

## “Winter Stars”

My father once broke a man's hand  
Over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor. The man,  
Rubén Vásquez, wanted to kill his own father  
With a sharpened fruit knife, & he held  
The curved tip of it, lightly, between his first  
Two fingers, so it could slash  
Horizontally, & with surprising grace,  
Across a throat. It was like a glinting beak in a hand,  
And, for a moment, the light held still  
On those vines. When it was over,  
My father simply went in & ate lunch, & then, as always,  
Lay alone in the dark, listening to music.  
He never mentioned it.

I never understood how anyone could risk his life,  
Then listen to Vivaldi.

Sometimes, I go out into this yard at night,  
And stare through the wet branches of an oak  
In winter, & realize I am looking at the stars  
Again. A thin haze of them, shining  
And persisting.

It used to make me feel lighter, looking up at them.  
In California, that light was closer.  
In a California no one will ever see again,  
My father is beginning to die. Something  
Inside him is slowly taking back  
Every word it ever gave him.  
Now, if we try to talk, I watch my father  
Search for a lost syllable as if it might  
Solve everything, & though he can't remember, now,  
The word for it, he is ashamed. . . .  
If you can think of the mind as a place continually  
Visited, a whole city placed behind

The eyes, & shining, I can imagine, now, it's end-  
As when the lights go off, one by one,  
In a hotel at night, until at last  
All of the travelers will be asleep, or until  
Even the thin glow from the lobby is a kind  
Of sleep; & while the woman behind the desk  
Is applying more lacquer to her nails,  
You can almost believe that the elevator,  
As it ascends, must open upon starlight.

I stand out on the street, & do not go in.  
That was our agreement, at my birth.

And for years I believed  
That what went unsaid between us became empty,  
And pure, like starlight, & that it persisted.

I got it all wrong.  
I wound up believing in words the way a scientist  
Believes in carbon, after death.

Tonight, I'm talking to you, father, although  
It is quiet here in the Midwest, where a small wind,  
The size of a wrist, wakes the cold again-  
Which may be all that's left of you & me.

When I left home at seventeen, I left for good.

That pale haze of stars goes on & on,  
Like laughter that has found a final, silent shape  
On a black sky. It means everything  
It cannot say. Look, it's empty out there, & cold.  
Cold enough to reconcile  
Even father, even a son.