munching they brought her corrupted elements back
from death
to life
from the people
new food for the trees.

She remembers
cities (monstrous things) loud overstuffed
that stopped crumbled were overgrown swallowed
the last survivor was a pyramid who was ground down into sand.

She remembers
their steps the people four palms then two feet
bare then sandaled or variously shod
and the length of them set out enfolded in earth
the feel of their passing the rapid decay of
 blood
 organ
 intestine
 sinew
 then long bone
 and tooth
marked by a stone bearing a name
now under moss
now under lichen
now fading
now eroding
now ashes like their bones
now dust like their teeth.