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# in the silence of the migrated birds

POETRY BY AUSTIN SMITH



**PARALLEL PRESS**



A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK



# In the Silence of the Migrated Birds

Poems by  
Austin Smith



PARALLEL PRESS 2008

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FIRST EDITION

*I would like to thank the Illinois Arts Council for awarding me an Artist's Fellowship Award that allowed me to remain on our family dairy farm during the last year we were milking cows. I will always be appreciative of the time that the money bought me. I would also like to thank my father for his permission to use his line, "in the silence of the migrated birds," for the title of this chapbook; for the stanza from his poem "Changing Weather;" and for being the most supportive father a young poet could hope to have.*



To my mother and father, for the way of life that gave  
birth to these poems, and for the words to write them.

To my brothers, Ryan and Levi,  
for their company in the fields and woods.

To my cousin, Alex,  
for what he taught me on top of a bus in Nepal.

To all of the beings, living and dead, whom I have been  
blessed to share a home with.

And to Mike Theune,  
for reminding me of something I had forgotten.

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In this hour  
moving toward dark,  
all beings  
moving toward home.

—Daniel Smith, “Changing Weather”

## *Stonework*

In that Sundered hour night and day share,  
a lone man comes down from the hills.

He is barefoot as he nears a village  
where he is nameless and pitied.

He tows a cart of river stones  
piled like polished skulls

pulled from a sleepwalking stream  
in the pale light of a full moon.

Through arches of thorns a low wall  
watches its maker approach

the mouth of a river of rock.  
Awaiting him there is that moment

when he will place his last stone  
closest to the sleeping children.

## *Sleeping in My Boyhood Bedroom Again*

I wake to the songs of mourning doves,  
having returned from far-off places  
to sleep beneath the scaffolding of old dreams.

I know this room the way  
a river knows its bed:  
every crack of plaster  
through three skins of paint,  
every fissure veining the ceiling  
where the old house has buckled  
bearing the weight of five lives of sleep.

On the doorframe of the closet  
our father measured our growth,  
penciling a line above our heads,  
recording the year and the weather  
as if recording water levels.

I am the furthest flood  
of the river of my life,  
the high-water mark.

I stand in that closet again  
and feel infinite children  
nested within me.

I have gone miles  
and miles.

Now, when I wake, I must lie still  
to allow the light to recognize  
this shape I have taken.

## *The Shape of the Mourning*

My mother and I stand still in the swath  
the old Illinois Central Railroad  
cut through the green flesh of foliage  
like a long, obsessive bullet.

The corridor it bored is a bike path now,  
but we can still feel its remnant power  
coursing through us, an energy as oblique  
as the last feeble light of evening  
or the resonant embers of autumn leaves  
insisting they *were* through the first snow.

The caboose sleeps in the ditch now,  
its joints tumors of rust, its busted windows  
allowing the arms of a few exuberant weeds  
to wave through, as green and hopeful  
as those freight loads of farm boys  
hauled east like coal to be consumed  
in the patient burning furnace of war.

We stand breathing our singular seas of breath,  
listening to the blossoming sound of an owl calling.

The shape of its mourning is spherical:  
we are encompassed by it, the owl's  
hollow question dilating outward,  
a low note from a feathered organ,  
a bulbous globe of glass blown,  
grown larger to satisfy the need of heat.

The sound's circumference widens  
to include everything:

every relic whistle shriek  
buried deep in the trees  
like boy-lost hatchets,

every decayed creature  
long ago gone extinct  
and now become coal,

every breathing being  
in its own concentric circles  
of wilting and blooming breath.

Every death.

All are included in the owl's empiric call.

And yet, despite this complete possession,  
this radiant pregnancy, despite being pregnant  
with every single thing, the owl's question  
is answered by silence by silence.

## *While Dreaming of Water*

1.

I was just a boy when I last saw the sea  
and now it is not enough to know it is there.

At night I lay awake as it pulls on me,  
having somehow found me here,

far inland, where I live.

When I wake I expect to see it

stretched taut and blue before me,  
having become a somnambulist,

having staggered miles to watch the waves  
wear their white caps to their decapitations.

