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Cover: Robert Shetterly Jr.
Beech Leaves

BATHING KARI IN THE BLUE TUB

She shows no fear, but strips herself,
This child who is not mine.
Gingerly, she lifts each pale foot
Into the filling tub—white porcelain in blue.
Face uplifted, she waits.

But I pause now, and take
A certain deliberation in wringing the cloth.
Squatting on her heels in the water,
She pulls herself in against a chill.

If the power were mine to bless with water,
Who would command me, "Bless"?
Since great chiefs and commanders have passed
over water,

Since they've taken their graceful daughters with them,
Since the Sybils and Delphinians are no more,
Or are silent, we can only wash with water.
Smoothing back this chestnut hair,
Hair that merits violets, green oak leaves,
Or one primrose twisted behind the ear—
Sponging this translucent skin.
Damp with a velvet dampness,
Like the wing of a new-hatched insect
Quivering on the branch.

Though this water lacks both rose and hyssop,
No one will forbid me if I bless in secret:
Bless now, hands, bless this beauty that is none of mine.
Even now, under old oaks, beside older streams,
The strongest magic reaches to bless the beauty
That is not mine.

Amy Kessel

rites of women**i.**

One turns the whetstone,
one holds the blade.
When the edge is ground
from the April noon,
they move to the cellar
through flat, cyclone doors,
my mother, my grandmother,
low amid the gunny sacks.

Potatoes fall
in their laps, an eye
for each chunk, a quick blade
into moist white flesh, the snap
of the knife. Trying to learn,
I snap sprouts that thrust their way
through the gunny sacks, white, swollen,
big as my five-year-old thumb.
"Child! Stop that!" my grandmother says,
"What can you be thinking of?
This is how things grow!"

ii.

Steam rises from guts as my breath
rises winter mornings when I wake
to frosted windows, a furnace burned low.
“Casings,” my grandmother calls them,
and they spill on the oilcloth,
casks of blue and steaming pearls
fetched like a dowry in dishpans
from the bellowing walls of the shed.

I stroke the opalescent loops, poke
membrane like the skin on open cream.

“Next year,” I say,

“I will watch when they do it.”

“No you won’t,” my mother says.

To kill the steer is a rite of men.

iii.

In the time of thinning cabbages,
I stoop with my mother to the waving row,
try to take the discards from her,
hoard them for some garden of my own.

“There is room for so much—no more,”

she says, and limp stems go
to the compost heap. No grief
among the cabbages, no tears
for what must go. She leans
on the rake, looks down at me:

“It’s like pruning,” she says,
and I know the rest: it’s the ritual
of choosing—it’s how we live.

Sonia Gernes

FIVE POEMS**Our Late Garden**

Our late garden...
scooped like a squared pool in the morning shadow
of the woods.
We tried the double digging,
that old, English, good-gardener work
And ended with the sods heaped on the rim instead.
Double-digging is work for willing muscles
and a dreaming mind that thinks of gardens lush
and vigorous
feeding deep on all that topsoil:
an unexpected present beneath the roots.
The thought of that slow, silent greediness satisfied,
of feasting plants, okra, chard, and beans, sweetens
the sweat.
But this was waste land, long in weeds,
and worse,
another's ground.
We two, working in the dimming hours,
were shadowed earlier than most by the valley's
rising walls
that left our garden floor dark
while the sky was still light.
We sighed for the giving up
and gave up.

But our pool is growing.
The tomatoes, tied to tall maple stakes,
release their hairy, aromatic scent when I lean
among them,
nipping half-reluctantly the suckers that leap between
stem and branch.
My father always removed the suckers,
said tomatoes would fruit sooner, grow better.
In late afternoon
breathing the heavy fragrance of tomato leaf trusses
my fingers reach to empty the crotch
of growing twigs.
He died in August. This is for him.
He was a gardener; sifted his compost to tobacco
leaf richness,
knotted his own nets for string beans and peas.
I remember the year he made pickles.
In the narrow pantry, lit by the single high window,
he leaned over his row of gallon jars like a
brooding alchemist,
tilting, deciding, decanting.
He had to bend to avoid the cabinets; his shadow
moved over the bottles
as if it, too, conferred flavour.
He was a mathematician and methodical
and gravely told me each ingredient,
but the air of mystery hung palpable.
When they were finally ready,
he seemed to hold his breath,
and when I ate them, eagerly, with the mouth of love
he straightened, lightened.
The flavour was unexpected and strange.
I'd expected a paragon of pickles, got a sorcerer's pickle,
queerly satisfying, stinging, unrepeatable,
tasting of the sharp-edged mystery of primes,
the cryptic allusions of pi.

