

Three Poems

JAMES LONGENBACH

The Pretty Rocks

Arms of land enclosing open sea,
Focusing the wind that ripples up
The meadow to the orchard, mylar kites,
A single heron with its neck extended
So improbably: but in the distance
There's the massive break, a wilderness
Of ocean close enough to witness
But remote enough to let us savor
The millennia of punishment
A rock can suffer while we sleep.

A child wanders through the meadow,
Waits for recognition from the older kids,
Intent on breaking limestone into dust
With granite gathered from the shore.
Two steps towards them, then away, not running
Or retreating but withholding something
Inexplicable, as if her movement
Through the world were nothing but the dull
Reflection of what's happening inside—
Or somewhere else.

She won't remember this
But she will understand the feeling,
Windswept arms containing all that water
And the opening or else a closing
Of the ocean far—but not too far—beyond.
The soul, if we remembered how we made it,
Would be similar: the pouring out

And then the violence of the rushing in,
The outside twisted back upon itself
To carve a coastline of interiors,
The caves and mazes and the refuse
Of construction strewn along the shore.

We're silent, she and I, the world so full
Of nothing but the sound of one rock pounding
On a softer one to make the powder
Sifting in the bucket down below.
Go find the pretty rocks, says one lost child
To another one, and off she goes.

Burglary Considered as a State of Mind

It's not the violation but the weight
Of everything that's left behind: dark clouds
Reciprocate the nothing in your eyes
With the suspicion there is nothing missing
Under surfaces. A finch abandons
What she built in the ailanthus tree
And if you were a bird you'd leave here too—
Leave all the things not yet accumulated,
One white ribbon dangling from the nest.
Consult the memory for a scene more
Welcoming than this: a sky so scarlet
Off the island, once, you prayed although
You hadn't said a prayer since childhood.
Whatever can't be stolen can't be owned,
But even thoughts like these are miserly
And what remains may never be accounted for.
A wine glass found weeks later in the woods,
The telephone, dead when you pick it up,
The sky a thousand different shades of gray—
Hello? *Hello?* Who measures out the value
Of accumulation, who can tell
You when it's gone? A broken window or
A blur of wings above the empty mouths:
Please make a list of everything you own.

The Afterthought

Not far from home the river splits
Into a dozen creeks and dead-end spurs.

But I prefer to linger here beside
The long canal boats with their painted hulls

And far-fetched names. One night I walked too far.
The towpath dwindled to a slice of land

Between the river and the barge canal
Until it disappeared, the surface clear,

Uncomplicated as a magpie's caw.
I'd heard of fishermen who never learn

To swim because it's easier imagining
A simple death, the body sinking

As the boat goes down; I knew that under
Any surface is a cauldron swirling

With the evidence of other people's lives:
I hadn't seen how easily the body

Could forget whatever skills it brought
To water cold and indiscriminate as this,

The mind released for just one moment
From a lifetime's weight of loss and grief

Before it sinks more quickly than a stone,
The body following. The afterthought.

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