

## **A Mountain Exorcism**

With fingers worn and knobbed like sassafras roots,  
nails caked with clay, he drags  
the old-fashioned horsehair bow  
across taught catgut strings,  
draws, unwilling, the scratchy song  
up from the hollow belly of the fiddle,  
like pulling brambles over flesh,  
like the devil, dancing, from a shriven soul.

## **March**

Teakettle keening of wind down the mountain  
tells me you've come, another violent season  
dawning, stripping the last stubborn, brown leaves  
from the oak, red alder, mountain ash,  
whipping naked blackberry brambles  
into the muddy earth. I have never seen you  
come in like a lamb.

The copse of old growth down by the orchard  
has suffered another casualty;  
they sway, a staggered circle,  
mute veterans, taking count  
of the fallen.

## **Winter Poem**

It's good to kneel beneath the brittle weight of winter,  
lacing windows, crackling webs of frost  
crawling over crunchy grass, overnight lows  
cold-baking the yard into an icehouse floor  
beneath a canopy of rattling, bony fingers,  
ungloved hands of trees,  
clapping in the frozen breeze.

## **Hibernation**

Living is waving a long goodbye  
to life, the soul preparing as a snake prepares  
to slide into its hole, to reemerge  
in another spring with new flowers,  
to scent again the smell of mouse, of frog,  
of speckled eggs in a low nest,  
to feel again the heat of sun on back,  
the damp of soil sliding under belly,  
the tremor of distant footfalls  
shivering up every arch of rib.  
Living is flicking a forked tongue,  
tasting autumn, tasting spring.

## Revival

Turkey vulture circles the fractured hilltop  
above a picket of pencil-thin birches  
stabbing like naked spears into the gray belly  
of sky, milky streams splashing in jagged lines  
like tears down cracked and rutted cheekbones

to pour and puddle behind the church,  
New Land Baptist, painted peeling white.  
*Aaay-man!* shatters stillness like  
*Fire in the hole!* Like a charge. *Aaay-man!*  
*Hallelujah Jesus Jesus Jeee-zus aaay-MAN!*

The clattering of fingers across yellowing piano keys  
punctuates eruptions of escapist glee, joy of refugees  
nearing the border, heaven sighted just beyond  
the poisoned river, just above the crown  
of redbud, white sarvis, forsythia  
springing through splintered shale,  
just over the tonsured mountain  
that once was home.

## After Rain

After the rain, as the puddled ground  
drinks in the wetness, as eaves drip  
and birdsong takes the place  
of the staccato pounding on the awning,  
I picture you, huddled  
beneath your black bomb shelter of umbrella,  
certain the world was ending and you,  
with your front row ticket  
to the earth's inundated final act,  
would at any minute be caught in the wake  
of a mad-eyed hydrophobic prophet  
and his floating menagerie.  
Now, holding hands, we walk in the orchard,  
we feel again the leaves releasing their held breath,  
watch the trees shake raindrops from their shoulders,  
measure with our trained eyes  
the thickness of rainwater glaze on a single peach,  
ripe just today.

## Neighbors

Twenty-four times a grandma, at ninety,  
more sure of God than the sunrise,  
she lives beside the cemetery, each night  
falls asleep to the whisperings of the dead,  
their dry voices threading through the maples  
like a hundred hollow hands.

The child she survived still listens  
for her footsteps, orthopedic shoes  
shuffling to the mailbox in front of the house  
she built with her husband sixty-four years ago,  
the husband who still sings to her,  
who calls her back to bed in the earth.

## **Weight of Dead Birds**

I broke its neck by the tool shed,  
used a chisel to press down,  
crush bone, sever the connection  
between wide-eyed, open-beaked head  
and chest, quivering, dog-tooth-sized wounds  
matting feathers with blood, wounds  
insufficient to quickly bring the unavoidable,  
to end the quaking of shallow breaths,  
still the flutter of wrecked wings.

Movement stopped, I scoop the body into a bucket,  
feel the weight of an ended life,  
toss the carcass over the fence  
into fresh snow.

## Ornithology

It was not a slamming door,  
an explosive shout or shattered vase  
that placed the period  
at the end of our sentence;

it was a bright, sterile light,  
sharp eyes peering over the surgical mask,  
and the stainless-steel specificity  
of the tweezers with which you pulled  
from the dry cavity of my chest  
the delicate heart, placed it  
within a tiny jar in the  
spurious immortality of formaldehyde,  
set it beside feathers on a shelf,  
beside hollow, marrowless bones, scaly claws,  
the tiny, harmless skull,  
emptied of all memory of open spaces.

### Three Souls

A crow is someone's soul  
it's said, and I believe,  
standing, surrounded by black, rustling souls  
in this tiny municipal park,

one soul shifting its weight,  
foot to scaly foot, on a naked branch,  
another sifting through dry leaves

and empty Tobasco packets, a third  
sidling suspiciously around the rim  
of a rusted iron garbage barrel,  
appraising me with a single button-black eye,

deciding if I am predator or prey,  
assessing what dangers may be hidden  
beneath my flapping brown coat,  
behind the reflective plastic panels that cover my eyes,

wariness the natural state of souls re-embodied  
in cloaks of satin black.

Should the lookout fail in his vigilance,

the flock will pull the warm liquid of life  
from his feathered chest with stony beaks,  
a swift death the only mercy  
one soul may afford another.



## Did You Know?

Last spring, when a stiff March wind  
blew away the flowers from the bare granite headstones,  
swept away the colorful bedclothes of the dead,  
and tore the laundry from the lines,  
mixing the sheets of neighbors in front yards  
with scandalous abandon,  
did you already know? When April's week of pounding rain  
left a sheen of oily rainbows along the sidewalks downtown  
and pooled in the upturned leaves of trilliums in the park,  
did you know you were lying  
when you said, "See you soon?"  
Did you know when the heavy, black-curtained coach of death  
pulled up to the curb outside your house  
on your quiet street, you would climb in without protest,  
pay your silver coin, and ride away into the long night?  
Did you know the emptiness you would become?  
The howling, angry absence behind my navel,  
the tiny black hole punctuating  
every sentence in every poem forever?

## 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

I will walk with you home,  
hand-in-hand, like children,  
hatless in the rain. I will open  
the door, let out the dog,

put on your tea. As you lie  
down, I will bring your cup  
and saucer, napkin and sandwiches.

I will watch your hands,

still butterflies folded  
on your stomach, skin thin  
as onion peel, rising and  
falling with each breath

as you sleep on the sofa. Setting your tea  
on the coffee table, I will sit in the armchair,  
grab a book to lay open  
on my chest as I close my eyes,

ready, should your breaths stop coming,  
to follow.