

Double Arm Transplant

“Not having arms takes so much away from you. Even your personality, you know. You talk with your hands. You do everything with your hands.” – Brendan Marrocco, Iraq war vet and double arm transplant recipient

Even grafted limbs sigh
when the rains come.
The hands, those twin divining rods,
may tremble in the presence
of an old love. Now they're the arms
of a veteran. The hair that grows
from the arms a different shade.
Since the transplant he writes left handed.
He waits for the hands to reveal
their previous life as farmer or electrician.
By a piano he pauses to see
if the wrists rise to the music.
If the knuckles love the baseball.
If the fist curls in anger. Before:
did he drum his fingers on the desk?
Was the salute quite so crisp?
On its own, the pinky angles to the teacup.
It's the giver of these arms speaking
whenever he debones a fish or juggles.
Every time a tennis ball comes down
it sits in the palm for a moment,
then rises again.

Snafu

No longer a tangle, the word snafu
takes on new meaning.
The waves on the beach sound like
the word snafu. It is the word
of longing unbroken the waves
have needed. Instead of hello,
people greet with snafu. Instead of goodbye.
The best drinks are named snafu
volcano, Long Island snafu.
Instead of congratulations,
instead of the closing of prayers.
In wedding ceremonies, guests say it first.
At military funerals snafu follows
the lowered casket and clings
to the first shovel of earth.
The sound of the engine catching
when it was thought the engine
was dead is snafu. Snafu the word
for bruises and beauty marks both.
Young lovers guard snafu carefully,
then say it 20 times a day until meaning
is lost. Instead of all the words for all
the animal noises, we teach the babies
to say snafu. Still, we ask the same
questions. What does a dog say.
What does a pig. A cow. The owl
wise in its snafu. The rooster waking
with snafu. The hamster, the rabbit
– and here you will say hamsters
and rabbits have no voice,
and I will tell you this is the world snafu.
Listen, in this new world,
how the lawnmower's growl
and the train's distant longing both
sound like there's nowhere left to go.

Northwest Cemetery, Ashfield

Let the woods keep you.
Here I walk the stone walls of your grief.
Rocks wrested from the centers of fields,
Thomas, how you stacked and leveled,
demarcated cornfields from forest
finding its way back. Walls
of rounded stone that still won't tumble.
Leaves skirling through the mossy cellars.
Lavina, did you lie awake knowing
that the forest would reclaim you.
There's a marker at your head and feet,
Ezekiel, a bowl of settled earth. You're all
waypoints of a country hike, now, valleyed
between two peaks with promised views.
The youngest here is four. No infants,
which is something of a miracle,
unless you buried them elsewhere,
Parish, or Eunice, or Phebe, in your grief.
Unless you left them here without stones.
The graveyard is what's left to you, William.
Ruth, living to 93 with all your children
dead before you. Survivors of long-ago wars.
A family laid out in grass and graves.
A stonecutter's weathered words.
Zebulon, if that is your real name.

Look for Raven Pairs Flying in a Pre-Mating Ritual

How they would nest in our bones if they could.
Inhabit a skull, wind-scrubbed, sterile,
line it with the high desert plants, that extra
hour of sunlight, the elevation. Bones bleach
because there's nothing better to do, no books
waiting to be read. Ravens love every little
dead thing, a fur-sack smashed against the road,
a body curled around its own thirst. Strayed hikers,
casualties of friendly fire, someone dying
of a broken heart, it makes no ravenly difference.
Carrion is carrion, you once told me, or maybe
carrion is carillon, the raven voices clanging
like broken bells. There they go, black looped,
long-beaked scribbles, hoping that the world
will end. Tell me they're not the most intelligent
of the birds. The soft parts of us – that's the first
thing we give away.

Rock Hall Harbor, Pencil and Acrylic, Unfinished

The blue comes down this way, deliberate,
a light fractured by birds, clouds
on their way, the feel of far-off rain.

In the foreground a boat still in pencil.
The bones of it, the hull in pieces though
the curve's there, a hatchmarked stern.

The artist put down his pencil, his brushes.
Walked away or died. Began seeing the desert
in things instead of the wet.

Or considered it done, perhaps.
A horizon being built. A boat
in the reckoning. A scene

completed by the viewer's mind,
our willingness to read over missing words,
create what is only suggestion.

I can't remember which lover
I bought this for or how the painting
ended up with me. By now I've grown

used to the forests changing around me,
the buildings razed, the rope swing gone.
The painting has survived every move,

every awkward swaddling, the time
in all those attics and how surprised I am
at each unveiling, finding something still undone.