

*Countrymen**for Jim*

We were sitting in the Abbey waiting,
and he was telling me, low-voiced,
about their week-old spaniel pups,
the one with the tail that was two-thirds brown,
the white only up near the tip.

If he did it right, he said
—if he cut for the flash—
she'd be like the mother, her tail over-long,
always bloody after hunting,
ribboned
by furze and briar.

Ah, to hell with the theory, he said,
—the theory and the purists—
blaze or no blaze, he'd cut her short;
he'd not see her hurt like Jess.

It was November,
the old year was slipping, the new one
drawing closer. There were monks drifting through,
you could feel them, uncertain,
pressed close to the walls
and in the worn places,
called back to mark these eight hundred years
of the Abbey's grey stones in the valley.

He would do it himself?

He would, he said. A hot knife—fast—the heat sealing
the cut flesh. His hands mimed
the knife and the pup, I watched them,
the swift, sure cut,
against the dark wood, the monks drawing in
for a better look. I thought of our pups—
warm flesh-sacks, they'd jumped in my hands
as the clippers closed—of the small bloody heap
of puppy-dogs' tails
on the vet's table. The monks were remembering
the oddness of hands, smells, blood, you could feel them
growing focused, denser, remembering
the body's red roar
and the past stretching back
till it slid off the edge of time and the world,
and always a dog and a man
—through first light, through last light—
a man and a dog
moving always together.

Suzanna

It was one of those hard funerals. A man, not old, not young, dead not through disease or an outside agent. And full summer, the great trees burgeoning, his brothers waiting, quiet at the door.

I walked in, sat down, glanced over. She was there in the pew on the other side of the aisle. I barely knew her, didn't dislike her. Perhaps I thought her a bit much.

The funeral mass, its pattern of word and gesture. It was harder for her, he'd been in and out of her childhood. I hadn't known him, had come on account of the feeling I had for one of the brothers.

Then the slow coffin, its move down the aisle on the backs of the brothers, the cleave of its prow through the wash of green light at the open door.

We rose from our seats. She came from that side and I came from this side; she reached and took hold of my hand and she didn't let go.

Wind streamed the trees. Rain came. The priest sped the rosary.

Later, at the long tables, she chose the seat next to mine. Funeral meats. Bread without hunger. Talk with the brothers, the wives, the nephews and nieces.

After that, her hand was always in mine so I loved her—