But I misspoke when I wrote  
I last saw the ocean as a child.

I often visit it in my dreams.

I then spend the day remembering

submerged mountains: I have seen  
range after underwater range

and valleys which, once dry and lit  
by the light of a prehistoric sun,

are now corridors for invisible currents  
which rise and climb sunken summits

which have failed to become islands  
and so have been forgotten.



I am tortured by these visions,  
for it is terrifying to dream

of a place you have never been  
and yet know it so well.

2.

And then I think of the tide,  
and how some say the sea

obeys the moon and I decide  
I won't accept it.

I want to believe in a girl somewhere  
with a head of seaweed instead of hair,

standing on moon-bleached sand,  
pulling all of that water toward her

because she wishes to collect  
the bones it carries,

to gather sand dollars and starfish  
into countless piles along the coast.

Or maybe her ultimate desire  
is to add the image of the moon

to her mounds, and it is this longing  
which grants her the reins

to the pulsing ocean, reins  
she holds tightly in her pitiful hands,

pitiful because she wants,  
more than anything,

that which, upon reaching her,  
is no more.

3.

And I am reminded of Li Po,  
and how he died one summer night

when, alone on a pond, rowing  
drunk, he fell out of his boat

trying to embrace the image  
of the full moon floating on the water

and fell through its reflection  
while that which he had wanted to hold

began to reassemble itself  
into the perfect orb it had been before.

And then all was quiet,  
both resting cold and still:

the moon in the water  
and Li Po in the grave.

4.

I rarely dream of the ocean these days,  
but when I drink water I find myself

staring down into the glass,  
wondering where the molecules have been,

what seas they've been a part of,  
what poets have breathed them in.

*Poem for Hart Crane*

You wanted to root the bridge  
in the homophone of your name,  
to fuse Brooklyn to your heart,  
but you could not take part in it.

That parabola of ore  
mined in your Ohio  
buried its ends in both shores.

The East River desired your body  
more than the city did.

In this suspended world,  
the earth is distant beneath us.  
There are few who live like rivers.  
Most of us cross over them  
on rainbows of mottled iron.

The city drove you to the ocean,  
a place of pure reduction,  
where the only bridge  
was the ecliptic of the sun  
building itself every day  
from horizon to horizon.

One day in April, you walked out  
to the stern of the *Orizaba*.  
It was noon, your shadow crippled  
and dark on the bright deck.  
You took your coat off calmly,  
as if entering a church.

You had reduced yourself to this.

Only one thing remained to be done:  
seeing your distorted reflection  
floating upon the water, you leapt  
and serenely shattered it.

## *Christmas*

Winter sets like a broken  
bone, painful and white.

Winter has a way  
of making war seem more futile.

And when sleet riddles the angels  
the children swam into the snow,

who can resist the urge  
to visit the Veterans' Museum

to touch the cold bronze  
faces of their grandfathers?

## *The River of My Fathers*

The day they demolished the old barn  
at the Glasser Farm, the windmill  
was still, the river was in the sky,  
and I went about with the drought  
like a communion wafer in my mouth.

My father and I drove down Winneshiek  
to see that its foundation was still sound,  
though the hands that set the fieldstones  
had long ago settled into more permanent  
architectures of bone.

The boards, once red as anger, had faded,  
and the ground was strewn with square-  
headed nails where the dull, cold core  
of the wrecking ball had swept through,  
practicing the trajectories of meteors.

Now the crane sat at a distance,  
absolved of all guilt, its neck broken  
in inaction. The wind explored the ruins  
like the beam of a flashlight  
darting through a car wreck.

We saw straw my grandfather had mown,  
still baled tight in tourniquets of twine,  
stanchions haunted by the ghosts  
of long-dead cattle, the weathervane  
disoriented like a compass near a magnet.

And yet the tunnel of stone in the side  
of the haymow hill my brothers and I  
used to explore when we were boys  
waiting for our father to finish folding  
the fields over remained open.