Storm

He slid the biggest plate back into the dishwater,
caught my arm as I left the kitchen.
“Don’t take your shower yet; come outside a minute.
I’ve been watching something out the back door.”
Obedient, I pulled on the yellow caftan,
the one with sleeves down to the knees,
and we stepped out of the kitchen’s soap and potato smells
into blowing darkness.
The wind belled my caftan.
We stood in a dark pasture of wind.
Around the horizon
flickered fences of lightning,
that lit the roiling clouds
like flashlights shining into a dark paddock
crowded with seething horses,
and catching flanks curving out of the light,
rumps curling into it and out again,
too briefly lit to follow back into the darkness.
We stared toward the clouds, tried to see
lower, black, individual ones in the next flashings,
but the lightning shifted places,
now behind the trees, making them stark lace,
now in front, turning them livid green.
The thunder muttered, rolled, and advanced,
rumbling closer,
the fence of lightning closing in. A whistling implosion:
a tree, split; the rains came.
The morning glories lifted away from the house
like a cape in a heavy gust of wind,
and we stumbled over the stones
into the kitchen, turned, and faced the violent yard.
The grass flattened; the fence of lightning
was now inside our own. The garden, grass, trees

leaped in and out of focus
so brightly lit that colours showed, so black between
that the afterimage in the hollow of our eyes
overlapped the next burst of light,
gave us double vision.

December Field

This is an early winter field,
gently sloping, textured with weeds
(featherstitch of golden rod, and
french knotting of dry Queen Anne's Lace).
Stubble from the late fall has grown
into longer fringe. Pleached grasses
lie puffed like trapunto work on
a cushiony, freshly fluffed quilt.
Beneath these puffs, these combed rollings,
moves thin, dark water, secretly.
It curves like a cold sleeper,
one who mutters, dreaming of warmth,
tugs at his blankets, nests, and pulls;
and overhead, the pulled grasses,
stretched straighter by the water than
by wind alone, mark the course
of the hidden stream, and pucker
like a tautly pulled basting thread.

Summer Night Fog

The summer night's fog
has beaded the Siberian iris
and hung drops on every point
of every mint leaf.
Moonstone pools lie in the moonflower cups.
They're all there by my back door,
to either crowding side
of the grey flagstone.
I stare at them and rub the doorsill,
feeling the cold stone on the ball of my foot.
An arched iris leaf holds a series
of silver-bottomed water beads, delicately in balance;
a single bead moves slightly,
the leaf gives a faint throb,
and the beads roll glittering down the leaf and off the end,
strike a morning glory leaf
and set it springing
and then sink into a dark rosette of ajuga.
The fog shifts slightly
out there past the reach of my porch light.
The stones run with damp.
When I go to bed, I leave on the light.
No one is coming, no one will see...
But just so easily I can keep
these king's ransoms all night glinting
in the fog coiling by my doorstep.
If I turn out the light,
all this jewelery,
this extravagance of arc and crystal,
moonstone and glinting silver,
will go somewhere in the dark.

“If you think it is hard to see the shape of water”

If you think it is hard to see the shape of water
you should try to feel the shapes of smells.
(And shapes they have, to yield or strike.)
Lean over a pot of simmering vinegar
that's changing cucumbers
into pickles.
One inhale and you'll know that shape for life:
sharp, spiked, and aggressive.
Contrariwise,
the smell of lilacs is silken, quilted, and slides
like a satin, down-filled comforter.
The smell of roses full blown is soft, dusty.
Soap has an uncertainty about its edges;
it's like moving your hand slowly along a planed,
but as yet unsanded wooden plank.
Screen doors, during a rain storm,
have a tart scent, tautly textured, fresh,
lovely, regrettably evanescent.
An orange peel, sharply folded between thumb
and forefinger,
spurting its tiny flares through the candle's flame,
has a cool roundness in the smell of its oily mist,
and a glisten, like the gleaming bells
of horns in the sunlight: trumpets, bugles, cornet.
You can see and feel so interchangeably.
Pine needles,
spongy and hot where they're pressed to the ground
by shafts of sunlight, have a scent
as luxurious as plunging your hands into deep, soft fur.
That smell can hook you back into the past,
as can the smell of new books, a rubber bathing cap,
a pencil box, a salt marsh quiet at low tide,
cinnamon
and the smell of snow.

Pamela Perkins Atkinson

TWO POEMS**Cold Churches****1.**

Each stands starch stiff
and starch white against black
spruces and pale blue hills.
No footprints in the snow. No smoke.
Each is painfully ready for use
but unused, like a white shirt
found in a cold room after death.

2.

So many! This was a landscape
of revelation, more fertile
of faiths than the Holy Land.
Deepening drifts, long nights,
one book of passionate warning:
a god's voice aflame
in the dark, sweeping wind.

3.

Tonight: dead winter, ten below.
Snow creaks, houses creak.
We gather together in a hunters' bar
by West Canada Lake. The t.v. glows
warmly. Smiles go up and down the bar.
Less ecstasy now, perhaps less despair.
Everyone who needs to be is here.
The pale churches freeze.
In the darkness of the winter-long wind,
our snowmobiles wait, orange and yellow
and red and flaming red.

Plain Style

1.

My great-great grandfather built a village,
house by house, that still stands squarely
in its upstate glacial valley. Beneath
the minor adulterations of our century—
neon, wires, gas pumps and whatnot—
the village remains his handiwork,
and all in American plain style.

2.

Pleased, my people stayed put
in their cloud-white, church-white homes
for a century more of plain living.
Only great-uncle Ralph sought
fanciness, yet even he returned
in his big Packards, driving
Route 20 when it was mud or dust
to flee painted women, fish the clean
river for trout, run his eyes
over buildings never familiar enough,
one by one, memorizing them all.

3.

