

Migration

This morning, stacking dishes,
arms reaching deep into the square blackness
of the cupboard, I heard a cloud
pass overhead: geese,
traveling south, having left their summer grounds,
hundreds of miles to the north,
on a day with its own particular sign.
They crossed briefly somewhere above,
encouraging each other
across the high white spaces
with their black trumpets.
The sky snapped shut
after them. I remember
an army of them, every year,
on the lake of my childhood,
the silver fire of their take offs,
a roar above the village.
All day, since they passed,
loneliness has been brushing up against me
with its pointed feathers.

Winter

Icicles, the teeth of winter, hang in hard lines
along each house. The bigger the icicles,

the poorer the house: our house
has the biggest icicles in the village.

Sometimes the ice claws at the lines,
and the beak of a strong wind

grabs a weighted cable.

The hundred other houses in the village

disappear. We are alone
in hills of darkness. The aloneness

goes on for miles and years. We wait,
listening to the fat wind.

We light candles against the nothing
that is everywhere. Our faces

are gold, full of caverns. Nothing exists
but the holes and lights in our faces.

Mindfulness

My father pays me five cents
for every two logs I haul
to the basement and stack
for the long winter.
Down the side-hill
to the back door, I carry
sharp split wedges, rhombuses,
small wooden arms.
I watch for the black stars
of spiders. My feet trample
the grass flat and silver.
I carry dead wood
falling from my hands
and chest. Beneath my face
is gold. Under the bark
are burn letters, hidden paths,
calligraphy of worms.
I carry fifty-six,
-seven, -eight.
I carry two or three
at once. The wind greets me
going down and pushes my hair back,
leaves a blessing on my forehead.
My arms grow knots and burn
like torches. I carry
the fire.

Autumn in Manistee County

Winter circles the village
like a wolf.

Black angels
of woodsmoke
float above the hills.

Dogs bark at nothing,
hackles raised
at the giant footsteps
of the wind.

This time of year,
a hundred doors
open out of the forest.

A leaf falls
from a tree,
flaps its one wing
and flies away.

Hard Winter

Inside our golden almanacs,
we study the moon charts:
half-full, full,
waning, waxing,
pages of wings,
like a collection
of small pressed insects.

This year, we had to pull back eight layers
of corn husks, linen after linen,
to get at the milky stones.
The hornets' nests were high,
Chinese lanterns glowing in the trees.
The spiders came early,
weaving clouds in every corner.

At school, we say ours names
backward, cross ourselves
every time a brown leaf throws its body
against a classroom window,
arms spread wide.

Hard winter, our grandmothers say,
their teeth growing longer,
bottom lips hanging forward
like cups, ready
to swallow themselves.

Learning the Mystery

In Onkama, Michigan,
I had catechism in the basement
of St. Joseph's Catholic Church.
Outside the snow was collapsing
by the road and, in the parking lot,
it melted in grit-filled puddles.
The church had a basketball hoop
with no net, a red-rusted
mouth. Inside, little rooms
were divided by accordion panels,
floored by flat gray carpet.
I learned about sin there,
sitting on a folding chair,
picturing a black spot on my heart.
If you sinned too much,
your whole heart turned black.
The instructors were retired
schoolteachers. Not a single
real, silently suffering nun.
Every Monday night, assembled,
we did gymnastics with our ankles
around the legs of the chairs.
My eyes followed the dips
and curves of the painted-grain
pressboard table, rated
the walnut accuracy of its knots.
The things that happened in the Bible
never happened to anyone I knew:
none of my neighbors turned to salt,
bushes did not explode into flames,
and, of course, the dead did not arise,
a little wax-faced, and walk again.
One day, our religious instructor passed out
holy cards of the angels and saints.
I picked Raphael because he had
a fine glitter in the halo around his head.
He stood on the banks of a river,
a silver spear in his pink hand.
I rubbed the glitter until a few sparkles
came off on my fingers: I might not
believe in God. I waited for something
to happen.