Light, Flashback, Flight

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Because I was young that morning
In gray light untouched on the rug
And our gifts were so few, propped
Along the furniture, for a second
My heart fell, then saw how large
They’d made the spaces between them

To take the place of less. Because
The curtained sun rose brightly
On our discarded paper and the things
Themselves, these forty years,
Have grown too small to see, the emptiness
Measured out remains the gift,

Fills the whole room now, that whole year
Out across the snowy lawn. Because
A drop of shame burned quietly
In the province of love. Because
We had little that year and were given much.

Paul Zarzyski

Light
for Fred Lighter

He cherished the chunk of burled apple
bucked from the trunk
of his grandfather’s oldest tree – cured,
stored, packed, and moved it with Audubon art,
alongside Victorian rococo, from home
to new home, through his feisty thirties,
through mid-life crises into his tender fifties
until the wedding of a close friend
brought us to his hearth
one cool Seattle afternoon. We watched him
lay the log onto the grate
cradled with cedar
kindling the color of straw, lay it
gently as a priest placing the swaddled infant
into the manger of the crèche. Lord,
how that apple burl beamed
its radiance behind the bride and groom,
and long after their kiss, still glowed
brighter yet behind him
sitting close to the firelight’s shadow play,
the ceiling alive with crows
dancing to the pantomime
of his limber fingers wheeling their excited flight
as he spoke to us of his first love
for rich earth.

His grandfather taught him,
while planting saplings together
on their knees, to know the loam as sacred
living flesh – to cup it loosely in both hands
embracing it close enough to see
within its darkness, the starlight,
close enough to hear the high
pitch a single sparkling granule sings
shifting into its new, unique niche
in the universe – until once, so charmed
while savoring the sweet
sweet breath, he barely caught himself reaching the pink
tip of his tongue, like an angleworm,
toward the dirt, his grandfather coaxing him on
with a chuckle. As we laughed, each spark
became a burgundy seed. We relived
with him the bushels of intimate fruit
he knew in his youth, and we too felt
the brisk autumns of first-frost harvests
so real, we flinched at the thought of windfall
thump and bruise.

After the last champagne toast,
we left him alone with his embers
living long past midnight
when we dreamt him
sifting through cupped hands
to each sapling in his backyard orchard
the warm ash at dawn, fairy tale
glitter dust, as magical
as photosynthesis itself – this sunlit sprinkle,
this gift of grandfather
friendship passed on
through the family of the rose.

Flashback

Please fill my ear with softer sound,
I wish, lifting a thrift store conch shell
and cringing, one week after the crash,
still to the jagged-edged
noise of chain
collision – pain in the rotator cuff
of what I will call, till the day I die,
my throwing arm. August gone,
dusk no longer able
to tuck the sultriness of sun
and hold its sweaty warmth up
under Montana’s hefty September moon, I am drawn
from the sea I could not hear
to a wooden Pabst Blue Ribbon box
stored in a cobwebbed corner of the garage
so sentimentally empty
without our family car. I stand in its space.
I am amazed by the body,
man-made or otherwise, surviving
on its original four-banger heart
umpteen years, a quarter million miles,
all warranties, rebates, guarantees,
long ago expired.

The crumpled Rawlings football
flops from the beer box with no more bounce
than hockey skates and fielder’s mitt
onto the concrete slab. I spit
in my palm, wet the needle, work it
clockwise into the stiff valve and witness
leather – unlike glass or metal –
taking back its shape. My grip fits
the laces with a craving
for simplicity fulfilled. I throw the pump-fake,
then perfect spiral. Across the pasture
a pair of colts watch the pigskin
launching almost vertical,
just a bit more trajectory each time
until I can not quite race under it
to make the fingertip snag, a boy’s
playful hands atrophied
to hooves. I think better of the Hail Mary pass
toward my tailback receivers
trotting rocky ground
into the sunset.
I must have thought cortege—
blinded as my head snapped back
to track the next toss, whiplash
shooting again through the trapezius,
and two geese surprising my eye
where the ball once flew—I must have sensed
at that sad moment the dying
Princess in a Paris tunnel with her mate
already dead, the dark blue
Mercedes demolished
one week to the hour after we walked
away from similar aftermath, body and soul
out of the blurred midst of the twisted.

The ball
disappears into the crown of a Lombardy
poplar bobbling it just
long enough for me to slide
my splayed hand
between leather and earth, knuckles
skinned. Because summer barely hangs on yet
in branches fleshted thick and breaking
the fall, today this is what life takes
and death gives back—the split-
second intimacy inside a car spinning
out of control, hit and hit again and still
spinning as I learn
what thin significant space
a single leaf, love
passing before our eyes, fills.
Flight

I felt a little miffed that first morning
the great horned owl did not return
with her fledgling to their nest in my hollow balm of Gilead tree, to their tabernacle
facing east – gentle buss of sunrise
softening even further the tufted chick
when I tiptoed out to say *good-day*
before my first cup of joe,
one scowling old bird, I thought,
of this earth to another. The dawn greeting
had become a ritual that boosted us,
I deemed, beyond the gloom of Tribune news,
into our more civilized, personable world. And so,
upset by their rude rejection of my good will,
I marched up the coulee to search
the abandoned lambing shed for the nocturnal birds I felt I deserved to call
my friends. How could they desert me
without so much as one wing beat
of warning?

Their velvety gray pellets
piled below each rafter perch
and a knife-blade feather preened loose
was all I found on the dirt
floor where I stood stunned
in the dankness of an empty nest. The grimace
of a shrew’s ivory crossbones and toothed skull,
hatched from the chasm
of an old dry pellet, made me back away,
frame my face in a paneless window,
and brood.

Peering into the steep
glacial hillside shingled with limestone and shale,
alive with lichen and bright violet verbena,
I climbed, not stepping on one petal,
to the rim where I raised
my single wing feather
and waited.

For the first time, I witnessed earth
as painful host, not much hope
for some grand galactic raptor
stooping to pick the globe clean. Out of nowhere
I caught myself wishing for such
heroic stroke, softly brushed
my fingertips across the blossoming
tufts of downy verbena at my side,
and understood the mother owl
as mother earth, yearning,
within orbit and soar,
to rid themselves of me for good.

Pramila Venkateswaran

Diminuendo

I had imagined the drama of my parents’ separation:
suitcases stuffed with mother’s saris, my dresses,
tattered Tamil magazines, silverware, and photos
lined up at the door; mother had sent the maid
to fetch the taxi. Soon we were on a train, speeding
to grandma’s. At every episode, I changed the ending.