The American plain style: I see
it best in the neighboring barns—hop,
wagon, hay—oak-framed all,
enduring, shrewdly crafted for use
and proportion like old hymns: the strong
serious art of a cold country,
neither happy nor sad.

G. D. Richards

PREPARING THE WAY

It is advent, says the priest, the time to expect what cannot possibly be. Think of Mary . . .

A woman in the back of the church shudders recalling her own pregnancy, her guilty ambivalence, anticipation heavy from the outset with sore breasts

and months of soda crackers and white lips, unable to brush her teeth without gagging. And the thickening belly and need for naps, the preoccupation, tired, wanting to be left alone, unaccountable, disembodied; people saying

she certainly had the glow and she seeing the cow in the mirror, the bloat that used to be her flat and private body that gave her definition, that gave her her mind; and all that resenting and anxiety, wishing she knew who it was and whether or not

it was all there all right swimming, smiling, kicking an empire up under her ribs. *Expect what cannot possibly be:* a healthy daughter who can feed herself, change herself, kiss good-night and awake in twelve hours precocious and

articulate. *Think of Mary* who gave birth on her due date with angels and stars; the woman's baby born two weeks late, coaxed out with gloves and IVs, wearing a black cap of a birthmark over the back of her head and the pediatrician and dermatologist

and plastic surgeon looking at each other saying Hmmm—watch it for growths—prone to cancer—sometimes a growth means it's too late. And the woman leaking and draining suspects this wild thing pink and black milking her thinking: *this is advent.*

Jeanine Hathaway

LESTER

And then there's Lester, who snarls
if you come too close
and wails like a siren if you leave.
We can't get through to him,
know only

he used to drive the Albany route,
18 wheelers, sometimes tandems.
He was a nut for animals.
They say he once chased a guy
from Batavia to Canandaigua,
drove him off the road and left him
pretty much the way the guy had left
the snake he'd swerved to hit.

He weathered winter runs
by counting hawks.
Barreling past Chittenango, Utica,
Schenectady
he'd crane his neck for hawks
as if the sky was where the signs
were read. He liked the way
they hunched up in trees
like truckers huddled over wheels
tailgating pretty girls.

For Christmas last year
he wired a spruce for lights
on the grill of his Mack.
What he hit east of Troy
remained with him—
small bits of tawny fur
and hide, some shards of horn
on spruce.
The lights were out.

Rennie McQuilkin

TWO POEMS

Picking The Pears Too Soon*in memory of James Wright*

A pear rests in the hand,
a supple stone, longing
for the bruising ground
where nothing proves
solid, and sweetness
rots free of its shape.

Such a drop, before it
falls, tingles strangely;
its secret name is yours.

Years back, I chucked
pears at the garden wall
to savor their mashed explosions.

Now, closing a summer
palled by spring deaths—
my father and my poet,
I sidle up, fearing
that each trailing branch

will break,
a stunted abundance bearing
simple grace down.
I pick gnarled ends
and whisper to the tree.

I ring the trunk
with offerings, so the roots
may nurture on their nurturings.
Grow in me, my fathers,
as I lay the fruit down.

The Wanderer

*"All is uneasy, earth's realm
Alters by Fate's decree."*

The Wanderer

I am weeping after the fleeting aroma
of a confectioner's roasted peanuts on High
Street in Columbus; my tiny hands berate
the unreasonable world, which will not stay—
the flood of faces, the brightly wrapped gifts.
The dwarfs, pushing Snow White on her glitter-
spangled swingset in the Lazarus window, pivot
and tip their caps, but the vision wavers
with each of father's earth-pulling strides.
As we drive home, I huddle in the backseat,
absorbed in the tale that the tires
bemoan against the road: an elegy about
distance, fatigue, and perpetual loss.
Song-gasps sizzle through static as mother tunes
the radio to ever-shifting stations, but nothing
touches me deeply, save for the tread-runes
printed on the road for no one to decipher.
Home, I am changed enough to gravitate
to mother's Goodwill pile, strangely awed
by goods gone bad that still must take
much with them: a black overcoat (willed
by some gaunt great-uncle, the pockets full
of wadded kleenex), a rust-stalled clock,
the clothes outgrown on my way to this fall.

Will Wells

CLOSING THE SUTURES

I thought forty meant dead, or close to it.
We were learning about bones
in the eighth grade. Mrs. Coulter claimed
the head is made of separate plates, joined
loosely until forty. She had an old skull
and showed us the ragged-looking sutures,
dark trails on the gray forehead and top
inherited from our prehistoric ancestors.
When you are older, gradually
the bone becomes solid.

Once a year or so, even now,
I think I can feel one under the skin,
all the way to my right eyebrow,
a crease as if something had hit me, stone
or a blade. I liked the idea,
soft paths in that strong bone
and that they can prove someone died old, a lesson
peculiar as dry bones in a museum case.

It was the first I'd looked at,
and the sutures were rivers on a schoolroom map
for some mysterious continent,
switching back and forth on themselves
like streams near the farm pastures.
Rivers like that are big enough
that you can just see each turning
as it falls behind in the sun,
the scrub trees growing on either bank
and along the mud bars.

Floating a small river was something to do
for an afternoon when anything else
seemed too much effort.

