August 2014

Skiing Home at Dusk; The House Not Home; Solstice, Entering Capricorn

Jay Parini
Skiing Home at Dusk

This is the blessed hour when shadows lengthen
on the bloodlit snow, when skiers mount
the billows with an ease, a forward _shush_,

and memory excites the tilt toward home:
the florid fire that blossoms over logs,
the candle and the book, hibernal harvest.

Motion through the trees collects the soul,
a whispering in transit, wind that's caught
like music in a flute's brief wooden throat.

This is the hour of accepted grace,
when everywhere we've been comes down to this:
the edge of day, where particles of thought

cohere like atoms in a structured dance
around one center that we call ourselves,
like poetry: the patterned perfect dance

of sentences that rise and fall with sense,
a language adequate to what we see
and feel and hear, a broad equivalence,

the center of the mind as clear as winter
with its empty backlit zero sky,
the motes of snow-dust blowing from the trees.

This is the hour when skiers and their skis
make one crisp sound, when every object
whistles out its name, when _home_ is home.
The House Not Home

We're running out the long way home
these huckleberry days of late July
when sunlight honeys on the road we trace
past blue-eyed ponds and stony fields,
where nobody would find themselves by chance
so deep inside Vermont. On ham-red clay,
we follow up a steep unwinding slope
in lazy time. Our pulses quicken at
the hill's high brow; then suddenly—a house
appears. Whose house? Without a clue, we stop
to nose around. The kitchen counters are
too clear for people with the ordinary pangs.
We guess that they have gone away till Monday,
assuming chairs on their broad porch, its widow's
walk too lovely not to linger underneath,
old wicker rockers squeaky on the floorboards
painted not a week or two before. America
is houses: big ones made of wood in hollow
valleys where we only dream, loose-jointed
afternoons in crooks and niches, lovage
and blue sage, the hollyhocks that crowd
red barns, a windlass and a pail. We're taught
to long for everything we see or think we see,
but not to sit on other people's porches when
they're gone, told not to snip a curlicue
of spice, an overripened pear, a past-peak
blossom from the hawthorn's branch. America
is property, one's own, appropriately
chosen, paid for, painted and, sometimes,
protected by alarms. We're taught as babies
to collect our toys in separate bundles, balls
and rattles, colorful as nature never matches:
gumball blue or fire engine red. We're told
to dig our sandbox with conviction, love
its warm surrounding blond undirtied sand.
I think about my father and his house,
how Saturdays, his ties strung up like thieves,
his overalls in place, he'd don a ladder
and begin to scrape or paint or hammer, always
with maniacal conviction that the world's best end was perfect siding. Even now I comment on this paint, a creamy yellow with contrasting green for shutters, sills.

Unfathomable, the richness in our grasp: the huckleberries, grackles, weeping birch, a lawn so green to lie on it your soul would take on color and go green as well. The loudest cardinal we've ever heard drills through these woods. I lay my sneakers to one side, socks off, to aerate my toes in breezy air, the air like water in its headlong dash across clean stones.

Is Earth still spinning? I can find no trace of decomposing matter: cricket shells, mosquito wings, or punky firewood. Every little rock looks like a diamond in its whitewashed way, so evenly illumined not one facet has to hide its charm. Inside, through windows with a pale ammonia tinge, we see how properly composed, a room can lead one into meditations on the final things: simplicity and grace. The Queen Anne highboy is so right, the table is so bare, its bowl of fruit exquisitely at ease in holding fruit: two Granny Smiths, a bright banana, and some nectarines. The light fulfills them in their shapes and colors. Wide-plank floors are perfect in their piney waxen glow; they tilt into the air, convinced that gravity is good for all. The crooked doorways that you have to dip through teach us to adjust, competing with our bodies for one space. Our souls inflate to occupy the spaces we provide. America is strong in rural houses that contain our passions, keep our joys within the human bounds of what is plain, though summer afternoons like this one are an unexpected danger for the heart-at-bay. One easily believes a lofty and benignly blazing sun will never budge, that shadows aren't inklings.
of what's near, that berries are a permanent blue fixture on the swollen bush. One easily assumes this role: paterfamilias to a house of ghosts, constructing pasts to fit the present fitness of all things.

Come, friend, let's go. This house, for all its shimmering facade, is not our home. This noonday island doesn't say a thing about what's coming: long hard hills, the day's decline along the western ridge of our green world, the darkened bedroom where we must take arms against the falling hours.
Solstice, Entering Capricorn

In far off states, the snow is falling
over silent fields that hide
the missiles, blue deer

running in the frozen woods behind the wind,
the winter apples black as figs,
choke cherries buried

in the plates of ice beyond recall.
In submarines, off shore, sub-zero weather,
warheads sleep

like prehistoric fish with one eye open.
Hammerheads move slowly through the depths,
the minnows darken.

Wolves tug firmly on their leash of sound
on Russian steppes
as bombers wait in icy hangars,

pilots shiver through the dreamless sleep
of those on call.
The black crows gather overhead in minds

of mice and rabbits. Spinning
in an ether all its own,
the earth knows nothing of its slow disease

as Capricorn, the goat-horn, digs
for spring, unable to contain its forward
tilt, its ignorant religion.