

Polaris

The town where I grew up is tucked in folds of sandstone, shale, and chert,
at the heel of red-dirt hills formed not from tectonic clash but domes

built up from Paleozoic ocean floor, layer upon layer of settling silt
and the dying bodies of crinoids. There are caverns still to be spelunked,

and closed grottos, some small as a child's play house. No fossils to be found
except trilobite and ammonite impressions in sedimentary stone;

artifact arrowheads flint-knapped into shape by Osage and Quapaw.
We lived above the tree line on a bald knob visible from the valley;

people below on the old road looked up at night, strained to see
through car windows the porch light oft mistaken for a steady star,

and said *there* as if a benediction bestowed, but it was only our house
of tar paper and tin—hounds in the yard, a flink of cows cud-chewing

in the night, hogs snuffling around the scum-slick pond—but a beacon
to those finding their way while we slept unaware, swimming through

the ancient ocean of our dreams, preserving ourselves for the waking hours.
This is where you capture my hand and I stay, each of us sleeping
serene as stone.

A Chipping Sparrow's Nest (2021)

We found it, blown to the ground, on the triangle of grass between
farm gate and fence line.

You wouldn't pick it up even with gloved hands, having grown distant
in this peculiar time of masks and disease.

But I did, this perfect nursery built of horse hair, bird spit, and one bent twig.
Little bird, so much effort made useless.

I think of our children, roosted and gone. Empty nest they call it—
this beauty, this sadness. You touch my face barehanded.

Jenks Wood Makes His Daily Rounds (2021)

each morning, his truck on the skyline road,
pulling slightly to the left, chert pinging the pan

both hands on the cantankerous wheel, a home-rolled hanging from
his lip, the *go, Nellie* as they take yet another dusty hill;

a stop at Doshier's, then around the bend to Milligan's, and
on to Davenport's—milk cans rolled to the road,

kept cold through the night wrapped in wet burlap
waiting, while cream separates and rich butterfat rises;

at each house the wife watches from a window, curtain
drawn back with a finger as she tallies in her head

a sack of chicken feed, tub of lard, flour and cornmeal, matches,
no sugar, no coffee—only one can lifted to the truck's bed today

Killing Horses (2021)

We choose words more comfortable.

Euthanize. Put down. Put to sleep.

But kill is the word. Single syllabic. Hard.

A slug of phenobarb plunged into the vein nestled in the jugular groove.

Sometimes if they are down when the bolus hits their heart, they stand.

Those magnificent muscles full of memory bring them to their feet.

Then the collapse, the vet saying *stand back, stand back*.

Kill: Etymology: Old English *cwellan* (to murder, execute).

On that day, his forehead pressed against my chest, he tells me it's time.

The vet draws up the syringe, says *it's hard to lose the good ones*.

I stroke the familiar of his chestnut coat, then walk away.

His eyes watch, large and dark and moist.

Abandon: Etymology: Middle English *forleven* (to leave behind).

This is too large a death to witness.

After Reading *In the Lateness of the World* I Think of a Friend in Portugal (2021)

She sits at a wide sill in Vila Franca de Xira,
sky burnt blue-white, juice of a black plum glistening her chin,
sweet rivulets coursing her fingers. Behind her a man on his back
sated and tangled—not her husband but yes, her husband,
in the salt of that moment all the men she has loved or dreamed of loving.

She looks down over the street, flicking ash over the horns
of the running bulls, over the *pastores* that hold the ropes
tied to the bulls, over the blood that runs and will run again tomorrow.

She will come back to us in time—but there will always be the fruit, always the salt.