

In April, Jesus Was a Camel Cigarette

After the cow births her calf my dad lights a smoke.

We move to a hill far enough back not to bother them

getting to know each other the first time in light of day.

He rests on his haunches, lights another and watches,

a smile curves his mouth, blue smoke curls into still air.

We wait while the calf finds its feet and udder end of the cow,

nursing sounds, a hymn. Two cigarettes later, I know

I want to smoke when I grow up. Sounds of frothy sucking

drift across silence we share with the calf, cow, melting snow

and gods, all of them waiting to be fed. His camel's smoke

keeps dancing, remains of snow give way, a crocus here

another there punctuate mud and tender grass.

It isn't church, but better.

Farm

My mother stood at her kitchen window
facing north and wringing her hands

Heavy like iron that I thought
I could unwind her gnarl of worry

When my father fixed fence along the creek
he expected supper She unwound

her worried hands to make it
A mix of potatoes meat and sorrow

My father ate everything
except the sorrow—

My brother and I divided it
He being older

took the smaller share
Evening came

I walked to the barn
to gather the cows

to smell the water in the cattle tank
to imagine I was a fin

on the windmill
a splinter on the fencepost

holding the gate

From *Having Listened* (Homebound Publications 2013)

Bunkhouse

The bunkhouse held a secret it carried for years.
Just walking near I'd feel an arm reaching out,

wanting something. I'd hold my breath
to keep it still, then walk fast to the creek

to hide, again, the freckled arm of the hired man.
When others walked nearby,

I'd wonder how they missed it.
We moved and it collapsed.

I didn't need a creek to hide things.
I walked like others,

as if no arm ever reached for me.
It worked for a long time

until the day I heard they burned down
what was left of the bunkhouse.

Everywhere I walked, I startled to see arms
coming out of walls.

From *Having Listened* (Homebound Publications 2013)

My Father's Trips to Town

What a shy gentleman he was,
in the field, working,
in the church, silent,
unwilling to sing,

and in the bank,
head bowed, bargaining
with only the promise
of harvest.

Yet, in the bar, loosened
by liquor, laughing,
dice-shaking,
dare-taking beyond his reach;

at last, returning home after dark,
he walked alone, scolded,
to the barn
to milk the burdened cow

who lashed him in his shame
with her piss-wet tail
as he sat, cursing,
on the three-legged milking stool.

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My Blue Shirt

My blue shirt hangs in the closet
of this small room, collar open,
sleeves empty and tail wrinkled.
Nothing fills the shirt but air
and my faint scent.
It waits, all seven buttons undone,
button holes slack,
soft fabric with its square white pattern,
all of it waiting for a body.
It would take any body,
though it knows, in its shirt way of knowing,
only mine, has my shape in its wrinkles,
my bend in the elbows.
Outside this room birds hunt for food,
young leaves drink in morning sunlight,
people pass by on their way to breakfast.
Yet here, in this closet,
the blue shirt needs nothing,
expects nothing, knows only its shirt knowledge,
that I am now learning—
how to be private and patient,
how to be unbuttoned,
how to carry the scent of what has worn me,
and to know myself by the wrinkles.

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