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Preface

The bears, which appear in the title poem, are intended to suggest unpredictability, the mysterious and dangerous aspects of experience as well as the possibility of love. The poems are rooted in a changing landscape ranging from the Hudson River Valley to Manhattan, and further back in time, to the West coast of Ireland, from which the writer's parents emigrated. Arriving in New York in the twenties, they brought memories of famine and civil war as well as strong cultural values. The writer is haunted by their sense of another world, particularly after the death of her son. The poems attempt to work out a reconciliation between radically different perspectives, knowing there is no satisfactory way of doing so. Yet, Seamus Heaney has observed, "As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way."

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I. IN BLACK BEAR COUNTRY

In Black Bear Country

Tracks are rare in the high meadow.
They prefer pond shrubbery rich with
blueberries. In spring they may toddle up to
the front door, curious, uncertain what to do.
Driven from maternal dens, they are
unaccustomed to loneliness. And their uncertainty
is troubling in a world where each insect
has its flower, or seems to. They are
the clowns, heads cocked, standing at
the edge of things, waiting for a cue.
For all their size, they move silently,
uprooting boundaries, nudging possibilities.
Theirs is the face at my kitchen window,
hoping for a hot potato. Or an unlikely raccoon
treed by a small dog.

But silence wields a different spell as
day slips through the hemlocks.
As light thins and the barred owl
seeks its prey. A log rolls over, revealing
something other than a clown.
The equation shifts.
What then emerges from the mind or
tenses between the shadows?

Rhythm

Today I found the rhythm, easy and smooth,
that once propelled me through ocean water.
Feeling the prick of cold springs in the depth
of a mountain lake, I was suddenly buoyant,
supple, slipping through the radiant surface
of memory to a plane of possibility.

Experience has become more fluid,
the present more permeable, inclining
to digress or cunningly reverse direction.
The salmon colored dogwood tree
in autumn is rooted in a childhood garden.
This Hudson Valley trail dissolves at a turn
not easily defined. It shifts with the seasons,
circling back along a country road,
along a creek that broadened and plummeted
to amethyst in the distance, an arc of desire
long contemplated but out of reach.

Water has left its imprint on music
evocative, transformative, shifting
the curve of time, restoring lost alliances.
Someone, long absent, is improvising
rhythm and blues, teasing the worn
piano keys, insinuating,
scattering pent-up silence. Take
the risk. Plunge through the music,
find a voice to answer him.

Premonition

Breakfast in October by a frosted window:
maple and shagbark hickory fire
the Shawangunks; barberry gleams
in the long grass. Above the smoking
chimneys hawks tumble and glide.

The season of migrating birds
like shoals of striped or mottled herring,
swallows wheeling past in perfect
symmetry; wild geese dawdling in the fields
rise and settle again, cacophonous,
vaguely human in complaint.

The pitch and taste of light is
gold spilling through the leaves
in this most poignant, most implacable
of seasons.

Shadows cross
in slow deliberate rhythms
unrecognizable at first in the distance
—one thinks of eagles—
those wings of monstrous birds.
The very air must alter with their coming.
One knows them at once for what they are
at night settling in our trees.

Something Else

A glacier's track; its hollows and eruptions
are plain. Boulders puncture the hillside
where the planking of our house settled
half a century ago. Stone imprints the boundary
of pasture land. Scrub pine and hickory
root in pockets of thin soil. Yet
there are flashes—intermittent, persistent—
of something else.

At the point where hill meets gravel road,
a spring is reaching for the surface,
sifting stone, sowing alien stalks
like dying sunflowers.

Squatting by the roadside, geese breed in
early summer. Muskrat, egret, the small green
heron flourish; trees shrivel down to scaffolding
for beaver huts.

The water level is rising; after snow
a ghostly arc sweeps the corn fields,
touches—still tentative—
the border of our stony enclave.
Something is seeping through.
Something tugs at our mooring.

Constructions (for Rick)

The house would be cantilevered over the pond
where clear water spilled from a lake beyond
the willows. At twilight there a blue heron
stood sentinel, one foot rooted in sand.

Emptying, the pond spat boulders and entrails
of fish. The crank and whistle of heavy metal
punctured the autumn, tracked through soft earth,
uprooted willows.

With snow came a desperate
quietness. Until one morning the pond was there
(if not the heron), restored by a visionary
hand on the sluice gate. All winter long
we gloried in transforming water,
saw the moon reflected, the hawk rise.

With spring it vanished at the whim
of a thin man in a black Toyota.

Hudson Valley Road

Death trailed me into the Hudson Valley,
speaking of one beloved to whom I
cannot speak. Her thoughts washed by the river
below her window, she floats above
all sound, silent—it seems—beyond reach.
Can white bellflowers lure her back,
turn her face from the window?
Can she hear music in the tall summer grass,
in the fragrant earth between my fingers?

This road might be hidden in the West
of Ireland, rooks crying out in stony crevices,
or circling the trees. Family ghosts walk
with me through the gray, sweet twilight.
Pioneers of eternity, they come
without reproach, without speech.
We climb to the high pasture, the plain of willows.
Tall and bountiful, drifting in the wind,
their leafy presence is the peace of summer rain.