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Peeling Fence Posts and Other Poems

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Peeling Fence Posts

Not till I hatchet a slice
the long way, slow but sure,
from the shagbark hickory
does this tough customer
shuck his warty slats
like long underwear.

The agreeable yellow birch
spooling her curls
like a typewriter ribbon
loosed from its socket
lets go in spirals,
in tendrils of neck hair

whereas, hard as it is,
ash splits its skin clean,
gives me a pry-hold,
comes away like a glove.
I finger the torso under,
pale, wet, alive.

Turning brown as a tribe
all stand leaning
together in the barrel
of oil deepened with creosote
where, in rainbow blobs
released from pith and cortex,
their tree souls float.
Relearning the Language of April

Where this man walks his fences
the willows do pliés with green laces,
eyelashes fly from the white plums,
the gaunt elms begin to open their frames.

When he passes, lithe with morning,
the terriers, rump-deep in a chuckhole,
boom out to follow,
the squirrels chirrup like cardinals.

Five prick-eared ponies
lift from their serious chewing.
The doomed cattle, wearing
intelligent smiles, turn.

For miles around, the plowed fields
release a sweet rancidness
warm as sperm.

I lie in the fat lap of noon
overhearing the doves’ complaint.
Far off, a stutter of geese raise alarms.

Once more, Body, Old Paint,
how could you trick me like this
in spring’s blowzy arms?
Stopped Time in Blue and Yellow

Today the violets turn up blue
in the long grass as ever
a heaven can, the sea-calm color
of promises ballooning into view.
Stems long enough to lace
around your oval wrist,
small petal face
the wash of Waterman's ink,
vigilant cat's eye at the center
yellow as the sluice box where cows drink.

Today under the blue line
that covers your pulse I feel
the small purling sounds
your body makes, going on.
Time squats in the blue-spurred grass
like a yellow blister
and love in the long foreplay of spring
follows skyblue after.
Never

*Good for you!* he calls
beside me as I take
the chicken coop, the in-
and-out, the double oxer, all
without sucking back,
springing off my hocks
as if at Ledyard,
an Olympic champ.
Down the mud slide I whirl
clearing the drop jump,
the one my heart
lurches over, clinging
to my soft palate
where it thumps
like a snared rabbit.

O heart, we are
a pair of good girls
hurdling the ditch
at the bottom of the chute
and up the other side, *good for you!* victorious
not over fear, my lifelong boarder,
morose skulker about the house,
but over time. The large
child inside leaps up
for daddy’s loud kiss,
for daddy’s lollipop.

Body on body riding hard
*good for you!* I play to spin
this game out to the end,
never coming to the part
where we stop,
where the jumps are set
too high, and darkness wins.
Spending the Night

As bubbles are baked
into the risen loaf
so the small hot apprehension
of my death is folded in me
each time you enter my body.

Even while we hold each other
rising more surely than hornflies
to beat against the ceiling
Death tags along like a Saint Bernard
padding across his own night-alp.

Afterward I dial the grave.
My father speaks, his voice
is thin yet clear as lightning forks.
Stay home! No visitors! he calls.

While you sprawl in sleep
arms outflung like a child's
my tongue tries the salt
of this dream.

In the cup
of your armpit the Spoiler lurks.
Snatched out, held down, this one
time more I pass him in the dark.
An Unfinished Story

A habit I can't break, caring.
In sleep the signs come on long as a freight train:
a vestibule of old galoshes,
squirrel bones in the wall
and last of all, the college racing shell
he used to flip up like an umbrella,
this brother I love, in real life shrivelled
by a disease that wastes the large muscles.

Tonight he strides in rosy-cheeked
and eighteen in the pectorals
to announce he has six months to live and plans
for every hour: Pompeii, galloping
the moors at Devon, The Great Wall,
lots more sex. Further, he means to kill
time with a perpetual-motion cell.

Stickered like a housefly to the ceiling
a small watcher whispers, this is
only a dream. I take it, I run it through.
It is less terrible
than what I will wake to.
The Incest Dream

Brother, the story's still unfinished; you
struggle up as best you can,
three-legged now as in the riddle of the Sphinx,
the whole left side of you dumb
to the brain's fiercest commands.
Talking is problematical; vowels distort
rising against the numbness in your throat.

Still, we've been out to dinner,
assorted husbands, wives,
and driving back through rain the sidewise swipe
of memory delivers a lightstruck
picture of us, ages four and six
propped in matching sailor suits
against a railing on the Boardwalk,
both wearing the family lower lip,
the family shock of hair,
two savages spruced up for Grandma's Sunday
in the roller chair.

Listen! I love you!
I've always loved you!
And so we totter and embrace
surrounded in an all-night garage
by theater-goers barking for their cars,
the obedient machines spiralling down
level by level as we block
the exit saying our goodbyes,
you tangled in your cane, my black
umbrella flapping like a torn bat.

At 3 a.m. I'm driven to such extremes
that when the sorrowing hangman
brings me your severed penis still
tumescent from the scaffold
yet dried and pressed as faithfully
as a wildflower
I put it away on my closet shelf
and lie back down in my lucky shame.