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Three Poems

Ben Howard

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Three Poems

BEN HOWARD

Metamorphosis

In his cold advancing years he became the ironwood,
Gnarled, dense, never to be preferred
For its grace or opulence
Or for the coolness of its shade.
In a checked stump I see his reticence
And in the heartwood's whitened blot his solitude.

Strange, that a form so stolid should lay claim
To a fleet and liberating spirit,
Which once had dwelt in fire
And in the almond's flowering white.
Or was that parent selfhood always there,
Waiting to be discovered and restored to home?

Descent

First snow. Into winter's
Canyon one

Descends. The ambered
Walls grow taller, day

By day. Like a fugitive
In chains, one leans

Backward to brake
The force that tugs

One downward, past
The porticoes

Of ice, the legends etched
In snow. At winter's

Heart, a thousand feet
Below, one sees

The tumid river, thick
With frost, the noonday's

Yellow light
That burns, and fosters nothing.

Reading Room

You enter through oaken doors
And you see the tables, ranked
Beneath fluorescent lights. For a moment, now,
You forget what has brought you here.
Scholars and students read their books,
Not watching you. One takes notes
Half-consciously, not looking at her pad.
Another, wearing a coat
That could be yours, hunches over his text
As though protecting it, while still another
Stares at the wall. What measures and
What pains, what inarticulate desires
Have brought you here? In other rooms
A woman is baking bread, a man
Is cutting cloth, or tallying
A bill. Those other rooms,
That are not Reading Rooms, are not
For you. Nor can that man who made
Those choices years ago, be brought to book
Or forced to answer. You are his captive now,
Though all your projects be completed
And all your words be read.