"As Close to Transcendent as a Natural Thing Gets"
& Other Poems

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On Sarusawa Pond (Formerly Called Hojo-ike)

Passing the pond on my bike, I am brought to a stop.

Four turtles nudge a silver-white carp keeled on its side—
gape mouthed and still like a liner in distress.

A stranger stands close and stares—
unapproachable, silent, scanning the surface
for something that seeps within.
Only slowly it dawns, across the pond more carp drift,
escorted by ranks of little heads poked up
at an angle to the sky.

Hungry, immune—how soon will the turtles break vigil
and clamber aboard?
Can we see what they smell tugging pieces of carp
back down through the murk?
Or know the taste of what hides
where lords of the pond
no longer circle and glide?

We wait for an all-clear sign,
for something to unclench
in the water and sky—a drop
in degree, a light breeze?

No siren will likely sound
in either her ear or mine.

*  
After the monks of the southern
capital turned against the court,
they seized more than sixty of
the Heike's dispatched horsemen,
cut off their heads and hung them
in rows beside Sarusawa Pond,
where the car road edges the bank
now planted with pale willows,
hanging their own drooping load.
On the north, a flight of stairs
leads up to the temple—fifty two
steps in all—one step at a time—
to wake your Bodhisattva Mind.

*  
When the full moon fills
As Close to Transcendent as a Natural Thing Gets

the September pond,
tourists flock to appease
love's outraged plea.

Dragon boat maidens
with priests in court dress
lay to rest on water
the seven autumn colors

of Uneme's forsaken
flower fan. Yet no color
could add to or take
away from the whiteness

of her ghost-white face.

Pity, they say, came
in the night and turned her
spirit-house around

not to face the pond.
Read anger: what emperor
could reverse his
favor, raise her back up,
or himself dive down?

* 
Neither so clear
nor so muddy
with no water weeds
or frogs
no outlet
no inlet—

each April
live fish from fish shops
are released

in the pond
formerly called

Sets-living-things-free.

Local Worship

It will never be marked on a map
but from this poem
you can find it on the road
that winds past
the bamboo grove
one hundred paces
beyond the graves below
Byakugo-ji
where the valley opens out
in terraced paddies
and small fields.

Up on the left as you head
east to the mountains
you'll spot a white pipe
slanting down the slope
and then
a tall zelkova
flinging its branches
out from the bamboo, out of reach
above the road.

Right here—

tucked into the bank beneath
is a clutch of skirted
egg-shaped rocks and the weather-worn
sculpted O-Jizo,

plus an omphalos
rounded like a lump
of rising dough.

Count them—

twelve doll-size stones in all,
child's play for grieving mothers
or the very old.

Who else would squat down
to the ground
and tie on little red
strips of cloth,

or know what
secret boundary
we have casually passed,
what flicker

of deep memory
in the hillside
must not be lost?
Stand back and follow
the two flexed roots
sprung up from the bank
and joined
    at the base
of the trunk
arched above the womb
and treasury
of this Earth-Store-Buddha.

See how the bark
gently swells in the fork
and splits
    in a vertical slit
exposed to the light

like the heavenly dancer
who pushed down her waist band
enticing the sun
to come out of its cave

and dazzle the dark.

Listen—

a solitary cock crows now
on top of his nearby hill;
he can't stop—

raucous as the gods who howled
first in fear
then delight.

**Trickster Dog**

Late in the morning while I sweep
leaf by recalcitrant leaf,
the jabbering kids who never greet me
come running for an adult.

I follow them back beyond a van where we halt,
then face a dog-size creature,
snout and eyes fixed on the ground—
his bristle back sloped like the neighboring hills.

Something in his air even more
intractably other than teeth or claws,
as subtle as a shadow with a sheen,
warns us off.

Dazed, diseased? He stands
heavy on his feet for the long count down,
stalled, it seems, before a gate
(where there is no gate.)

We keep still and watch him breathe
until he retreats to a heap of leaves
left un-swept between
the cinderblock wall and the van.

Once out of sight, his spell is broken.
I store my broom, and lively
the kids disperse, who would rather stay and rout him out.

First thing next morning from four floors up, I spot him back in the open, stiff on his side in front of the van—like nothing else in our asphalt lot.

Twice more I go to the window hoping each time he'll stop playing dead, shift his shape, or be whisked away...

Today peering into my kyusu I glimpsed his coat—the color of tea stems soaked at the bottom of the pot.

*Mori no Sakebi*

Up ahead on the forest path through its tunnel of trees scaled down and dulled in the winter light a painter stands arm-length to an easel, eyes shuttling back and forth from canvas to glade, guiding home what's seen in mossy trunks and the crooked spaces between, moving mind to hand in quick, self-correcting dabs of umber and shadowy green.
Or so I imagine, until I pass by and see these old-growth woods swallowed up in a howl of reddish pink—the whole deer-threaded thicket mapped in a god's eye ellipse floating dead center in the picture plane.

O nameless artist brother, (older, amateur, never shown?) setting up each morning in the same bend on my path with the same canvas, no master is more in the grip of a single abstraction or more urgently compelled to work and re-work his vision.

