

Orca Fin

"The Spirit of Our Youth"
a sculpture by Marvin Oliver

Turquoise, orange, bronze
it rises out of the Seattle ground
near the youth detention center
as a symbol of hope and phallus,
the latter needing small opportunity,
the whole area sea green and gray,
the grass the sea, unmown,
and, most biblical, in winter,
forty days without sun or moon.

At the base waves scroll up
from which salmon climb towards
a figure that could be the eye of
a sperm whale (I'm reaching here)
alongside three straight-edged canoes
if they are not feathers instead
and the eye a shoulder joint
of an eagle whose beak curves
into the pick point for all flesh.
Here everything ends, a good
three feet shy of the orca's bright
turquoise fin tip in a sky
that's uninvented day by day--oh
Haida art, cubist bent
at the spirit of our youth.

Yes, vision is still desperate,
survival predatory
even if blessed by the gods,
the fin here about as tall
as the conning tower of a sub
some from this town serve
buried for months at sea
for the good of the country.

After the Cascades, 1994

After the Cascades by air we cross
the Columbia River where it ribbons
away from the mountains squared
and o'd for Tick-Tac-Toe,
Weyerhaeuser's unintentional joke
for the clear cuts west to the Sound.

I've left my eighty-year-old mother
and aunts and uncles still fighting
family wars I'm just tired of
as they are of me, shifting
in my chair, first one leg then the other
over the other again and again
a long and lemon afternoon.

All agreed that I had my father's eyes
but hopefully not his heart, dead
twenty years now at fifty-five,
a failed CPR, a public golf course.
The rest requires litigation.

Into the Stone

W.F., geologist

He'd grown easy
in his sleep, his oldest son,
who'd fought him once,
there at last in the chair
at the side, head down,
reading from a Bible.

A good life, given the many
years in the lab and the field,
the hour by hour tutorials
with mostly foreign students,
his own kids governed
by the compliment
that they could do what
required attention, solo,
per his early instruction
and his wife's fidelity,
no need to apologize.
The letters and plaques
lend testimony.

The family had taken
turns on watch, listening
to the stories they'd long
ago cataloged but now
mostly by humor and love--
his eyes still active
among the labile blips
and invented stratigraphies
of the monitors.

Nights Now

1.

Call it an early spring gift in the still
hush and sweep of late January,
the days a blessing over coffee and rolls
permitted again since no reason exists
not to given the spreading cancer.

The road up our hogback's a rutted crookery
of down deep and sideways tire spinings
with no one, including me, willing to buy
snow tires much less studs or chains.
If one of us spins into smoke, one of us
throws a coat on, grabs a shovel, and helps
most of the time except when it's damn clear
no one should brave that road.
It's the same with prayer, sometimes.

2.

Lights out, I tuck sheet and quilt under the chin
and turn on my right side, where the pain
at the T-7 vertebrae leans left only
if barely thanks to the opiate.
The drift into warmth opens the heart
first to confession and then thanks
and praise for the life I've had--
rough spots and smooth, love and pain,
little epiphanies and spots of time,
tulip buds, jonquils, night shades
of the promise of what still might be,
the snow hugging the ground hard.

(stanza break)

One night I barely slept but ended up writing
in my head almost chapter and verse
of those who had been good to me—or for me—
and blessed them as though I had the power.
I don't cry easily but I cried for joy.

Yes, I've signed my name away, hospice
for sure, from "cure care hope" to palliative--
oh, the Latin meanings of the body's break down—
but I'm still at home and in my own bed.