

Magic in the World

We all agreed the merciful thing was to kill it.
Larvae growing out of its back like spines
and its head craning round to see what had become
of its body, what it had been replaced with.
I was the oldest, but it was Stephen I made

pry the caterpillar off the branch, and crush it,
and hope nothing would ever grow where it dropped.
I believed there were two magics in the world.
The one you got with prayer, or something
else, maybe, that worked every time but was forgotten—

and one you might cast in error,
with mirrors, or saying the wrong name in ignorance.
Go To Church, the sign said like a match
in the paranoid dark. *Or The Devil Will Get You*.
In our neighborhood there was one row of hedges

covered in webs, the sheets extending
deep in the bushes—but no other houses had webs.
Was it something the family inside had done?
Pale spiders moved secretly in the spade-shaped leaves.
We knew it couldn't be true, what Aunt Lynne said

when we came home: that the same god who tends
the animals, looks after us too.
But we wondered. I thought for the first time
that all the magic in the world might be the same,
the communion wine and the wasp grubs tunneling.

Since that summer the woods have been
a terrible place. Strange galls hanging off the trees.
Chambers in the roots, only a magician
would dare stick an arm in, and yellow molds that move
in the cracks of logs even if you're looking.

The sound in the distance is a woodpecker
tearing his world down. The smell is an autumn crop
of leaves fermenting like orange rinds in a bottle.
Shadows wear goats' heads and staves between the branches.
Anything could happen. But doesn't.

Out of the Sea

The sea turns over like a band in a factory machine,
stamping out widgets unattended all night, wheels of motion
that grind the salt in the air exquisite fine.
Bodies separate from their minds. High on the pier, the oystermen
hack up hard cultches, breaking off pearls of moonlight
like the sea's loose orthodontia strewn in their catch.
Merchants scrutinize bellies of thick sailfish, searching
for signs of malfeasance or rot. These are punishing hours
above the beach breathing white and insomniac,
the salt baths shining in the stars like bowls of rice water.
No one knows what's easy and what is difficult.
Siddhartha thought desire was the cause of hardship,
but hardship is the cause of hardship.

Just like you the birds wake up hungry in the morning.
The sea is still undressing in the blush of stars
when they're rounding up the discarded dead from nets and buckets.
Waves finger tide pools like raccoon hands polishing a stone.
Somehow the breakbone cold sloughs off the jetties; the oystermen
crate up their catch in even counts. The birds get their fill
except the ones who don't. Did anyone say
one day the calm would last, the fence held steady in its crescent
around the dune grass, the sea still in its solid block of night?
Who says you deserve the life you have?
A shearwater slings its body in the air like smoke,
weighed on the stressed winds of the Gulf Stream, tired before it starts.

Wild the Sea

The sea pushes the rusted cable ferry out to the dried up bay,
waits an hour, sun on the gunmetal flanks; hauls the load in again.
Out of the sea, back to the sea. It's had a long time
to resent the things it's been asked to do with its life,
pushing and pulling, changing the sun for the moon,
long hours on its silent plains burying what no one's looking for.
It's never felt younger or more vigorous.
It's wild, a maniac, ruled by its desires. It wants
to eat the rails off the ferry. Far off on the ice of Saint Lawrence
its waves disgorge a Greenland shark, a caribou in the belly
antlers and all—through great contortions the sea describes
what it's craving. The tide comes in. It eats the rails off the ferry.
For days it's spitting up rust and red flecks of paint.

Down in the treacherous shale pumping oil by gallons,
in the saltwater gyres spinning winches on old ships with sails;
bludgeoning the earth until geography happens. The sea's labor
wears out the unfinished shore—not with temperance,
no artful work with the hands, like the seagull who gets
the meat from a horseshoe crab. A storm kills the cattle and dogs
but leaves the fan trees standing and joists in the pier.
The steady slope of the ocean shelf terminates
in a sudden drop—that's a metaphor the Buddhists employed,
though they had not walked out to the great canyons and seen the sea
grinding the quartz at the core to make its pearl.
Or the lime cliffs it stole material from, things more ancient than anyone.
But it's good to watch a quantity diminish:
it's like how time moves. Not at all, then all at once.