One Sunday like that, my folks went out
after dinner, for a walk
and came back smiling, different.
I couldn't figure out what it was.

The bone must know when it is time
and the grooves become shallower like
a creek silting up, the trees sickly,
unable to hold back the dirt, then buried.
After awhile there's hardly a trace left.
Evenings, poor people around here still fish
from street bridges over the stagnant canals
though it doesn't seem to get them much
beyond remembering, how they kissed a girl there
once, and never a chance after that.

At forty you need to be harder-headed,
and it doesn't seem likely
I'm going to get much smarter
so let them all close up, I say,
after the days that didn't work out
and some that did, let them close as if it were nothing
that people go down by the river at night
and get drunk, smashing bottles,
grim enough to die, and forget anyone
ever loved them, ever.

This is a long way to carry stuff from school,
too boring to hold us, giggling, showing
each other knowingly toward the girls in line.
I mean, I miss my parents' yard,
the cottonwoods along the thin banks
of some half-dried creek in fall.

I knew that names could not close the ache
felt, learning the ground for myself,
If I tried to resist all knowledge, names,
maps of anything beyond the nearest hill,
I didn't want to be alone, separated
from places I could make versions of myself.

My wife is beginning to interest me
in words for the feelings and new birds I spot.
Soon I will be forty-one. Last evening,
I walked clear out to the fields,
land no one cares about,
not worth straightening up or to build apartments.
The trees lined up along one slope
were just trees, standing together in the light,
the colors I think of
in some life of their own.

David Keller

DEATH OF A BOY IN A ROCKSLIDE

Moments before, the hill had seemed to tear itself apart.
And then there was a clattering, a stampeding
Of slabs and hard litter that heaved out like a sneeze.
The rumbling abruptly settled. And then it was raw and
quiet in the dust.

He'd watched Peter go on ahead by himself.
The muscles in his back tightening under the sun
As he hauled his butt and legs up over a jut of rock.
They'd come without ropes or tackle, on a lark, really.

Two nights ago he'd rubbed balm into Peter's back
As they sat in front of a fire that had calmed their talk.
"Oh yeah," Peter was sighing, scrunching his shoulders
With pleasure. "That ride up was just amazing."

And last night he'd lain next to him,
Leaves rustling like rain beyond their hot tent,
Sucking in his smell as Peter slept. And when
His hand at last touched the stomach, Peter woke.

"Just let me ask you one thing.
So what were you doing last night
While I was asleep?"

"Nothing."

They were squatting before the fire with their eggs.

The morning was muggy again. Peter left the camp,
Washed up at the creek, then paused to dry his hair
In the sun. He brushed it slowly. His eggs went untouched.
He could see Peter picking his way up the trail.

"It was nothing!" he'd cried and the slide had started,
Perhaps by the yell, but probably by a rain,
Or chance. But certainly not from any clumsiness you
Might accuse Peter of. No. No other boy could move
as tenderly

Or as musically when he washed his hair or rode his bike
Or scraped their tin plates or rolled a joint.
He could not be at fault. No boy as graceful would let
His spirit slip away from his fine body by sudden,
awkward accidents.

Larry Edgerton

A SANGUINARY

I. Michael's

With his white cap and its perfect chain
 of ancient sweatmountains rounding it.
 With his cleaver in the air, with his cleaver
 in the meat—the cleaver doesn't care.
 Whomp Whomp. He halves the
 marbled buttend
 of a corned beef into an animal
 geode.

This is someone's father.

This is the sudden-come understanding that
 passes enlightenment to a 13-year-old: everyone
 has a father. This is my
 friend Michael's.

Nyah-nyah nyah-nyah nyaaah-nyah
Mi-chael's fa-ther's bloo-dy

With his whole red side of a steer
 on his back, with his whole bent bunched
 piano-mover's back. And in fact
 the ribs are set in the raw meat like raw keys.
 Up the plank to the cooler.

With his pacing at night in that lavish
 cathedral of freon; with the hooks like questionmarks
 God's asking back; with the ice
 gargoyles and belfries. Pacing,
 monologue grumble CASH ONLY.

Someone's father holding a bowel-like-a-fire-hose.
 Playing canasta. Five o'clock shadow like tacks
 driven up from inside. At night, a pat
 along a son's head with a hand too blunted to feel.
 This is the smell of blood under his nails, even.
 This is someone's father
 with his work, with his apron of blood on.

2. Pressed Flowers

There came a time when understanding was taught
to be facts. Pierre,
South Dakota. The shadow of Earth
on the moon. The Earth and the moon
were pool balls. Janice Netter's breasts
were an ache in my own chest. Janice
Netter's breasts were the size of pool balls,
hard and white. I would have died
for their shadows. There were charts
and pie graphs. The Circulatory System
was a great tree in a man. Those red
cough lozenges were blood cells. So
the days went by, in models
of knowledge. Sodastraw
molecules. Plaster of Paris
Paris. So the nights went by, dreaming
Janice Netter. I wanted a kind of spice,
I suppose, like a kind of Columbus. And she
was a kind of new world. There were tests,
1) what a giraffe eats, 2) what a tribal unit is,
3) define a satellite. So the years went by.
At night a boy on the verge
could lift his hand in front of his eyes and wonder
subatomic pipecleaner structures whirling
away like crazy in there. I wonder
it still. There were tests,
in shame, in crumbling under first anger, in seeing when
strength meant turning away.
There were blushes, and uncontrollable
uplunge of the cock. This was the blood-tree
from Biology, only real, and this
was smackdab fullforce Spring. It bloomed
enormous, lush rashes of flowers.

