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Prayer Flags

We walk to a temple above Gangtok.
Prayer flags span the road between stands of dark pine.
White with age, they stream in the wind,
wishes tied to a string.

A glass-enclosed room. Hundreds of oil lamps burn,
a bed for the dead, their long goodbye.
Rosy-cheeked monks polish them one by one.
Nearby, a room for meditation,
benches, cushions for kneeling,
drums, gongs, a place for quiet thought and song.
We slip inside, hug the wall,
listen, eyes closed, in the dusky light.
A monk rushes up, asks us to leave.

We stumble outside.
Hurry past prayer wheels.
Set them turning.
Hands skimming faith.
The letters foreign.

Though shut out
I know about incomprehensible words
circling night after night,
lamp fire added to lamp fire until the dark
grows ill with desire.

I know that between stands of dark pine
our deepest surrender
flutters with myriad others
on a continual thin line.

Never Too Late

It is never too late, he says, to give a hand.
The clock on the mantel barely moves a hand.

The spider's web is rimmed with winter frost.
The spider, lost, hides in the child's sleeping hand.

Pigeons scabble for winter's paltry crumbs
scattered by an old man, his frozen red hand.

Honking cars, black slush, a man marooned at night.
He looks around, but cannot find a hand.

A pianist in a bar as the evening shuts down
lets loose with his rare-dream hand.

A young man ties his Countess Mara necktie.
The silk slips smoothly through his skilled hand.

Rapunzel lets down her hair, her pomegranate hair.
Her lover climbs to her, hand over hand.

The moon slides down the roof of my house.
I go outside to catch it, stretch out my white hand.

Jumping into Water

They say if you jump in often enough
water will grow wings.

A jump past your skin to the heart of things.

Do you remember the hiding spot under the big leaf
where you listened to the rain? A rain house.
A finger was enough to enter the world.
And the newborn mice in the furrow of a field?
Skin pink against brown clumps of soil,
heartbeat transparent.

But the world had different ambitions.
People sketched far-fetched horizons.
Chuckwagons headed westward,
gouged ruts.
Promises gilded gold.
The Alamo fell.

They say if you jump in often enough
a baobab house will rise
thickening with each rain,
a gourd filled with water for “the dry.”

They say if you jump in often enough
you will not drown.

The Fish

You smile as if
you had caught that one fish, the only fish,
mouth, gills, tail
all there, tiny and moving and now
what to do
in your amazement, with it lying in your hand.

You were five and did not see that the strange moving
was dying.

You smile like then,
stepping into a new strangeness,
rocking in a rocking chair as you tell me about her,
the catch and hold,
only now you can read the signals,
understand the pumping-gill need,
the blue-fleshed fragility
as you dive in.

A Reminiscent Shape

The deer are missing.
They pass through my garden year-round
regular as the need to eat.
Foes—what did they not devour—then a kind of familial.
Eyes closing in.

Their absence. What to make of it? Until one day
I stumble upon a birth
dropped as if in passing on the stone pathway.

Only a reminiscent shape, a touch bigger
than a man's footprint.
Flattened face, recognizable still,
mouth open for first breath.

Smell, that round sprout,
its shroud.

A small brownness
something like down
flits with each snatch of wind,
and settles back.

Unlike the goslings
that just tested wings.