

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.