*

So we were 13.

The cells of the body,
all of the cells of the body, are new each
seven years, and what
pressed flowers in part
survive such slough and flux, we call
our memory.

Michael calls;
his father's died. His father, Papa Joe
from when I was 13.

I've sloughed
three selves since then. Though I'm older
than he is by 21 years, that wimp kid
in the bar mitzvah album, smiling with my face
inside his face like a diver two or three inches just
short of surfacing... See? In a way,
he's my father.

Papa Joe
above a sirloin shaped like Asia, Papa Joe
who gave me the fat loud spattered necktie
in my closet and it's back in style,
Papa Joe belly, Mr. Papa Joe. Michael's voice
with thin cracks in it. He tells me
his father's heart attacked.

That photo album
self of me... it's gray, between the pages
like a flower in an encyclopedia volume
for 21 years. And I have an assignment tonight,
a homework. I'm to look up
everything I remember of one day

when

I looked up from a diagram
in my biology text, and there was
Papa Joe's work apron hung on the wall
with its stain in the same shape.

*

When you concentrated fully on the blood-tree,
when you stared with red intensity at the blood-tree,

you saw everything else
 was only a kind of weather around it
 —the flesh and the muscles, all the peartipped
 pins of pain, the fatty swags of passion,
 that gray cloud floating the bough—
 weather around the blood-tree, just
 a touch of breeze in its branches.

3. *What a Giraffe Eats*

High leaves.

How It's 15-18 feet tall.

How Simple. It stretched out

over generations. Now it has a system
 fit to its needs. Now it's a landscape
 for the redwood
 of the blood-trees. In their field work

"Investigators learned much
 from the electrocardiograms of whales and from
 heart failure in cattle at thin-air heights"

because the gray pea prostate
 just the *nth* part of the body
 can fill
 with hurt enough for the whole of the body

because the beauty
 up the retinal thread from an eye
 will fill the brain
 will fill the three pounds of the brain

How There are levels and accommodations
 There are understandings and confusions
 too large for a single human life
 and so they fit
 in the greater human life, they stretch out
 over generations

One time, in the Houston Zoo, I saw two of them mating—like neighboring castles and one rolled out a red carpet of welcome into the other. Everybody gawked. It was a comedy and glory everybody knew, on a level they'd never know. And a woman next to me said *It's like bursting in on your parents doing it—earlier creatures, speaking your tongue.*

“Analysis of giraffe blood has shown that its chemistry is not grossly different from that of human blood.”

*

And we learned that William Harvey traced that system, down its many hammers and one amazing fist.

It's

—oh, say 1625. /*I profess to learn and teach anatomy/* He's back from a turn in the wards at St. Bartholomew's /*not from books but from dissection/* and he's tethered the roan outside his lime-mucked pigeon coops /*not from philosophers but from the fabric of nature/* and now in the dusk of a day of rheum-oozing Grub Street ginswills, someone's grandmama with a breast sawed off, that small girl gored by a boar, and her master squeezing the yellow French Pox pus out from the buboes on his stump...

now Harvey

enters the cool clean shadows of his Menagerie under the dovecote, and is lost observing the chick still in its shell, the definite network in the transparent paisley a shrimp is, all of the pumps the size of pollen grains, in bees, slugs, worms, the castanet clackings of oysters, and here's

a pig tied on its back to a plank
and its living belly cut
open as neat as window shutters,

and

here's the Physician Extraordinary to James I,
William Harvey, having published his
 complacency-shaking
study of the looping of the blood, in 1629
defending it—over a blue-hued charswEEP's body
bladed gaping and clamped back, Harvey
with his wax-tipped stylus traces
up the curlicue
gray doodles in the wrist, the sturdier tubule-runs
through the arm, to the chest, where they write
 their recycling
s- and y-shapes in this candle-lit lick
of the human lung, in this guttering dissection-room's
disclosures of the aeon-perfected sanctum-rooms
at the heart of the human heart.

And

what would even that expert student of anatomy
say at the miles inside a giraffe? In Africa, what
would even William Harvey say in the *outré* face
of bushbuck, springhare, hippopotamus,
steenbok, dik-dik, kori bustard, eland, gembok,
hartebeest, wildebeest, kudu, the ostrich made
seamless from incompatible parts...

We'll never

know. I like to think him wearing away wax-headed
stylus after stylus in inching his studious way
along the giraffe's vast cardiovascular map, and
saying, not much surprised, "It
is not grossly different..." and maybe
stroking the neck, the flanks, as he would
his roan's, with a brusque affection.

What

the Bantu say in the African bush, without
 the diagrammatic
aid of the Darwin-tree, its forkings

a finesse of interspecies consanguinity, monkey
here, and *here* giraffe, and way down *here*
 the worm, and up *here* man at the apex... I'll
 never know. But there are hunting songs
 that call these other beings
 "brother," "sister," ask permission, joke,
 solicit advice.

