A Mountain Exorcism

With fingers worn and knobbled like sassafras roots,
nails caked with clay, he drags
the old-fashioned horsehair bow
across taught catgut strings,
draws, unwilling, the scratchy song
up from the hollow belly of the fiddle,
like pulling brambles over flesh,
like the devil, dancing, from a shriven soul.

March

Teakettle keening of wind down the mountain
tells me you’ve come, another violent season
dawning, stripping the last stubborn, brown leaves
from the oak, red alder, mountain ash,
whipping naked blackberry brambles
into the muddy earth. I have never seen you
come in like a lamb.

The copse of old growth down by the orchard
has suffered another casualty;
they sway, a staggered circle,
mute veterans, taking count
of the fallen.
Winter Poem

It’s good to kneel beneath the brittle weight of winter,
lacing windows, crackling webs of frost
crawling over crunchy grass, overnight lows
cold-baking the yard into an icehouse floor
beneath a canopy of rattling, bony fingers,
ingsloved hands of trees,
clapping in the frozen breeze.

Hibernation

Living is waving a long goodbye
to life, the soul preparing as a snake prepares
to slide into its hole, to reemerge
in another spring with new flowers,
to scent again the smell of mouse, of frog,
of speckled eggs in a low nest,
to feel again the heat of sun on back,
the damp of soil sliding under belly,
the tremor of distant footfalls
shivering up every arch of rib.
Living is flicking a forked tongue,
tasting autumn, tasting spring.
Revival

Turkey vulture circles the fractured hilltop
above a picket of pencil-thin birches
stabbing like naked spears into the gray belly
of sky, milky streams splashing in jagged lines
like tears down cracked and rutted cheekbones
to pour and puddle behind the church,
New Land Baptist, painted peeling white.
*Aaay-man!* shatters stillness like
*Fire in the hole!* Like a charge. *Aaay-man!*
*Hallelujah Jesus Jesus Jeezus aay-man!*

The clattering of fingers across yellowing piano keys
punctuates eruptions of escapist glee, joy of refugees
nearing the border, heaven sighted just beyond
the poisoned river, just above the crown
of redbud, white sarvis, forsythia
springing through splintered shale,
just over the tonsured mountain
that once was home.
After Rain

After the rain, as the puddled ground
drinks in the wetness, as eaves drip
and birdsong takes the place
of the staccato pounding on the awning,
I picture you, huddled
beneath your black bomb shelter of umbrella,
certain the world was ending and you,
with your front row ticket
to the earth’s inundated final act,
would at any minute be caught in the wake
of a mad-eyed hydrophobic prophet
and his floating menagerie.
Now, holding hands, we walk in the orchard,
we feel again the leaves releasing their held breath,
watch the trees shake raindrops from their shoulders,
measure with our trained eyes
the thickness of rainwater glaze on a single peach,
ripe just today.
Neighbors

Twenty-four times a grandma, at ninety,
more sure of God than the sunrise,
she lives beside the cemetery, each night
falls asleep to the whisperings of the dead,
their dry voices threading through the maples
like a hundred hollow hands.
The child she survived still listens
for her footsteps, orthopedic shoes
shuffling to the mailbox in front of the house
she built with her husband sixty-four years ago,
the husband who still sings to her,
who calls her back to bed in the earth.
Weight of Dead Birds

I broke its neck by the tool shed,
used a chisel to press down,
crush bone, sever the connection
between wide-eyed, open-beaked head
and chest, quivering, dog-tooth-sized wounds
matting feathers with blood, wounds
insufficient to quickly bring the unavoidable,
to end the quaking of shallow breaths,
still the flutter of wrecked wings.

Movement stopped, I scoop the body into a bucket,
feel the weight of an ended life,
toss the carcass over the fence
into fresh snow.
Ornithology

It was not a slamming door,
an explosive shout or shattered vase
that placed the period
at the end of our sentence;

it was a bright, sterile light,
sharp eyes peering over the surgical mask,
and the stainless-steel specificity
of the tweezers with which you pulled
from the dry cavity of my chest
the delicate heart, placed it
within a tiny jar in the
spurious immortality of formaldehyde,
set it beside feathers on a shelf,
beside hollow, marrowless bones, scaly claws,
the tiny, harmless skull,
emptied of all memory of open spaces.
Three Souls

A crow is someone’s soul
it’s said, and I believe,
standing, surrounded by black, rustling souls
in this tiny municipal park,

one soul shifting its weight,
foot to scaly foot, on a naked branch,
another sifting through dry leaves

and empty Tobasco packets, a third
sidling suspiciously around the rim
of a rusted iron garbage barrel,
appraising me with a single button-black eye,

deciding if I am predator or prey,
assessing what dangers may be hidden
beneath my flapping brown coat,
behind the reflective plastic panels that cover my eyes,

wariness the natural state of souls re-embodied
in cloaks of satin black.
Should the lookout fail in his vigilance,

the flock will pull the warm liquid of life
from his feathered chest with stony beaks,
a swift death the only mercy
one soul may afford another.
Did You Know?

Last spring, when a stiff March wind
blew away the flowers from the bare granite headstones,
swept away the colorful bedclothes of the dead,
and tore the laundry from the lines,
mixing the sheets of neighbors in front yards
with scandalous abandon,
did you already know? When April’s week of pounding rain
left a sheen of oily rainbows along the sidewalks downtown
and pooled in the upturned leaves of trilliums in the park,
did you know you were lying
when you said, “See you soon?”
Did you know when the heavy, black-curtained coach of death
pulled up to the curb outside your house
on your quiet street, you would climb in without protest,
pay your silver coin, and ride away into the long night?
Did you know the emptiness you would become?
The howling, angry absence behind my navel,
the tiny black hole punctuating
every sentence in every poem forever?
70th Anniversary

I will walk with you home,
hand-in-hand, like children,
hatless in the rain. I will open
the door, let out the dog,

put on your tea. As you lie
down, I will bring your cup
and saucer, napkin and sandwiches.
I will watch your hands,

still butterflies folded
on your stomach, skin thin
as onion peel, rising and
falling with each breath

as you sleep on the sofa. Setting your tea
on the coffee table, I will sit in the armchair,
grab a book to lay open
on my chest as I close my eyes,

ready, should your breaths stop coming,
to follow.