

Darkening



The simple joy of riding with good friends in a car coming back from a barn dance on the edge of a great lake in mid-March, driving through falling snow on blizzarding country roads, past farms, silos, cattle barns recessed in deep shadows as *Stand By Me* spills from the radio. But on that night our car hit black ice and skittered across the road's slick surface like a water bug — twenty-odd yards — before coming to rest in a snowbank beside a farmer's house. A man appeared out of the dark, walking down his laneway. He asked if anyone was hurt. Are you okay? Seeing the car was undamaged, he said he could tow it out with his tractor. I remember that night walking up the road, a hundred yards or more, in the moonless dark, without so much as a flare or a flashlight to wave down passing cars, wondering why my friends and I had survived the crash. Wondering why I was not dead. I can still see myself standing impatiently, wind barreling across fields, over snow fences, the cold licking raw the flesh beneath my jacket, trying to hail the drivers of three cars not bothering to stop, not quite certain whether they saw a figure half-glimpsed in the helixing snow at that late hour, a messenger risen up from the ground, to warn them of some impending hazard until too late they found an old tractor

upon the road. And what I remember
of that night will not call back anyone
from the past. Not the vehicles swerving
to carve a wide groove in a winter field
crusted with thin ice and eddying snow.
Not the farmer on the tractor cursing,
his breath rising, a white scar, mixing in
plumes of diesel smoke in the chilly air.
Not even my younger self, who I see
standing roadside like an apparition
turning his body to stare back down
the dark hallway of a moment ago.

Exodus

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The wind in the white birches
moves across the valley's floor,
the farms, the fields, the orchards
where fruit pickers long gone
work each new harvest season
singing laments and drinking
rum in the cool evenings
of cheap roadside motel rooms.
It rushes past the villages
and townships, the stone fences,
the barbed wire, as if looking
for its name etched, chiseled
among white cemeteries
with historical bronze plaques
beside gas stations for sale,
or underneath small bridges
in the storyless silence
of creeks and rivers flowing
through generations of lives
built along their muddy banks.
Wending through every shape
— ravines, gorges, and forests —
it moves deeply inside even us,
wanting to lie in our bodies,
and not keep moving, looking
always for a place to rest.

Winter Cranes

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My wife saw birds pass over the frozen pond
and wondered aloud if they were cranes,
desiring proof of their corporeal existence
to mark them as either a tangible reality
or a fantasy born of some lack in our lives.
Their wings beat exultantly, blossoming,
a wild spume of feathers backlit by morning sun
so they looked like more than just creatures
but symbols ferried from myth or poetry
to satisfy my wife's wishes or my need to place
a few lines down upon the blank sheet
of this morning's latest offering of snow.
I said they were only herons. The same ones
from last summer come back a little early,
guided by an instinct, a faint signal, hard-wired
in their brains to the earth's magnetic fields
allowing them to navigate their way here
each year to stand like sentries, silhouettes
against the pond's grey light, if only to teach us
how even patience can be a kind of violence.
"I want them to be cranes," my wife said again,
a little more forcefully this time, so her words
were now a truth or a sacrament of experience
fully grasped, making us hungry for the dynasties
of the past we believe such birds emerge from
like after-images of a dream only now recalled.
"I wish they were cranes too," I said, watching
the pair descending towards the farthest end
of the pond where the ice was the thinnest,
the city hardening its shell in the background,
still waiting for the winter storms to come.

Locations



Meadowlark, sweetgrass, milkweed bursting like cotton-fluff:
all of nature's excesses burgeoning in a vacant lot
bounded on one side by a suburb full of blasé dot-com-ers,
vassals of the new economy, who drive expensive SUVs
and marinate their lawns in chemicals, and on the other side
a meat factory whose workers sit on little picnic benches
and smoke in the summer sunshine while on lunch break

beside tiny purple flowers whose name I have forgotten
and which are probably weeds anyway. Nearby,
a little boy in a Batman mask stands at the end of his street
waving at strangers as a river of cars washes by.
Young mothers push infants in strollers, exchange numbers,
sipping chai lattes, while even the elderly are out
teetering on sidewalks in small groups of two or three

(they hold onto each other like survivors of a small war zone).

Each step is a battle they wage with their bodies
so full as they are of old griefs and consolations. Little birds
strafe the air. Their mellifluous voices breezing past
a young blind man out walking with his shirt off — the tick tick
of his white cane on the cement taking a constant
measure of his contentment. An army of lawn mowers

sound warnings to civilization in the distance. Back across
the road, who is crouching in the middle of the lot
deep inside the wild phlox and red clover, staring through
the tall grasses at the black gates to the underworld?
What has he found among the anthills, the grasshoppers,
the commercial real estate sign, but a no man's land —
one that needs to be itemized, one leaf, one rock, at a time.

Rome



Once I found myself in a strange and eternal city
where saints and angels looked down upon me
from every building. A city built on immortality;
narrow cobblestone streets and marble palazzos
quarried from myth and history and Italian hills.

I had been drinking red wine and feeling sorry
for my luck, sitting with new companions, two
Irish men and a tall American girl, all of them

chattering while I sulked, mourning the loss of
three days' travel time, after I was found without
a metro ticket at Stazione Termini, and promptly
fined a hundred thousand lire by a police officer.

I was twenty-six years old, seated on the Spanish
Steps, right across from the house where Keats
lay suffering on his deathbed for almost a month
coughing up at times a full pint of blood a day,

while his friend Severn, the painter, mopped up
a sweat clinging like beaded ice to his cheeks
and played for him an arrangement of Haydn's
symphonies on a rented piano until one night
he died. His life consumed too soon, Keats went
into whatever knowing death is, leaving behind
the smoking noun of his name, abandoning it
to ill fame and fate. But at the time, I was not

thinking of poetry, or the high price Keats paid
at his journey's end. I was a foolish young man
thinking of myself, and how I would have to stop
my trip without having seen the Alps. I knew

nothing about transcendence. Only the wish to be
elsewhere. I was not thinking about that famous
young man who had come to that city before me
dreaming of faraway lands he would never see.