

## FIVE POEMS



*John Daniel*

### IN SKY LAKES WILDERNESS

Winter tells the old stories,  
the lakes are shut like eyelids.  
Earning heat to pay the wind  
we thread our skis between dark firs,  
pitch camp as the gray light leaves.  
Our fire throws wild shadows  
against the circling forest wall,  
while beyond that little room  
where we drink whiskey, laughing,  
the cold stars glint, the wind  
touches every tree. Later,  
inside our tent, we feel the air  
go still, a heaviness, and soon  
the ticking of fine snowfall.  
As we drift in and out of sleep  
we hear the silent storm  
begin to bury us, to mound us under  
like the bowed young firs.  
Our fire hisses faintly as snow  
cools and covers it—nothing then  
except the creak of limbs  
taking on the slow, familiar weight,  
and the small whistling flurries  
of the wind. Anything we are  
makes no difference in this place,  
where trees, wind, and falling snow  
work their ways together  
in the stillness they have always known—  
what strange joy, to huddle here  
buried in our single warmth,  
listening to what lives outside our lives.

THE EUROPEAN BIRCH  
*in memory of Denise Levertov*

The white trunk's wet gleaming,  
scarred, flecked with moss,  
the fountaining  
of leafless limbs and twigs—where  
but in this rain  
does the birch belong?  
Half the world  
from the birthplace of its kind,  
it gathers  
the falling formlessness  
so that each twig-tip  
and joint of twig  
bears one dear drop,  
one cosmos glowing from within,  
each held in wholeness  
by the sheer  
tension of its forming,  
and the drops all together  
this autumn afternoon  
show the birch  
in its distinction, standing clear.

THE GRAY WHALES PASSING POINT REYES

With geysering spouts the whales break into sun and plunge  
steady southward, flukes tossed high  
and sliding under sea. All afternoon they pass, three and four  
at a time, still weeks away

from the Baja lagoons where they'll roll belly to belly  
and birth their young,  
six thousand miles from the Arctic ice to lounge a month  
in those warm seas—

those seas where Scammon's men a century ago speared calves  
to get the mothers, spouts  
shooting blood, flukes thrashing the water to crimson froth,  
and the salt flats stinking of peeled bones

as the northern prairies stank of bison shot from trains,  
stripped of tongue and three-dollar hide...  
that square-shouldered pleasure bringing big things down.  
We aim binoculars now, shoot

only pictures, crowding the lighthouse rail and exclaiming  
as a new spout rises,  
a glistening back breaks water and plunges away.  
Steadily, easily

they move with the urge that drives them, huge bodies small  
in the spangled sea  
and small in the scope of their great journey, traveling  
this trail of rough-rocked coast

that in March they'll follow north again, the new calves  
swimming alongside their mothers  
to the Bering Sea's blue cold. We watch and keep watching  
as if hypnotized, not by the creatures

we see only for seconds but by the long unfaltering line  
of their passage, continuing on  
through the afternoon and steadily on in the hazy dusk  
as we drift from the rail

and blend in the highway's flow—bright stream that bears us  
to the dinners and sleeps  
of our singular lives, and each of us on to new places,  
new homes, travels and travels

but no journey together like the journey of the whales,  
no path that might gather us  
and lead us around through the turning of seasons and back  
to ourselves, again and again,

looping our one life through the lengths of Earth's time.

## THE WORD

The last and truest of all these words  
is the one that won't be said,  
that almost forms upon my tongue  
as I listen  
for its missing shape of sound  
in wind and running water,  
in the stillness of the misted field.  
I hold it like a stone  
I have no name for, blankly smooth  
to every touch—  
I stare and watch it always change  
into things I already know.  
I strike it,  
break it down to its brief syllables  
and peer among them  
for the secret it withholds,  
and when that fails  
as all else fails, I turn  
to the fractured light of stars,  
this brilliant wilderness  
that somehow spells the word I love,  
the word I lose  
each time it starts to say itself,  
the word  
for which I make this home and pass it on.

## THE CANYON

Here below as the sun slides past its zenith  
in the pale October sky, below  
the crumbling basalt of the canyon rim  
that spewed in fire when it was young,  
now water-stained and streaked with lichen,  
tumbling slow down dry grass slopes,  
below the deeper layers of sand and chalk  
containing lives that flourished once  
when a warm sea lapped and pounded here,  
below the bright crowns of ponderosa pines  
and homely junipers, finding our way  
on the canyon floor among silvered snags,

alongside the stream with its quiet song  
discovering deeper and deeper ages,  
here we walk and rest with our ten good years,  
plucking juniper berries and sprigs of sage,  
crushing them to breathe their savor,  
to stain ourselves with this place we love—  
this gorge time lets us wander in  
as if all time were ours, as if our hearts  
beat to the rhythm of volcanic storms  
and we breathed to rising and falling seas,  
as if time itself weren't scouring the canyon  
of every sign of our two lives, as if  
it weren't drowning us, each from the other,  
from ourselves and all our places—my love,  
there is no rock that we might cling to,  
no ledge where we might climb from our bodies  
and watch time wash them away, and yet  
we're the luckiest of all time's fools  
to be alive together exactly here,  
so lost in where we are and will not be  
that we wander wholly, helplessly free,  
following the canyon at our own pace  
as it shows us down, with water song  
and the odor of sage, through the long  
unfolding of the afternoon,  
our faces glowing with the same cool warmth  
that lights the pines and junipers,  
that brightens the bottom of an ancient sea,  
that fires far above us the rimrock cliffs  
with their cracks and stains, their crusts of age,  
their flaws revealed to the deepening light—  
faces, my love, such as we too must wear,  
faces like those we are wearing today,  
beautiful for all time brings and bears away.