In the Bantu
 rite called "being-born-again,"
 the father butchers

a ram

"and three days later wraps the boy
 in the animal's stomach membrane
 and skin." He'll be a fullgrown
 male of the tribe, and marry, and kill, and wear
 the masks,
 and carve the ironwood sticks, but
 first he must be swaddled three entire days
 in the sweet ram stink, must be its heart and its heart's
 voluminous transport, must be
 birthed
 as if in actuality cut away
 from a kind of ur-ancestral he-beast
 umbilicus and bloodworks.

*

Or what the Nativity means: at one time
 there were animals
 closer to God (they could lick Him)
 than you'll ever be.

*

"At birth—I've never told
 anyone this before..." then Michael stops.
 Yes? "...Well, I had a screwed-up
 RH factor. And what they had to do,
 my pediatrician pioneered the technique, was fill me
 by transfusion, completely, every
 last scraggle of day-old capillary,
 with my father's blood."

There's a pause. Something leaves him
then enters him again.

"They strapped us down and drained me out and
then they poured him into me. You're

a poet—just think about
that blood

*stretched out
over generations*

4. *What a Tribal Unit Is*

We don't know.

But we think they looked like this, and this,
when hunting. We have chalk flints.

We have wild cattle done
in red ocher on limestone walls with
angular incisions that may be spearheads.

We have a pit the bison were
stampeded into, and evidence of
organized lugging away of cuts of bison,
and so we think we know

of nights around a fire, planning
something in common and in a common tongue.

We don't know. But we have the remains
of the fires. We have an idea of what a night is
with the bear outside, the ravenous bear of the caves,
and what a fire means
in night like that, and the vertical stories rising
up a fire, we think they hunkered a circle around the fire,
holding hands. We have the hands

on the walls, done hand on hand, by blowing the paint
through tubes. We have the shit and we can read it,
it's a single diet
floating in many stones. And
there were rites. Before the first rough lumpish pots
or coins or nets or little burial boxes

we think there was song, we think by a grotto lamp
 a boy was notched, in oneness with his people.
 We don't know. But in the scatter of unworked stones
 they used for lamps with a wick of juniper twig,
 is one lamp worked in a smooth
 and moving sweep, out of deep rouge sandstone,
 this would seem to say

a ceremony. We think that stories of spirits
 were handed down, of spirits and stars. We think
 the "handing down" of literal importance, the idea
 of hands in red paint on a wall and what
 it means for understanding
 something passes like a torch or a shell of water
 down a line of men in

time as well as in space—that there are
 generations, and stages in a generation, and moments
 to mark a stage. We don't know. But
 we have the ox-ribs carved finely in regular groupings
 of 30—the moon? a menstrual record? and
 we can see in microscopic study
 these were held, and held again, and worn
 in handling, then their images
 refreshed, as if a moment came in torchlight
 when the song rose up to take a form
 that kept the dark at arm's-length, and the words
 they said were "This is for you now,
 This is what we know and now you know it, Take it,
 This is what a tribe is, You will also pass it on,
 In time that's your time."
 We don't know. But we do

have their hands in museums,
 like fingerbone Japanese fans.
 Like opened, white, bone fans, on wine velvet. Not a one
 is essentially different from my hand.

*

So they showed us movies.
 Australia, Africa.

Bantu boogajooos dancing up a storm.
 I remember, one was called
 "The Dark Continent." It was 1961. We were
 13. I studied

Janice Netter sitting in the movie darkness, everything
 of mystery and foreignness
 I wanted to explore.

*

And Janice Netter traced that system.
 And Sharon Feldman traced that system.
 And Ava Brecker with her girlish books
 on horsemanship
 and the little chocolate nougats that caught on her braces
 traced that system, as sure as William Harvey,
 surer. They laughed. They had notes
 and were excused. They had little brochures from their
 mothers
 with flowers on the cover, in pastels.
 We had Fabian's big hit "Lonely Teenager."
 Davey had a playing card with a naked lady and
 got caught
 in Geography showing Richard Jaskoulka
 her big tits one at a time. We said big tits a lot.
 We taunted Ava Brecker. It must have been horrible
 that first time, all the pain in some layer
 that never registered pain before, and then the
 half-understood
 flow. They had a network of lore
 and emotional support, I'm sure, that functioned
 in the ladiesjohn beyond those brochures with the lilacs.
 Hey, Big Tits, Big Tits. We hurt each other.
Mi-chael's *fa*-ther's *bloo*-dy. I got a fat tie. From Papa
 Joe, he gave me a fat red tie, and ties were thin then.
 Sputnik was big then. We got lectures on some
 scientific spark
 touched off by Sputnik once a week. I began my
 bar mitzvah lessons. I memorized the Hebrew.
 "Col Amar" it began, or something like that. They

wanted me to sing it with a passion I devoted to my late-night-walk renditions: "I'm a LONE-ly TEEnay GERRR." I didn't want to. I fought. In those days late-night-walk meant 8 o'clock. And then in bed by 10. Janice Netter a ghost girl in my arms. "*Jew-Weenie-They-Cut-It-It's-Teeny.*" Mine was learning to be enough. By day it hummed. By night I experimented. For Science Fair, Michael and I constructed a wheel a mouse turned with an electrical gadget

we rigged up to look like a Sputnik. I don't think I ever realized the strangeness, thinking astronauts then going home to practice the millenia-old bar mitzvah. Rabbi Lehrfield spit when he talked. "But do it for Grandma Nettie," they said. "You know she hasn't long."

