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At the Altar of Touch (Extract)

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Self-Portrait as the Last Wounded Stag

I'm walking into the quickening blizzard
as if into a hunter's dream—

the flint arrow through my chest keener
than earthly desire. Wherever I went

teeth followed me, relentless as the shadow
of the doe-eyed boy I thought

I couldn't live without. Long ago, love
made all gestures of flowering

possible on earth. Now I'm tired of living
on the peripheries where the witch-hazels thicken

as inkblots & the light over the hill grows
more distant each year. Father, far

& reticent as you are, let me not be a memory
of blood & musk salting a wolf's breath.

Let me be antlers. Let me be lightning
branching jagged into sky. Let me be sky—

Blue Hour

Waves heave against fenced-in horizon.
They seek a listener, chime a single melancholy
note in the whorled ear
of a stranded shell, which I mistake

for your heartbeat. Where we live
sleep is expensive. But you purchase it
with your shallow breathing, cheek buried

in your pillow, and the moonlight
tonight is the lone traveller on the highway
of your spine. This is the blue hour

when all the music of the universe
is still waiting to be played
and everything is tinged with renewal exactly

the colour of a wintry sea. And the impossible
task of being wholly alone: the way

we once unbuttoned each other's skin,
our hands feverish with greed, right
down to the barest threads only

to find beneath it a circle
of friends & kin waiting
to glare at us, their inescapable eyes
wide with fear & suspicion.

How I long for the world to return
to its first form, a shoreless echo
like a foetal kick in ultrasound
strong as gold. Our bones

shall be folded back into star stuff, back
to their cosmic potential, all
phantom fires & radiant sawdust whizzing

through space, past the need for
speech towards
the same genesis. Instead,

the leaves in my head grow
too dense for thinking. They rustle
solemnly against life and yoke
pools of blue light as the bicycle

wheels in the trees
keep on spinning. Dawn breaks
against our skin, raw as a wound.

I watch the sheep stepping
gingerly out of the thick nets
of their own silhouettes

to tread the pebbles on the beach. Their faces
innocent & knowing as children's.

Myth, or Luck as a Swan Boat

Fear fear, shriek the unseen cicadas in a borrowed
language all summer long. It forms a pattern:

the cut diamond of their chorus shredding air
into thin ribbons of heat. An abandoned fountain

dry as the loins of any stone cherub. I go where
chance takes me, or is it luck—that sun-bleached

swan boat steered by nothing but the lake's caprice
through the knot of shadows cast by a willow grove.

That shadow play of *mind : foliage : mind : foliage*
until the water turns murky as unanswered prayers—

chance, a codeword for surrender; prayers, a prelude
to trust. I lie down beside the rock worn to myth

by the lake's ancient murmurs. The boat I came in
has turned to a swan, the swan now saunters towards me

as a god. Fear ebbs from me in ripples tainted by the moon
as I seek that rare kind of tenderness that lies between *rescue*

and *ruin*, guiding the god's feathered touch over the ivory
magnolia of my belly, steering his calloused hands over

mine, saying, *Here are the oars. Here is the impossible rowing.*