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## To own nothing, not even our skin

To live here  
beneath cedars and firs.  
To live among osprey, raven, peregrine, owl.  
To feel the sun grow colder,  
night more eager to arrive.  
To close the barn's red mouth, the cats inside.  
To come in from the horses.  
To warm the hands. And with  
warm hands, to sit at the piano,  
teach the hands a new pattern.  
Something labyrinthine for the left.  
Something with trills for the right.  
To watch the mind and hands work together.  
To do this with sunlight between the tips  
of two trees, and light falling into the room, light  
that started on the sun now grazing the page,  
black notes on white paper.  
To recognize beauty if not to understand it.  
To go out to the horses again,  
bring them in from the field, lay  
my hands on their foreheads, necks, withers.  
To learn the music of them.  
To know, then, that this life is all one day.  
A day in which quail break out of their eggs  
and scurry in single file across the yard.  
A day in which dandelions bloom and hurl  
their seeds to the wind,  
and the great heart of the world  
grants the air its breath.  
To live to eat and drink some piece of the day.  
To say, where are we  
but on the floor of a vast ocean,  
blinking and blinking our eyes  
as light breaks through the blue above us.

## Directive for holiness

*after Miłosz*

A woman with child should not walk on dry twigs in spring.  
Should she dream of horses running in moonlight,  
her labour will be quick.  
Her husband should not carry an axe into the house.  
A son should not slice an apple in two but a daughter should  
do so, and count the seeds which will number her children.  
A man should not kill a lynx in snow nor let the blood  
drip a path to his door.  
If he does so, his wife must cover the blood with bark or leaves  
or river stones, else it will bring injury or death into the house.  
This I learned from the snake handlers who lived in the coulee,  
who mark misfortune in lightning-split trees, dust swept up  
by brooms, a girl's first blood.

## The abandoned farm

You wake to mottled light and know you've gone there again:  
the strip-log house, the well run dry, and wind spilling  
through broken windows, and sagging fence wire tangled  
in sheep's wool still whistling drought stories down the valley.  
All through summer and the slow death of flowers, the cat's  
litter of six would tumble over themselves in wild grass, carried  
off in talons one after another; that, and the pine bed

where your children slipped out matted, bruised, but for one  
who turned back, and no stone ever laid for her that lay buried  
months in snow, nor the stained sheets he rolled over and over  
his arms and threw away, that could prove her real. Twenty  
years scouring your dreams and the blackened edges of fields  
for something wild like her to look you in the eye, circle  
at a distance like coyotes for sheep.

Then June would open its green eyes, the neighbour  
in his truck who aimed his head out the window, his front  
tire careful over the rattler's blunt head, too close to the house  
to let it live. One knife stroke severed the rattle he curled into  
your son's pink palm. Your man's cupped hands overflowed  
with mustard in bloom, the way  
he'd unbutton your blouse, slow, deliberate,

and taught you to mend fence, wind wires over each other  
not even the horses could break through, how you'd think  
of yourself then as a child in school, pencil in the wrong hand  
writing *o* and *o* and *o*, she with hair flaming, still a child  
in you, sometimes slides, silent, out, while you squint high  
into the pine and see her there. *Come, down, child,*  
*come down, you call,*

*I will show you no more.*

## Like sunlight carried on the current

A stranger light has entered me  
and made my veins shine as dawn  
on all the tributaries of a river.  
A stranger light, a brighter dark.  
Where has it come from? For its tenor  
is not of this world. Where will it go,  
if I am not its ending place?  
A train passes field after field of wheat,  
its steel howl which the coyote answers  
from a distant hill. Tonight I listen to rain,  
wind in the wide valleys, my veins  
flowing into each other beneath  
the caul of my skin. Unlike the china cup  
shattered and mended with gold,  
I am not prized, but sometimes  
noticed by the moon  
in whose watery light she washes  
the dust of dying stars from her face.



## Aubade

A slight, slant snow, *a good day for burning*, he said, the land coveted for growing. Then he surrounded the farmhouse with kerosene, though I'd made him wait holding the match while I searched its rooms, and emerged carrying a locket, a Bible with flowers pressed in the Psalms, oars in their oarlocks, a newspaper from my birth year stuffed into the basement joists. The house a conflagration, burned as though taken up by heaven. Bats fled the rooms and rose like daylight stars; a scrap of wallpaper floated toward the ground. The heat of it singed our faces, melted the snow. And the next summer, drove to the place again, three days sleeping in the open under a net.

I wakened to a fox calling somewhere in the slow curved distance, then silence, then answer: a loon alone by the dock, though we'd slept on after our love, the night too warm, both our nakedness free for the air to do with us what it wanted. And home, and he flown to the other side of the world. I found a dark hair left on his pillow like a road half-covered in snow, and kept it there, as though it were a letter whose words, no matter how rearranged, are a sadness, a grief. And so pure a grief it was, that stillness on one side of the bed, the light falling into the dark. I would tell him, his voice far and small through the phone, how I saw a mouse take flight in the talons of an owl, the ploughed field take on the idea of absence, and then the owl, two notes of boast, two of regret. Those nights, waiting for sleep, I listened for the lap of his boat rowing back, the same ghostly sound the deer make when they run through the stream, the night fanning out in circles, his oars' wide wings.