

The Crossroads a Pound of Flesh Is

Sun and water become seed and soil
become timothy and clover
sharp and soft in the evening,
lips wet, fuzzy with milk, manure in the barn,
calves the color of gloves and coal
grazing in the rain.

 Add years and slaughter:
a block of meat bought from a beef farmer,
blue-green plaid kilt,
splashes of red in his beard, slight New England
twang, an upturn at the corner of his mouth,
neither smile nor smirk, etched, when
he needs to put it on.

 Add minutes and sweat:
this block, ten dollars, marbled with fat,
frozen pound in plastic pressed between palms,
freezes the hands I wrap around my dog's Irish ears
as we sit on the bench, inching back from the sun,
gently rocking in the rise and fall of her breath
as she raises her nose to study
a scent I cannot detect,
folds upper lip under lower canine, holds
pensive about its statement.

 Add seconds and sense:
come to some conclusion, she crosses one paw
over the other, tufts of cinnamon pluming
between toes, drops her jaw, unrolls
her tongue, lets drip one bead
of saliva and pants the heat away.

Quiet, Grit, Glory

Sometimes I go silent, not intending to, just following an inclination to be quiet, and then some shadow will pass and I'll think to respond, engage again, throw voice and opinion and take the counterpunches they ignite, but before I do I turn my head aside and hear the woods calling, and the pull of that call tugs deeper, so I go into the woods, and when I come out to some road or town or intent to be social, I feel obliged to live up to the weight the silence has spread over us, and I can't, the word weighs too much, puts a whole world of gravity in the tongue, so I stay silent—I sit with it until it breaks.

And sometimes that breaking is heavy, the shattering of metal, lead, hammers, brick you have to chew until the teeth work it down to grit, then the tongue resumes its fighting shape of yore and lashes like it's I've always been in the ring, even when I left all buildings and said nothing but what was said by the ring of the horizon. And sometimes that breaking is light, a feather let loose in leaves, the day's simple rituals—telling how something tastes, how the bones have felt their marrow—sometimes a curtain blows aside and the good of conversation announces itself like the good of morning in unachievable, everyday glory.

Listening

A man, tired after a day's long journey,
comes to a cabin in the woods
and opens the door. The hinges squeak
and the sound of wings shuffle overhead.
He walks in, waits for his eyes to grow
into the darkness, to make out its forms.

He finds a stool by a table and sits to rest,
not wanting to try his back on the floor.
He has no sleeping bag and does not
feel like piling leaves. He puts his head
to the table and listens.

It speaks through his skin and his mind,
tells him all he can remember of tables,
of wood, trees, seeds and growth,
of splinters, termites, rotting and soil.

Eventually his mind takes him to the edge
of the field where he grows quiet and humble,
where his inner voice no longer speaks
for the table, and feeling takes over.

He sits there a long time, until his forehead
begins to hurt. Then he lifts his arm
and runs his hand along the edge of the table,
slowing to finger its nicks, its rough spots,
stopping at the rounded corner.

There, in the oily smoothness that might
be the inner elbow of someone
he once caressed in the night, he grasps
the part of the table, the part of the tree,
the part of himself that, then as now,
he does not and cannot know.

In that shadow of time, in the descending
darkness of timelessness, he belongs
to the cabin and falls asleep, waking when
his neck grows hot under the morning sun.
If he dreamt, he doesn't remember.

He listens, not to the table this time,
but to the living day. The hinges squeak.

His stomach grumbles. He gets up
and approaches the door.

A Way to Work

I

Good morning.

A body is not just one body.

I inspect every part I can, touch parts that rarely get touched.

I feel the aliveness of being on both sides of the touching: toucher and touched.

I can't depend on this to continue, but I do.

This body will fail me, and when it does, I won't mind, I think.

Whether mind or mine or I survive the body: shuts me up.

It opens me at the same time, parts the air as if somewhere in the back of my eyes, I could turn on another frequency of vision and see the insides of being.

As if seeing the insides of being weren't what we're doing, us innards.

II

Now the cells constrict, the blood slows, the skin screams against going numb.

It is really fucking cold. Brr doesn't begin to describe it.

Breath crystalizes on my glasses. It hurts to wipe them off.

I remove them and thread their arm through a hole in my lapel.

Hello, blurry world. Dogshit, I can still see you coming for my shoe.

III

There is attention and there are kinds.

The weather has a hand in it: twenty, a hundred and four, fifteen below.

The blessed seventies, before heatstroke, before dementia?

I have thirty-some years to find out. What an assumption, the future.

IV

Desire is the greatest liar I know.

It even gives us the want to believe in its visions. Says *see, you want this*. And we do.

It will be warm when I get home.

There will be water in the pot and the stove will work and the tea will raise my core temperature.

I will sip it thinking of my wife's soup and eat her soup letting my thoughts dissolve in flavor.

She will ask me how I like it and I will have to think to tell her.

She will question the level of salt.

V

I arrive at work. The office is cold. There is no stove. My colleagues say hello.

We generate warmth for one another because this is our chosen family.

We will either choose or be forced to leave it.

If death is the force, and gravity's here, the ground will take us back.

I mean the force that makes us leave each other could be the end of earth, in which case gravity may not matter, the ground may not be under.

VI

My mother wants her and her mother's ashes blown from the tops of the Cherokee mountains.

I hope when I get to the top the cold doesn't drive me down; I'd like to watch where the ashes go.

I'd like to live long enough to offer them to the wind, intact enough to climb.

I imagine some of them blowing back on me, sleeping up there, waking up sore and comfortably dirty.

The kind of dirty one can never wash clean. The kind of dirty one wouldn't want to.

The kind of dirty that becomes the residue of family lore, whether that family is one's bloodline, one's loveline, or the line of sentient being.

Or the line of being, sentient or not.

Poems that Are Poems Even though They Aren't Poems, I Swear It

A poem doesn't have to be etched on the page,
warm in the mouth or caught in language;
it can be unspoken in the course of your day,
it can be *the* unspoken course of your days;
it can be the way you conduct attention,
emotion, the way you treat someone,
the way you turn toward an echo down an alley
that sounds like some long-sought call
from the depths of your soul;
it can be your heart as it lifts almost
out of your chest in response,
your voice as it strikes your throat
as an organ of the body
and an organ of the earth;
it can be work, streaks of pain,
the undetectable merger of days,
rust-heelled nails, unanswered mail,
wild strawberries in the mouths of cats;
it can be the way you look at
the light, the light
filtering dust
and all that comes to dust
onto your window
and down to its ledge,
the black granite ledge shining,
the stormgates of your pupils shining;
it can be the way you reach out your hand
to wipe away the dust
then hold your fingers before your eyes
to study the dusted pattern
and wonder how it all comes to this.