Yet when you take your painting back indoors out of sight of the trees, which breathe for us all in all their coolness on our skin, who will have an ear to see or an eye to hear

"The Forest is Screaming"?
"As Close to Transcendent as a Natural Thing Gets" & Other Poems

Winter Figs

This skinny sucker shot up
from the base of an old fig tree's
broken trunk
    stands bare
and exposed as a quizzical Adam
stripped
of his cover in the first
winter wind.

Two purpling figs hang swollen on their stems
at the ends of the left and right
cross-limbs.
    Unprotected
they drink in
whatever warmth comes
from the exiled sun.
Will they fill themselves to bursting?
Or shrivel in the air
in neglect?
    Or be wantonly pecked open
in gaping holes
hemorrhaged at the core?

No one will stoop for fruit
fallen bruised to the earth under such
a repentant tree.

If I could reach over the fence,
I'd pluck them before too late.
Fresh figs I've read
are best served whole
on porcelain plates
"fringed with leaves" and not left bare—
to bed (not dress)
the inward flowering
of ripened flesh.

Lovely! the ur-shape
and Eve-like clefts
that bid us consume what eyes know
and a tongue proves
is sweeter than innocence.
And lovely too

how fingers
pursed at the lips
condense in a "fig" (not a fist)
all the joy (and hurt)

that can burst in a kiss.

*Burn-Grass-Time*

The morning after.

A tawny swath wide enough to break a brush-fire's path
zig-zags down the blackened slope set alight last night
by a hooded priest with a hand-held torch.

Too cold and crowded to see up close.
We stood at the window
and spotted the first low flickering star
and watched it leak
into a molten scam
and then flare up
in wind-blown sheets of flame.

A thousand cameras pointed in the dark and clicked
before your turned away and the tears plowed down
your face—stunned in a thirty-year
time elapse.

Old trauma trumps any photo-op,
 yet a control burn feeding your deepest fear
jump-starts growth
 where grass is
scorched to the root
on this holy hill no sooner unlit
then forced to heal.

How tender must the first shoots be!

As Close to Transcendent as a Natural Thing Gets

If by chance you found
inside an arabesque
from Isfahan or Kells
something suspect,

a tendril cut loose or
worse a loop knotted in
a hangman's noose,
like that I felt when I
glanced across my
tangled-wood creek and
captured in the shadows
a ghost trunk once

anchored in the bank
now hung before it
in the grip of a snaking
branch long ago eased

into a hold, half strangle
half lift. Out of all
this old growth making
room for each new

twig and stem to angle
the light, what odds
just one more swerve
or less by accident

would ravel a knot
in the tangle you could
not think to tie and
would not (except in

thought) ever repeat.
Imagine a young tree
budding or in full
leaf first ripping free

from earth and the rush
of air on still thirsting
roots dangled above
a tangled-wood creek.

Postscript

As flesh becomes Word
(not the reverse) my
hung tree's pas de deux
of trunk and vine was

strung up for good.
Too late to plant its feet
and burst into leaf,
yet unlike other trees

stuck in the earth its
work was all in the error
stilled under bark:
the clutch that knots

a tangled-wood Art.
Who could've guessed
a gust of wind (plus
rot?) is deft enough to

unknot a timeless plot?
Does Daphne ever
shed her bark, Antaeus
plant his dead feet?

O the chagrin what is
that dropped to the bed
of the creek tangled
in a broken tether like

an old sea-crow's up-thrust neck and beak?
Far from any real river
or sea that surrounds,

what good news is this?
In which Gospel or
myth does a Laocoon
limb come unwound?

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**Tohaku's Pines**

Crowding into the dim-lit room
knowing the best is saved
for last, we jostle limb to limb
for a chance to file past

Tohaku's pines,

not the slow growing
ring-upon-ring, solar-fed kind,
but what he taught himself to resurrect
from the soft sift of pine-soot
pressed in a stick.

Pulled towards the glass with barely
a sideways glance, all eyes
fix on a distant slope seen close up
through the shifting tones
of a bone-grey,
bone-white mist,
each of us alone
taking in the same feathery light
flicks, ghost strokes and bleeding
black lines of a ragged stand of pines,
the eerily familiar,
end-of-the-world kind.

O what to make of a nation
that sinks its faith in phantom shapes
worth so much more
without girth or weight?

Who doesn't suspect
the real treasure is in the sorcery
behind the sorcerer's touch?
I swear before he even dipped a brush,
Tohaku knew his self
as a soot-stick too.

You may ask on what
stone was it rubbed, the color
it bled; what leapt to a tip neither
plucked from rabbit nor wolf;
where is the screen

where no nature is seen?

Butterfly Zone

A single butterfly leads the way down street.
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Scoring the air in bright dips
and sudden uplifts,
it banks left and right
above its own squadron
scattered at rest on the sunning decks
like slivers of light
against the white concrete.

I don't take note as I pass
nor mark my steps
until they trip the alarm for wings
to un-clap, fly up,
    and flap around me

in the steady pulse of a strobe-lit flutter—
lilac on top,
pearl-grey beneath.

When I move, the butterflies move
in escort to the border
at the end of the block where
abruptly they drop,
    and I am left alone

too giddy to think
what comes next
on my morning walk.