

Why I Am a Poet

after William Stafford

Graves was the name of the mortician
in my hometown, the oil company
called Dead River—is it any wonder
I thought I could wring sense from
language, collapse the distance between
word and thing, the way a baby says
milk then tastes it? I learned to swim
in a lake named Echo, eight years old
in my baggy swimsuit with the keyhole
cutout, same suit I wore posed on a stage
that year, hoping for a beauty pageant
crown, somebody to say I was the best
girl—oh, bearable lightness of my body
finally afloat. Minnows nosed my ankles
then darted like a hundred little minds
changing. When I emerged, leeches
rode my thighs to land. And my life
again later, sixteen, parked at the lake,
I kissed the mouth of a boy headed
out of here until my lips burned—
you hear it, don't you? Echo? Echo?

I Never Touch the Stuff but Oh It Touches Me

He was a liar, my favorite uncle—claimed a mother bear let him sleep with the cubs in her cave, bragged he'd outrun the cops in every state—and it felt good to believe him, get a little of his sweet dream, felt wild my seventh summer to let him lead me to the highway when he'd been drinking all day, sundowning now into scheme. He'd have wanted a hit of something we didn't have on hand, said his new sweetheart lived one town over, every pair of far-flung Main Streets in that Big Wood linked by a stretch of pavement like a silver bracelet hung with charms the shape of potato-blossomed fields, tin-can trailers in shades of sun-faded turquoise and pink, each a paste gem set inside a circle of junked cars. But we could see none of this from the weedy shoulder on the night Larry taught me how to hitch—it was dark. We'd only ride, he said, with folks we knew. He sang Willie Nelson in his slow, soaked drawl or told me scary stories, bloody knives and monkey masks, while trucks gusted and mosquitos swarmed and goldenrod reached up my dress, until we found ourselves closed in the cab of a stranger's pickup, ashtray spilling and smoke filling my lungs and my uncle complaining a little about my bony ass on his lap. I wasn't exactly afraid. Certainly the driver had a beer between his legs, one hand on the wheel and a Camel in it, so to take a puff he had to steer with his knee. Here's where memory almost

fails, so maybe we drive forever, and Larry's alive,
doesn't ever get high and wobble from his boat
and die, and I stay tiny, scratching my bug bites
and listening to men talk over the radio, dashboard
lit brighter than the moon through the windshield.
In at least one version, even I don't survive,
but let's say we arrive. I'm carried inside, sleep
hot under a jacket on the couch, wake to watery
light in a room I don't recognize. I'm alone in that
house or everyone's just passed out. I don't cry,
don't try to call my mother. If there's milk, cereal,
I eat while I wait for someone to come or come to.
I imagine my uncle returning, still smelling of booze
but sober enough to take me fishing, supply
the worms for my hook, burn bloodsuckers off
my ankles with a hot match. Already I want a story
to believe. Already the tender hour after dawn,
when the day may bring some sweetness we've
not tasted, is a spell I know better than to break.

I'm Tired of Writing About My Childhood

But I was born underground—or
I ate the seeds, and I can never leave,

not really. Which is to say I've seen your
moon, your sun even, how they hang

like lit fruit from a soft canopy of sky.
The wind that rounds the surface of this rock

ruffles my hair the way breath always does,
only yours is blossom scented, star jasmine,

sweet perfume. You smelled the dirt on me,
didn't you? Back at home, everything's

inverted—firmament of packed earth
and the only blooms are roots. You wonder

if we've gotten good at seeing in the dark,
consolation of adaptation? We're not like

lantern fish or frogs—ordinary bodies
ours, ordinary needs—but sometimes

we make out the shape of what's coming,
hold very still until the footsteps turn,

stop the rain of soil upon our heads.
Maybe I'm the poet of this place because

I like the word *gloaming* as much as *glimmer*,
how it holds both *glow* and *loam*, makes

of time a pageant, makes loss of light
another kind of light. I would write a sonnet

for daybreak, first beam by which you
watch your lovers leave—I like reprieve

as much as the next fool, am tempted by
the hand that reaches down, how sure

its fingers, its grip to me how dear—but
we're given our stories, same as our names.

I come how I'm called. I come from here.