Walking into its dark mouth,  
I waited for my eyes to adjust before  
searching about for a single stone  
for a keepsake, for something to hold,  
a weight to keep a page from turning.

When I found the one I emerged  
holding it like a spoken word.  
The windmill that had been pardoned  
turned slowly one full rotation  
and that night the river fell as rain.

## *Summer Evening*

In the cooling grass of June,  
the fireflies are empty lighters  
thumbed by the dead.

I can almost see their faces  
in the brief sparks of light,  
but there's not enough fuel

for most of them to catch,  
and those that do the pick-  
pocket wind steals.

I feel sorry for them,  
but there's nothing  
I can do, and there's heat

lightning in the west, and there  
are many windows open  
in this old farmhouse,

and I still have to go from room  
to room pulling the panes down  
between my face and the rain's.



## *Ode to Birches*

I have long been obsessed with birches,  
with the way they grow corporeal  
in the mortuary of the dawn, the ghosts  
of lepers not cured by death,  
fleshly as the corpses of marine war  
heroes or forgotten pharos embalmed  
in tattered rags, infused with moonlight,  
which they distill into a kind of otherworldly radiance.

You see their amputated limbs sawed off  
by the surgeons of the wind, or you see them  
standing in the snow and know them to be  
no different from snow, snow drawn up  
through a flute and made grained  
and wooden, white as bone marrow.

Turning to go, you look back expecting  
to see them following you, a legion  
of ragged infantry staggering  
across the infinity of your turning away.  
They are just as still as they were  
before, but it always seems as if  
they have taken one step closer.

*Postcards for Andrew Wyeth*

1.

A shadow pivoting  
on its weathervane.  
The egg box inside  
the mushroom basket.  
War medals, frying pans,  
crow feet. All sizes.

2.

Lime banks, fingernails,  
an aluminum canoe.  
Dead mice in seed sacks.  
An empty tin cup  
watching the bathtub  
overflow.

3.

Bricks on a millpond,  
scissors on nails.  
A river stone, longing.  
A bell rope, deranged.  
A child...  
A chair no one sits in.

4.

A pine chest  
beneath a basket  
of seashells.  
A kitten yawning  
at an old bull.  
The sheepdog and his answer.

5.

The simplicity  
of a farmer's kitchen.  
A splinter of wood  
holds the door,  
butchering tools  
hang shadowless.

6.

Pheasant feathers  
in green jars, distorted.  
Milk and blood sausage.  
The colorless ocean  
and a barbwire fence  
in the same window.

7.

A stillborn calf.  
Tassels in the chinks.  
Distant thunder.  
The springhouse locked,  
the cider barrels empty.  
A man on his bed, his shoes on.

8.

The woodshed leans.  
Geraniums offer petals.  
Hogs wander out,  
grunt at the sun.  
Beneath the mulberry,  
two fresh graves.

## *Lincoln*

—for George Buss

Innocuous giant, sharp-kneed and rawboned,  
prone to bad hair days and cowlicks, wary of combs,  
even on mornings photographers came to capture  
your haggard face, crow-footed and creased,  
your grizzled whiskers prematurely gray,  
your mountainous wart in its right place,  
so that we may gaze upon your image now and say,  
*So this was Lincoln*, pauper turned president,  
seed sown in prairie loam, once a splitter of rails,  
bearded messiah of the West, father of a political party,  
voice of the mute plebeian, harbinger of freedom,  
champion of the commoner, craver of knowledge,  
epitome of honesty, skilled spinner of anecdotal yarn,  
both teetotaler and master of the drunkard's humor  
(that of the burlesque),  
subject to fits of thunderous laughter and spells of silent gloom,  
you who were afflicted by premonitions of death,  
by dreams in which you saw your own lifeless body  
lying cold and still in state, these visions made more terrifying  
by the fact that you were always a believer in the occult,  
a hypochondriac, an insomniac, a man of two minds,  
some days blissful and pious, other days somber and irreverent,  
boarder in the hostels of joy and despair,  
a weary horse forced to pull the Herculean weight of a war  
for four years, without rest, pacing worrier, hands clasped  
behind broad back, eyes sunk deep in abysmal sockets,  
temples pounding from migraines, consoling widows  
and bereft mothers even as you mourned the death of your own boy.