Geometry was looong. I cried in class once. Ava Brecker wept then whinnied in fear like one of those horses she read about.

I read. They laughed, I read so much. I had glasses by then and Neil Somebody always pushed them into the bridge of my nose, *hard*. So I understood why I needed to follow Ava in a pack of boys and go Big Tits, Big Tits. Her pants were white that day and the stain so red it's close to jet in my memory. Maybe we all understood. It lasted, like Geometry, forever. We couldn't even put that mystery into language—Tits, we said. Big Tits. Biology told us this and that, but in those days sex education meant flowers. There was a hefty chapter on

The Circulatory System

and a chapter on The Secret Life of a Tree and they looked the same. I looked like—here, like this, that's my father on the left and his mother my Grandma Nettie a year before she died. Co-OLLL A-MAAAR. I think I could sing it today and mean everything poignant that's happened since then,

three sloughs of the body ago. I have my high school
yearbook yet,
and my biology text. They also look the same
by now—an overview
of beings and their blood. I could go to my closet
right now,
where it's still on the hook as if my own father
had given it to me.
That huge red tie.

*

Silhouetted black
against a clear cream sky,
to our eye
the giraffe is the shape of someplace holy,
massive, Chartres...

 If birth
requires blood, the "being-born-again" requires
blood again:

 a ram
is strung up by the hindlegs, and its stomach
is being prepared: a three-day wombsac
for the "fetus-again." The smell is a
waxy solid.

 Follow that
churchly giraffe, and it won't be long we'll come across
a tribe for which oblation-blood is
human:

 I have a photo of
"an aboriginal novice," a boy,
he's kneeling under an elder of the tribe,
 whose veins are opened
"to incorporate him
into the society of men,"
and it's flowing in ribbons,
in actual rivulets, viscous and rich, down the boy who
looks like a teakwood candle-holder
a candle of blood has melted
wholly over.

I have a photo of
 my cousin Alice's firstborn
 in a loaf-sized wicker basket, with the rabbi bent
 to the small swipe
 of dexterity a circumcision knife requires,
 meanwhile the initiate
 is sucking wine from a twisted napkin teat—
 and around the table,
 my face included, by implication
 my own notched cock included, festive,
 fearful, joking, holy, and in empathetic wince—see?
 the society of elders is gathered to witness.

*

This is what I see: the shape of the sacred.
 Maybe a giraffe is kneeling,
 making a single, urgent, stylized
 spire, as if anybody, of any persuasion, were welcome
 here to worship.

It's midday. Parrot,
 rhino, cheetah. The river is old,
 so old it's red, the deep dramatic red of borscht
 in an East European *shtetl*... A boat in the distance.
 A man in the boat ...Or, no—an even older
 red than that. The most
 ancient of rivers.

William Harvey's
 boat grows larger. He's tracing this system.
 Every tributary, every fine red thread, he has
 a calipers and an astrolabe and a divining rod
 and he wants every backwater whorl of this river
 mapped to its source and recycling.

Now he
 puts into shore where the line of trees
 is most enormous. These are the ancient of trees,
 he knows it, these are the great, original, pumping
 heartwoods and their branches. The roots are
 jeweled with grubs. The boughs are a jabber of primates.
 These are the trees that drink

directly of the river, and William Harvey wants to explore.
He walks in. There's a quiet. In the quiet
there's a man, in a rag of shade, he's stringing
an animal up by the haunches.
There's a bowl below the throat, and there's a blade
in an official obsidian handle, and this is
somebody's job. This is a man
who's going to make a line, dividing
life from meat. Harvey wonders: madman?
priest? everyday neighborhood butcher mumbling?
Or maybe that's a prayer. Or a cry that's
older than prayer. With his swing through the air.
With his face besmattered.
Washing the knife off now.
—Somebody's father.

5. *Define a Satellite*

On some nights I go for a walk and the moon
isn't there. It must be in the past
for a moment, as if turning back to an old text
of itself, the stages, trying to get down straight
for one more time
how it's done. And when I go through that blankness
block by block, I think of the people who aren't
here for me
that same way,
knowing they'll be
faces come into a fullness
lighting everything,
eventually, in their time, by a calendar
the nuclei of cells may keep but
numbers will never account for.
If I wander then, in reverie as much as in a maze
of golden raintree and mimosa, thinking Papa Joe this
and Papa Joe that, I see

first,
 in a seeing as jagged as it is, that Paleolithic/Neolithic
 knife, from the catalogue to a show
 of Judaeen antiquities—just two intentional edges
 away from being another dumb stone. It's this
 five inches of flint that must have
 koshered the throat
 with a few quick flicks to supper's
 jugulars, mumble-and-bless,
 this one
 not different from one when "Joshua
 made him knives of flint
 and circumcised the children of the Tribes
 at Gibeath-ha-araloth, Hill of the Foreskins."
 It implies a cube of fossil hands
 about it, from the first
 appointed butcher's efficient hack-and-trim
 to the curator's fusses, as literal as the hunk
 of flint that also, at one time,
 held it.

