

We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds...

—David Hume

CROW, MOON, CROW

So here is how I remember it:

a child is a crow is a moon is a river.

Everything multiplying after midnight
as in a dream: *one crow, two crows, three crows.*

And from the tracks where we look down
at the scooped burrow of the river,
curled this June like a discarded snake skin,
there is a moon growing its canker
on the ridge's shoulder. And up ahead,
in the wet woods, the smell. No garden here
but dead leaves. An augury of matted loam
clinging to boot bottoms. But not even that.
Or say we imagine pale green shoots
that might be fairy wands or spiderworts
or wingstems. Which is another way of saying
we are bound to the earth. Imagine
the sucking sounds of our boots cleaving
to the mud. For here is how I remember it:
a river is a moon is a crow is a tongue.



RIVER

LIFE IN THE WOODS

In my uncle's diary of symptoms, light
is described as washed-out moon.
Color as winter fields: gray sky, gray earth.
Shapes forming of their own volition,
strange geometries of line, lacquered splotches
coalescing then disappearing. He blamed
decades of wind, dust kicking up, grit catching
and congealing—or witnessing a younger
brother dying slowly from a metastatic brain.
Eventually the pages of the diary dissolved
for him into dark hallways, so I transcribed
the symptoms for the doctor, a task that reminded
me of high school when I copied out long passages
from *Walden*: whip-poor-wills chanting their vespers,
fluviate trees, the ceaseless roar and pelting
of rainstorms. At sixteen I gave my lone copy—
spine fissured, pages bent back and loose from
their moorings—to a girl I hoped would understand,
but she returned the book in less
than an hour to say, *I wouldn't ever live like that.*
Which I recalled the August morning I arrived
at my uncle's farm to find him on his front porch,
a compendium of jays calling from the willows
by the wire fence. The old man was sitting on a lawn
chair with nothing but his quietude, his face dark
and obdurate, stoic with years. He looked up
with emptied eyes as my shoes creaked the front step—
here is what the dark brooms have swept away—and not
until my voice was familiar in the air did he rise
from his chair and gesture me into his house.

CROW MUSIC

In Edvard Munch's
Melancholy, the sea sags

eternal tedium
to shore, and the man—

palm cupping chin—
gazes through half-drooped

lids to admit a meager
sliver of the world.

*

My father would smoke
cigarettes on the porch

and call out to the crows,
single syllables in discrete

repeated units, sounds
like desultory drumbeats.

Itinerant dusk swelled
beyond the field,

inevitable with shadow,
and my father,

motionless, watched
the birds, immaculate

in grass, perfect black
obelisks, lifting

themselves as
extravagant darkness.

*

At his funeral
a lone

black feather
in the open

maw, crows
cawing in usable light,

the grammar
of desiccated grass,

an idolatry of mud
that makes a field,

my father
calling to birds

that were calling back,
saying nothing.

ECONOMICS

Depression is rage spread thin.

—George Santayana

It was a form of weakness, my father said, an embarrassment, the men after the War who were hollowed out, were grass in the field behind the house, men who slept amid the shadows of their days, who existed like cigarette smoke—idle and drifting—and shuddered at backfiring pickups and saw their life's labor as a stroll to the mailbox for the government check. When I was twelve, my father returned from a trip to Chicago with 500 off-brand batteries purchased on the cheap from a company going out of business, and so I was sent on my bicycle to the farm houses and clusters of neighborhoods in our small Ohio town. There was something holy in labor, my father believed, but what I remember is how discouraging it felt to ask strangers again and again to reach into their pockets for cash they didn't have. Sometimes the old women or men who opened the doors eyed me the way the moon eyes the earth, the way the clouds are part of the sky but also separate from it. Then, in college, I worked one summer on mosquito abatement, and my primary job was to step from the truck to the road's verge and count how many mosquitoes bit me in a minute. I was a poor man's St. Francis of Assisi, but my father was impressed by the work ethic evident in the manifold bumps on my arms and legs, impressed the way he never was with my meager sales of the batteries that mostly still remained in a cardboard box in his garage during the final

years of his life, when I would find him sitting on the couch with the television blaring the same cycle of news, over and over. There was a stillness about him then, a smallness, as though the grass had grown up around him in great, empty stalks. The years and the sun had freckled his hands with dark splotches, and often he seemed to be studying their hieroglyphics, pondering what the slow decades had wrought, and his unshaven face was listless as the clouds. The days blurred together after that, were like the fallen oak by the fence, hollowed at the middle and spilling its dark salt. My father had little, if anything, to say, though he did tell me one early morning that he imagined the advantage of being dead was that the living would finally leave you be.

FOURTEEN OMENS IN NINE DAYS

These grackles at dusk are telling a story of dark fire.
Then days pass and wraiths of sunlight ash the heart-ripe

hours, each breath a priest, the weeks as dim and constricted
as a pupil. Or a light rain drifts down, the odor of damp weeds,

the grackles now at first light a neurological firestorm.
Or we watch the solitary magnolia beside the garden, thorns

of brambles and dark dirt, or watch my father on the porch,
smoking, the ash on his cigarette lengthening but not yet falling.

He knows to enter a room inside himself, close the door
and turn off the lights, to sit in the dark with his bourbon-colored

thoughts—until all we see is this vigil he keeps with himself,
the blue cigarette smoke almost too weary to lift into air.