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"Thanksgiving, 1621," "John Billington's Exile," "Waking in Plymouth"

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Three Poems

DAVID RODERICK

Thanksgiving, 1621

As seasoned birds drip from an iron spit,
the Wampanoag stuff apples into deer
And Massasoit opens his quillbox
for a cut of ottommaocke to pack his pipe.
Frozen in the fields, children wait
for wings to descend from the clouds,
Then they mock and flap in a dance
that sends each flock back over the hillside.
The scent of roasting deer mingles
on the wind, causing clouds to disappear
Into the blue hue over sassafras trees,
then children realign in the fields:
Tag in a goat pen, snap the whip,
a wooden puppet buried in a haystack
For a child to find and pirouette
among dishes of butter and cream.
Look at the cottages looming in sections
of old forest, the trail to a waterspring
Crusted in ice, translucent pieces treasured
by children and men with blistered hands.
So cold and splendid, advancing winter,
when split wood leans between trees.
Look at the flush goodwives whispering
as they walk to the spring, buckets girdered
On their shoulders and more children growing
inside their bodies, meekly concealed,
As if each wife reconciles what is hidden
with her need to hide it beneath a frock.
Look at the hawk-feathers in Massasoit's hair,
the blue lisp from his pipe, the crabs

That broil in their shells on the fire's lip.

A heap of askoot-aquashes simmers

In pulp and seeds. It is cold by the ocean.

Children run from the fields, breathless,

Pieces of straw attached to their jerkins

and matted hair, their collars loosened.

It is getting dark now in Plymouth.

The men take notice after they fill themselves

With venison and bellarmine of wine.

It is getting dark now. Their cider is gone.

Just when they would like to loosen

their cloaks they must knot them against

A winter that promises to rout the coastline.

They kneel in conference with Squanto

And wonder what God has in store for them

beyond this plentiful year: a bundle of arrows

Wrapped in a snake skin, savage disease,

a killing frost that would likely require

Bringing the goats into their kitchens.

Thanks-be-to-God for the salted cod packed

In the storehouse, victuals and beer,

the crate of red berries picked from the marshes.

Thanks-be-to-God for these racks of deer,

the blessed gift of Massasoit, our friend.

John Billington's Exile

The only way to see John Billington
is to imagine him limping beneath the lintels
of beam trees with a blunderbuss under his arm,
hiking a wash of stones that runs
behind my house to a pond without a name,
his haven from duties in Plymouth:
the months of planting corn and raising stones.

Forget the texts in Pilgrim Hall,
the dank ledgers, the pages filled
with plots and the portraits of clouds.
Forget his signature quilled
onto pacts with colonists and God
and the dozen bloodlines that branch
into the trunk that is his name.

The only way to see John Billington
is to imagine him digging
his bed in the mulch
and tying lines to catch shad,
never again to borrow from town:
his name etched in the governor's book
for food or a draught of mead.

I, too, have grown tired of Plymouth,
with its tidy past and the fungi
that thrive in its intemperate libraries,
so I follow John Billington
to a sanctum for pintails and swans
where I can rest for a while like him
inside a den of scented loam.

And I am weary of time as well,
the way it blows into my mouth,
so I build a fire in the gill-rinsed gloom.
Then I open my notes and begin to write
a story by the pond, one never heard,
a story that tells about the haunt and fade
of the bearded figure just beyond my firelight.

Waking in Plymouth

The moon fronts a hill of hemlock, northern ash,
open spaces crowned with markers

that lean, their names washed away.
I can walk there any time, swallow the lump

in my throat, think of a word like sand.
I can imagine the Wampanoag burial ground

steamshoveled over, replaced by cracked
lots and restaurants of salt and anti-salt:

quahogs, crabs, a great ministry of shells.
I wait for the next migration onto the beach,

froth of the breaks, tangled weeds,
a quilt of plankton that gleams in the moonlight.

What pain crawls from those waves. What night.
To get to the present I dream of the past:

squat cabins assembling near the water,
a sea wall mustered stone by stone.

And my father rises from the ocean
with a sack of clams over his shoulder.

And my mother tumbles from the woods
with a hamper of mushrooms in her arms.

And I watch while they make commerce
on a hill that looks over the water.