

**TRACY ZEMAN**

**Grass for Bone**

Small cakes of lily-seed an assembly  
of swallows branch-bound assembly of  
clouds burst your face washed  
in pigment no *sati* under pitch  
under night & timber heat  
skin burnt to blister living into  
*atrophy* or *enclave* the mouth of a horse  
tells the beginnings of the age  
of grass of red spearfish shale & black hills  
a reconstructing reckless this getting  
& becoming lost you the figure  
of crouched skeleton under gaze  
how bounded the boundless  
new area of contestation

■

Red crowned field sparrow  
trills in minor-key in minor places  
cut forests now shrubland of  
fences & abandoned pastures  
sieve of redbud leaves sewn together  
like a length of rope engineer a noose  
pink-billed new-world song plaintive  
& unceasing during the search for another  
noise herded into rows & hoof-prints  
where old railway decays into foxglove  
stream carves into gully into dusk into  
bodies boiled in lye then scraped clean  
turning bones into rusted machinery  
a stand of pale orchids no longer

■  
A tomb constructed of bark this remainder  
covered with branches with lichen & rock  
painted yellow & decorated with emu feathers  
contains three figures of straw & one man  
arms tied with a thin sheet of wood  
a still creek flat & frozen  
corpse placed with head sunward  
the direction of origin of ancestor  
miles & miles & miles & miles  
life that we called *yours* on a good day  
on a good day this love for you  
a “house of wooden fingers”  
house wren in a tree hollow  
tree hollow occupied with bone & straw

■  
Two rivers “ticking softly into one”  
leaf-cutter chronicle a fern frond left  
in a bath of sedges & blackbirds  
our “machine in the garden” over &  
over slash of green sweep of  
gray thought beneath so slight  
a field of white-lipped peccaries  
under the piha’s ascending whistles  
& screams the chronicler the echo-  
maker “we must not worry  
how few we are & fall from each  
other” a boat-like shape in the dark  
of the milky way a way of knowing  
brings the world forth as not

■  
Trade horse for tea & tea for horse  
this cobblestoned knowing brings us  
into being we must worry we must  
a clutch of red & cream white eggs  
silly goose mud-caked & barefoot  
among dry sticks trash & moss  
an occasional sentinel how to occupy this  
desert world our little camp  
our little home inside where a lamp burns  
uncertainly yellow then white then  
wild plum or peach leaf willow & smartweed  
we feed our horses with cottonwood  
upon this spotted plain  
an open grove a glitter of flint

■  
Arabian ostrich Atitlán grebe  
black-faced honeycreeper endemic &  
no more our trail canopied in wild  
grape & sunflowers did I say *counterfeit*  
or *crabapple* *coneflower* or *copy*  
prairie after heavy rain will soak  
a man on horseback up to his waist  
water clinging to bluestem  
grass clinging to wind & sun  
an "ache in the bone" a litany in negative  
we stand at the river's edge to watch  
the fish swallow what's left  
of you this *keno* a bathing place  
for the after & the rest also

■

Red buffalo pushes the hardwood east  
trees & wheat & dust  
an ache in the rind after a summer storm we are  
without the way defined by absence by  
presence of great feats a morass this  
place of ours fire licked grasses & rushes  
define the treeline we share  
with the rest carrion cardinal compass-flower  
bringing a way of being with  
not against into rivers oceans empty  
into oceans rivers splinter a continuum  
that sparks this consolation of *sow*  
& *form of joint & oxbow* you empty  
into this & splinter into that

■

To wander in restless want & penury  
to wear a necklace of green herbs  
to keen over the corpse embalmed  
with honey & washed in water of chamomile  
of blackened faces for thirty days of  
water poured on the roots of the nearest tree  
of *feasting & footbridge* of being sewn in  
a mat of threadbare linen day at its most  
long its most blue sky knit with clouds  
mountains crowded with long-needed pines  
lying flat & still on a good day this love  
stopped with cloth & cardamom  
a plumed chimney reduces the muscles  
to ash a fern in a summer fire

■

A wire cage of fledglings    bluish-white eggs  
of the California condor    yellow-faced then  
red    extant & permeable    “a member of  
the cloud” & cliff    the boundary between this  
world & that thought to be impermanent  
at times    grasses grow in the rain  
shadow of the Rockies    islands in a sea of steppe  
a tract for dying a good death    for dying well  
anoint with the right thumb    eyelids ear lobes & lips  
ovenbird catbird warbler wren  
what of the marker between  
the human & all else    misplace a howling  
experience    skins drying over coals  
smoke broken into silos & rings

■

Mountain as adaptation    quick clouds  
rags of mist    wolf elk bison bear  
creatures of grass plains & burrow  
contained a skull wrapped in woven cotton  
ancestor figure fashioned of wood & mud  
of one shepherd or another    principle of  
center of dislodging to introduce other  
order    old skin over this  
truth as bald as cold as middle  
no meddle    every settlement had a house  
set apart for the dead    new way of burial  
as manipulation as a tactic for conversion  
funeral as cover for war    “a month’s mind”  
untenable    the red deer the cordgrass

■

*Summit* or *sun* living rock  
to which the heart is given by obsidian  
skeletons disarticulated & tied into bundles  
before the ossuary furthest part of the world  
must be *sunset* & *sea* mouldering the order upset  
loggerhead shrike peregrine falcon  
black footed ferret the Missouri river hems  
the Big Horn Mountains a hinge between  
one land & another an effigy was made  
of wood & wax verisimilitude will have to suffice  
for aspen for sage-thrasher for pipit  
stalks burnt like feathers convoy of  
corn & flesh hope to graft the present to  
the predicament to all my tenderness

■

Canary's corpse copse of false  
Solomon's seal rivets of stars & sharp notes  
the men were "found slain  
with their mouths stopped full of bread"  
beneath the blue lupine & wild strawberry  
by springtime only a hundred were left  
having subsisted on dogs cats rats & mice  
gust goes obscured by the storm entrust  
hope inherent & lashed tincture of snow  
some shrieking O & you no longer  
named what you were a handful  
of farm buildings behind the windbreak  
wheat planted in alternating fallow strips  
how the cinder draped the field then

■  
Wasp's nest found inside a skull  
the tiny clay pot of the mud dauber  
dispossessed island of trees & people  
wilderness makes it hard to be  
"unregarded & unburied"  
bodies decaying in the hedgerows  
after surviving on only oysters for eight weeks  
ineffable slight the land not an after  
thought ember or tinder particular disaster  
headed for half-lives for we are tied  
to the place that made us no ledger  
for that map mouse-nest eggshell  
slaughter cellar sequester root out  
what as remedy for this condition

■  
Vanilla grass & sage brush flank the hills  
a gleaner an ax an owl a honeycomb  
knee-deep leaf-rot a certain joylessness  
a cage of ribs apple trees leafing on a slope  
a chance to still the worst of it  
wreck of thaw encampment of charred wood  
pheasant quail hare what of plenty  
of mending or maelstrom private burials  
disallowed for fear of covering up  
the "violent context of life"  
flocks of cranes landing on a bank  
filament fissure sawgrass  
surely we'll survive if apprehensive  
if fixing the outside within the frame