And then an iron horse came for you through April rain,  
a funereal train draped in black cerecloth and wilting lilacs.  
Arriving vacant, it departed with a sole passenger,  
bound for the far shore of a pastoral ocean.  
For a fortnight the silence of the sleeping towns  
between Washington and Springfield  
was pierced by the sound of a whistle  
the white-faced mourners had never heard before,  
the pitch of which had been too high for them to hear  
before you were called home to rest.

## *Pennsylvania, America*

Somewhere in the vast province of the past,  
William Blake has been inspired to write a poem

while walking through the wen of his city.  
Staring into a pair of sunken eyes

glowing like coals in a boy's blackened face,  
a song begins to rise inside him.

In that same moment, in a different place,  
a canary in a cage has suddenly stopped singing,

but no poet lives in that coalmining town  
where fathers used to sing songs to their sons,

songs that were silenced before they could fly  
up the sore throats of coughing children.

In the dark tunnels, their voices drown in distance:  
the common hymn of the pickax echoes through

the hollowed hills, a litany that will go unheard.  
Would it even have mattered

if Blake had been there to sing  
for those soot-mute children and that dead bird?

The fathers could not have heard  
the requiem he would have sung,

having long before gone deaf  
blasting shaft mines beside their sons.

## *The Gravity of Stone*

Gravity is a measure of how  
much the earth loves us,  
and weight is the desire  
of our bones to be buried.  
When we lie down  
to sleep or to die  
we feel how much  
the earth needs us  
to be part of her again.

I walked out into a field  
once to prove this to myself.  
Picking up a stone and throwing  
it into the air as high as I could,  
I watched it rise, slow, still and fall  
with the velocity of a son returning  
home from an unfinished war,  
in the strange violence of reunion.

The earth desires us.  
If she doesn't, then  
who is keeping us here?  
We would just float off  
down hallways of light  
toward the ghost of the dead  
star flicking the switch at the end.  
Something tethers us here.

I never wanted to leave home,  
but I was thrown by the hands  
of circumstance to distant lands.  
And anyway I was young and the world  
is vast and I wanted to see it.

Now I wish for nothing more  
than to die on the acre of my birth.

Home again, my father and I  
work in a common cadence,  
bending to pick up fieldstones  
scarred by the tusks of plows.  
This drought has nearly ruined us,  
the ground dry as papyrus,  
the oats sleeping in coats of dust.  
The only crop ripe for harvest  
is these stones.  
They need no water.  
They are like petrified flowers  
with brittle stalks rooted deep  
in the heart of the earth.

I am leaving again in a month,  
a thousand miles west  
to work some job.  
But in autumn,  
that season of returns,  
of leaves to the earth  
and sons to their fathers,  
I will fall back  
with the gravity of stone  
to this strewn field.



## *Song of the Lark*

In a room in our farmhouse  
there are three windows.  
Two allow wind and light in.  
The third is a painting of a peasant girl.  
She stands barefoot in a barren field  
listening to the song of the larks.  
She holds a scythe in her hand,  
its blade a cruel arc  
that will never close and end itself.  
It knows the pose of fallen wheat,  
this scythe she is holding  
but has almost forgotten.  
The sun is swollen behind her.  
I wonder, is it dawn or dusk?  
Is she going to or coming from her labor?  
I hope that it is evening,  
that night, that great pardoner  
of laborers everywhere,  
is growing up out of the earth,  
a crop that needs no reaping.  
I would pray for her a longer night.

May the engine of the dawn stall.  
May the planet in her orbit  
cease turning and become still.  
May the hemispheres of day  
and night freeze, confusing roosters.  
Let her rest in the painting's  
eternal moment.  
Let her sleep the sleep  
of buried arrowheads.  
The fields can wait.  
The wind can come  
in through the window  
and put her apron on.  
The fields can wait.

May it always be dusk  
in this room's third window,  
even as the light in the other two  
insists that this cannot be.

