Emerson Susquehanna

i. “When we have lost our God of tradition

Not thaw brought to the river—
thought, long winter a surface that holds
no current or image.
And there’s language laid down like that, mind

locked in a long walk through the chill of a single word, and there’s cattails
fraught where water’s not
any longer, and God’s a pall called down to mind the meaning
given a life. Once thought

the word makes mind too small

like Bible-colored Sundays all study and chalk and exotic
potted palms dotting a holy land

entirely crayon and the lavender mimeographs leave

on the hands. The word God has always been my mother’s
fingers separating

my sister’s hair, three strands gathered in a braid so tight white at the parted dark
roots stood out, word
a migraine in its wake, word endured alone in a room. Shades
   drawn over pain, word's
a mind's light ingrown, caught, nitid knot snarled upon
   itself…Subzero, months

from thaw, we walk—o trees, trouble,
   tremble at the roots of being, underneath,
under laws, the order of things
   so deeply a violence and unnumbered like the snow.
& ceased from our God of rhetoric

But I don’t know
their names—rust

worked under each
wing like sweat

lunettes; synthetic
silk crest stitched
to a white head;
small gears completely
grease preening
ash, mechanical

sheen of oil,
charcoal—only

this description eats
and screams

squanders territory.
What use is it
to see? Faith
the world is knowable?

There are ways
to understand
and none is living
    or lyric, limp
or stutter.
    If I send a letter
(this sudden utter
    other means
than speech)
    when I don't
know to love
    language other
than to run
    a larceny
all machine and god-
    likeness, gear
and hinge, pocket
    watch, tie-
pin, money clip and wing
tip, my father's
impostor I am
    then, my words
a mere guess at
    what isn't. It isn't

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mastery I’m after.
   It’s certain
other terms
   than my own
I wait for. For
   instance: birds
without names
   fly anyway
ceaselessly
   up the ladder
cast from visible
   to invisible—is it
it only seems
   there’s a way
to know the way?
iii. *then may God fire... with... presence.*”

And you can never catch it
nor make it still
and so it is like thought in this
or weather
that you might live within it
or by its constraints
but never touch it—
and there is the sorrow
it will never know you
though you feel all winter
the shiver of how it never hesitates
in touching you.

Or, said another way:
it snowed all day and into the night.
The view developed
slowly like a photograph
in a bath of chemicals—
what began as white
grew whiter
by virtue of contrast
until it seemed overexposed
so little shadow was left
   like a sentence revised too often.

What happens is the mind
   travels outward
because it wants to be the soul it has heard tell of.
   Nervous work
like a bird—sky and power line, garbage can, underbrush—
   it goes to them;
it intends itself toward oily black seeds
   toward reflections
in ice and in glass
   and it goes to the wind
and is shut out
   which is no one’s home.

Ever leave-taking,
   action is its only description:
each shadow on the lamp-lit street
   seeming to rush—molting out of itself—
each upward
   to snow—
multitude of hurry, confusion—midair
   to meet the idea that made it

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