I see him,
 lighting the first friezed terracotta lamps in a
 ceremonial line, then working the blade
 from out of the oxskin sheath it
 worked from out of the ox...

And then I think what
 does Michael think.

I believe it's the moon.
 Yes, Michael with his own birthweight
 of fatherblood in him, Michael with 6 pounds 7 ounces
 of fatherblood in him, in orbit.

I believe
 it's the moon. And when it reaches fullness
 in the brain, no matter how long the cyclical absence,
 then,
 its light transfigures everything, and Michael
 must walk out too, beneath the trees, and see whatever
 world that's showing through the darkness
 speaks of fathers, calls the father

in his system into a steep
 outreaching crest,

as I've seen Janice Netters
 time and again break over the sheet
 with the woman in them that's been called into its own
 periodic crescendo.

I believe it's the moon
 swollen full as a tick in the branches
 of live-oak, redbud, silver birch and banana
 tonight, the moon in the lake like a leech
 in a jar, medicinal, plump, disgusting, the moon
 and the blood and a certain ripeness making
 for commerce between them.

I believe tonight
 he's walking as I am, donors
 out into the piercing light, the moon
 in the elm, the moon in the olive,
 crepe myrtle, catalpa, cherry and yew,
 those resinous sexual creatures, acacia,
 pampas-huggers, asphodel.
 I believe the moon will make itself known in the bough
 of a man as easily as in poplar,
 larch, pecan and weeping willow, the manifold
 banyan and the unashamed dwarf pine, I believe
 a man is a tree to the moon, I believe
 in moments of great transfusion.

There
 are old barns in Vermont, from paint poured straight
 from the animals' rent necks, and in winter
 the only thing not white is a conversation
 between barn-red and ever-green around it,
 I believe this is the language of the moon we sometimes
 overhear and a word or two makes
 tantalizing sense,

I believe
 the bloodhound howls a syllable of it, the cypress
 understands the scent on the rag, and the fig,
 and the fir, and the hilltop maple.
 I believe I can feel it in me tonight,

tree of my current body,
blood-tree
rooted in me and seeming to cast
three shadows:
the bodies I've sloughed up to now.
They're walking with me,
clear in this light, three bodies
that look like but don't look like me.
And behind them, faintly, yes
now, taking shape, here...
all of the other bodies.

Albert Goldbarth

AFTER CATARACT SURGERY HE SEES

In the square room he presses
his new sight to the wall.
There is nothing here he wants to see.
Forty years he walked in confidence
with a tap and a touch.
Forty years he could wake up
in a cool tent of midnight
any night and all day,
not have to watch his white
nightmares watch back.

Now they expect him to read
with his hands in his pockets.

and to cross with less fear
when that hard light flashes.
But he is terrified,
picking his thin way
over curb and litter and pothole.

Some days he takes the train
and watches from his window
as pale birds hang
in the drab air beside him.
When the train stops
he sees the station
continue to push forward.

These days he can't help
himself. He comes home and
shuts off the lights,
moves into his dark corners
where he draws the shades
tight, closes out
those last red lines of dusk.
Sometimes he even returns
to the quiet of braille
until suddenly he's remembering
his sister's sad grey eyes
or the spots on his wall
where old plaster
has begun to chip loose.

And to soothe himself he thinks
perhaps tonight the stars
will quit screaming—the room going
darker than any blind forest.
Or maybe the moon will forget to rise.
Then he'll walk to that mirror
and see, in folds and folds of shadow,
his old face again, the image
that could deceive no one.

TWO POEMS**The Violin Maker**

From the heart of a hunk of maple he cuts
two thin slices, traces the classic
curves across their grain
with a finer saw, glues and clamps together
the back of a violin-to-be.

Hidden in his steady hands
through cutting, sanding, gouging,
balancing, staining, carving,
is the curve of her ear where he tastes the sea,
the fiddler crab bowing the air for a love.

He polishes the face an extra time,
then touches it with a struck tuning fork.
The work is true. He smiles
as if his baby's exploring fingers
had uncurled the scrolls of his beard.

An old bow draws out the warmth of his hands,
tender as all his distances,
tones rippling out like growth rings,
the fingerprints of God . . .

He sweeps up the sawdust and hangs up his tools.
Fiddleheads open in the marsh.

Keeping Watch

All the time spring was coming on,
a machine spun my sister's blood cells apart,
drained waste, gave back plasma, outsmarted
her body's defenses.

I covered her heart
with my hand and watched her pulse rate
beeping green on the monitor.

*

Side effects go through her body
like ages, generations—
boney, bloated, sometimes covered with hair—

while newspapers chanting place-names
into blank synonyms for agony
are pounded back to nothing in the rain.

*

With nothing to love you with
but this body that will die,
how can I trust things spinning
apart to fall together?

I look up. The air is alive
with winged seeds spinning beyond themselves
across maples already deepening
toward summer.

*

She says while we sleep
a woman comes
and sits by her bed till dawn.

Then we say her name all day long, a prayer,
keeping watch for eyes that know the face
she had before she was born.

David Williams