*My Mother, Baking Bread*

*—for my mother and my grandmother*

Baking bread, my mother  
raises her hands  
ghost-white with flour  
towards the morning  
growing out of the East.

The dawn is yeasted light.

Her hands are the hands  
of her Jewish mothers  
who came westward  
from old Russia  
through the ashes  
of the Holocaust  
across the Atlantic  
to be given the name  
Miller (of grain)  
and on over many rivers  
to this land where we  
have made a home.

The sun follows the same road.

While we were sleeping  
light flooded the window  
of a Russian kitchen.  
Dough rising before the sun  
or her sons,  
my mother and her mothers  
knead and need  
with the same white hands.

*Lines for Lorine*

*For best work  
you ought to put forth  
    some effort  
    to stand  
in north woods  
among birch.*

—*Lorine Niedecker*

Drove north in Indian summer  
through the ghosts of the glaciers,  
against the horses of the headwaters.

Crawled my car up the long curve  
of the hemisphere like an ant aching up  
a bowl turned upside-down.

The road exploded into towns,  
scattering the shrapnel of farms  
into the collateral hills.

The woods paled and thinned  
into birches, nervous dancers  
before performance, breathing.

I parked, took my hat off,  
distributed my loose change  
a coin in each pocket.

I read the Braille of the birch bark  
with my eyes closed and tried  
to divine its meaning.

I kneeled on the forest floor,  
a young brave bowing to accept  
a pheasant feather headdress.

My tongue fluttered an applause  
of mute syllables in the auditorium  
of my mouth, but no words came.

So I got back in the car and drove  
south against the horses of the waters  
through the glaciers' still ghosts.

And at home, hearing something begin  
in the trees, this poem curled up out  
of the typewriter like a piece of birch bark.

## *Index of First Lines*

A dry summer noosed the river

A gyre of rotting grain

A litany of Decembers

Before the violins, before

Breathing, the earth

Beneath no stars

Chain mail loud, the cicadas

Grace, a word made mostly of light

His face an avalanche of feeling

In a house of unstrung guitars

Language is an inn we gather in

Life is pollen, death is obsidian

Loss is the way the world she

On the sill, the geraniums' red noise

Quiet battlefield: the deaf drummer

Silence is a convict hung from a bell rope

Summer is a mason jar of lightning

The heart a startled cavalry  
The horse people, the cliff people  
The liquid pendulum of the soul  
There is nothing here of which I am not  
Vague stars of August, you who  
Waking, I watch the shadow boxers  
Where the river has slept itself depth  
Wrapped in yellowing obituaries  
Your voice of strung hyacinths

## *Poem for Les, Homeless*

You were somehow yourself *and* the autumn,  
in your coat smelling like the ashes of pets  
and the bins in Salvation Army stores,  
standing broken in our door, begging my father  
to let you park your car in our barnyard.

Les, you were so senescent, standing there  
like an exhausted season, singed by several fires,  
your voice a long procession of smoke.  
All of your possessions were boxed up  
in the backseat of your station wagon,

which fell so deeply asleep on the bed of our land  
the harsh whisper of the ignition couldn't wake it.  
One day you went to see your dying mother  
and never came back. We had your car towed  
and stowed your boxes in the barn.

I found your Bible one day of farm boy boredom,  
its lists of births and deaths,  
your mother's name awaiting a date.  
I carried it the way a boy carries a turtle  
and hid it in my desk beneath mundane books.

The passages that moved you  
you had underlined in faint graphite.  
You mostly marked the red words of Christ.  
I quit reading the book in the midst  
of a tedious list of names.

I don't know where it is now.  
How have you, the book and I  
grown so far apart tonight,  
like the three points of a triangle  
that traces the base of a pyramid of ash?



## *Equinox*

Driving into Orion  
I burn  
extinct ferns.

The winds, well,  
there is nothing  
to stop them.

It is the equinox.  
Day and night open and close  
like twin doors.

I think of all  
the medicine wheels  
west of the river.

Today the sun will walk  
those paths of stone  
like a vernal bride.

Her groom, the moon,  
sets into Dakota snow  
like obsolete currency.

When we drive slowly  
into the reservation  
the ghosts tap on the hood.

By now, Orion, the hunter,  
is buried to his belt in earth,  
the moon is over Asia

and a barn is a broken  
treaty on the horizon:  
its doors swing into alignment.

Through them,  
nothing  
eclipses nothing.

*The Night I Saw the Pleiades for the First Time*

Must have been some summer night  
of my boyhood. Maybe I had gone out  
to hug the horse goodnight  
in response to some sorrow  
I could not have then described.  
And I must have been afraid  
of the darkness, must have felt it  
in my body as a kind of hollowness,  
despite the fireflies and whatever moon,  
even with my arms strung like garlands  
around her warm and muscular neck.  
Maybe my hair and her mane  
became one in my fear,  
the way the earth and the sky  
become one through rain.  
What words did I whisper  
shyly in that immense quiet,  
more to myself than to her,  
in the way that our prayers  
are more for ourselves than for God?  
And at what moment did I look up,  
with whatever words were in my mouth,  
to see the Pleiades for the first time,  
gathered into a family at the zenith?  
Was it then that I first saw the horse  
and the dog and the cats and the cows  
and my mother and my father  
and my brothers and I as stars  
in a sacred constellation?  
Since that night, I have not  
feared the darkness as much.

## *A Delta of Bone*

Walking a cat's cradle of trails,  
I came upon a tree of bone  
growing out of the mineral snow,  
a buck's antler rooted in the ground.  
I bent down and picked it like a flower.

There is no thing in this world  
as cold as bone when it has had  
a night to swallow the cold of snow  
down its throat of marrow.  
I held the delta of bone in my own.

The place where it had been rooted  
in the sphere of the deer's mind  
smelled like blood and horses.  
The antler branched out like a great  
river loosing itself into the sea.

What does it mean to hold bone?  
It means that flesh, the least of what we are,  
has melted away like thawed snow,  
and all that remains is that skeleton  
upon which hung the threadbare coat of life.

When all the antlers have settled down  
through the rain-softened earth,  
we will lie down to rest upon a hammock  
of woven bone, and deer will bear  
the weight of what we have done.

I keep that antler I found near an effigy  
mound on my desk now, where it gathers  
dust between two deaf ears of Indian corn.  
They cannot hear me when I say my prayer,  
*May my grave be the birthplace of many deer.*

## *The Silo*

I must use another kind of language  
to describe it, the kind of language  
you must use when trying to describe  
evening to the blind

*(Dusk is a photograph of snowfall  
in a dead girl's album of negatives).*

But now it occurs to me that maybe  
it was never even there to be seen,  
that it was as gone then as it is now,  
now that it has been buried and stored  
in the ultimate silo of the earth.

Maybe it was always like the tomb  
of the war cartographer who knew  
where he would be shot and drew  
the spot on his map. The silo  
disappeared that way. Collapsing  
into itself, it became its own grave.

There was nothing to do in the country  
but make ourselves scared and the silo  
was where we would go to do that.  
When we took our visiting cousins  
to see it we pretended to be brave,  
but no matter how many times  
we climbed the rungs we always  
descended shaking and pale  
and hurried inside to sit in the soft  
kitchen light (*which is the light in  
movies about the deaths of peasants*)  
and we wouldn't talk about the grain  
we'd seen that was black as the teeth  
of a genocide.

But we couldn't hide from it: at night  
I could feel it out there, the little shack  
begging at its base like a leper,  
and sometimes I would rise and go  
to the window to see how it eclipsed  
the stars, and it seemed possible that  
they were contained in it like the grain.  
Sometimes I saw the moon coming  
up out of it and it was like watching  
someone leaving a dark house in the night  
and not knowing why they were there.

But one day, coming down the lane  
after school, it suddenly wasn't there  
anymore. Now you wouldn't be able  
to tell it ever stood there, but I notice  
something about the grass that the earth  
is using like a substance to try to help it  
forget: it has never quite healed the wound.  
When I step into the quivering tower  
of its absence, I can't stand to stand there  
for very long: it's like being in a cave  
without air. Eleven years and the air  
still hasn't moved back in, like a family  
after a haunting. The wind, which is air  
desperate to be felt, won't go in there,  
either. It circles it, as do the birds.  
Only the rain is brave enough to fall  
through its ghost because it is still  
in love with the grain rotting in the ground.

My brother and I hadn't spoken of the silo since that day we came home to see that it was gone. But last winter we were having coffee, talking about our childhood and I mentioned I was trying to write about the silo and he nodded as if he'd been expecting me to say that and said, "How can I ever be sure that seeing that rotting grain didn't change my life somehow, that I'm not a very different person now for having witnessed that?" and I said, "I don't know, Ryan, I guess we can never know." Outside, the rain was beginning to turn to snow and I knew that we were the only ones who saw the flakes were *black as the smell of ash*.

## *Coming Upon an Old Stone Wall in the Woods on Our Farm*

Those that know of it find it foolish,  
this wall that keeps no one out of nowhere.  
It ends at the base of a young oak tree,  
as if the earth wanted to continue it  
into the sky after its maker died.

Was his life consumed by the dream  
of building a bridge between the woods  
and the village to show the children  
the way inward, through the dense growth,  
to the truth in the heart of the grove?

The wall was the length of his life:  
the end of one was the end of the other.  
He must have chosen his last stone carefully,  
the way a man chooses his last words  
from the strewn field of language.

But no one was there to listen  
when he spoke the stone into place.  
In the silence that followed  
he lay down on the bed of clover  
the summer earth had prepared for him,

his beard flooding his threadbare shirt,  
his hands a chapel over his heart,  
his eyes open, black as obsidian vases  
stuffed with long stems of starlight,  
his only funeral bouquet.

Maybe he died there, in the night,  
while we children were dreaming,  
dreaming of horses and castles  
and orchards and all those things  
children dream of in June.



No one places their own last stone.  
That is a chore better saved for evening,  
and saved for someone else,  
preferably a brother or sister.  
But he had no siblings.

Maybe the haymakers found him there  
and buried him in Potter's Field  
with the other anonymous dead,  
marking his grave with a glacial stone  
that harbored the silence of gone mountains.

Years passed and the oak dilated  
like the eyes of a man in a root cellar,  
its rings like ripples fleeing a stone  
thrown into a well by a wishing boy.  
The village became a town became a city.

The forest swallowed the wall  
like a man swallowing a sword  
and the man and his work were forgotten.  
Older now, I drive out to Potter's Field  
alone to choose his funeral stone.

It is not hard, for where there are  
no names there are no possessions:  
any one will do. Choosing a stone the way  
a poet chooses a word in an elegy for a friend,  
I return to the woods to finish his poem.

## *The Names of Grasses*

—for my father

At night we close our eyes against it  
like a family closing windows against rain,  
trusting that the fields know how to be,  
that the great cycles that spin just beyond us  
keep turning like Ferris wheels beyond  
the prairie town on the last night of summer.  
Of course, they course through us, as well,  
but we're like sleeping children being carried  
up to our beds by our fathers — we don't notice.  
Heavied by the weight of this life we've chosen,  
it's a wonder the beds don't break.

Something (I don't know what) holds us up.

So let us not wander too far outside ourselves  
grasping for knobs that don't exist:  
that's how wars get started. Instead,  
let us believe always in the great Fable  
that did not begin and will never end.  
Let us trust that the earth knows how to be,  
and sleep soundly without turning.  
The great cycles will do that part for us.  
You will wake saying the names of grasses  
without knowing why.



Austin Smith was born in 1982 and grew up on a family dairy farm north of Freeport, Illinois. He still considers the Midwest his home, despite travels and sojourns in Japan, Arizona, India, Nepal, Alaska, and, most recently, California. His chapbook of haiku was published by Longhouse Press of Vermont; he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize; and he was awarded a \$7,000 Artist's Fellowship Award from the Illinois Arts Council.

He prays for a life spent growing vegetables and poems in an un-glaciated hollow in the Driftless Region of southwestern Wisconsin.



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