

## Ossabaw

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*for Rebecca*



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## Lovesong from the Marshes

Think of grasses bending as the stream bends  
Leaning against its sweep in from the margins  
Holding on somewhere under as the tide gathers

Rising and falling to the wings of the heron  
Pulling his old blue pleasure from one rill to another  
    Over grasses bending as the stream bends  
    Leaning against its sweep in from the margins

Where minnows worry a warp that softens  
And the heron pulls his old blue pleasure  
Over the long salty winding together  
    Of grasses bending as the stream bends  
    Leaning against its sweep in on a margin  
    Holding on somewhere under as the tide gathers

## For Rebecca

As we were becoming wing and wind, you  
were also watching wildflowers. I'd  
roam ahead on our walks, seeking quickness  
in under brush or open sky while you  
bent close to prairie smoke or pussy toes —  
grayish cotton swabs foaming from a stem  
so short that I had overlooked them. I  
may always think of you bending to look  
small flowers over and to save a leaf  
within the pages of the guide you carried.  
You found the hidden pod of the bloodroot  
and watched until you could scatter its seed  
as our seraphic, six-winged garden soared.

## To a Later Autumn

In the distance like the wings of an egret  
or a sheet shaken out falling over a bed  
a bleached bank of shells lifts southward

a low Indian mound on the marsh  
with an edge of wind-twisted cedars  
some green some gray and weathered

barely vantage for lichen  
but enough under the vulture  
his smooth shadow passing

for sun in November  
extravagant sun no matter how thin  
on a trace of whomever was lugged

to this sad pile of silt cedar and oysters  
where sifting salt water fills and then falls  
away from his long sloughing to bone.

It won't do to make much of impermanence  
neither ours nor the marshes'  
which though vast die from our venturing on them.

All that is given  
as we rush along dragging much with us.  
How much will bleach out like these oysters

shucked and dropped over an eater?  
Rushes stiffening still stand up to the vulture—  
green brown and bronze—

a few golden shafts check his shadow  
stretching for one  
touch more of the sun of November.

## “Go, Little Book”

Someone came along the way, wraithlike, leaning,  
his gray, relic laughter clipping the land,  
and hard, like silver: “Where is my lissome daughter,  
her wheatleaf folded in this ancient ground?”  
We heard his bitter meadowwalk,  
his burnt oath, celestial, stir the dry nymph’s tavern,  
his pulsing shadow kicking up the sand.

## Poem Ending with Lines from an Obscure Memoir

They took away his passport but not permission to travel.  
He was twenty-five and had found authority  
among men. One winter north of the Pripet Marshes  
would measure the rest of his life. But first Moscow  
before finding his long way home. The line at Lenin's  
tomb was too long to bother. John Reed's grave  
lay close by, untended, within the Kremlin wall.  
He visited Tolstoy's home and learned of a grandson, Ilya,  
younger than he and Quaker aided, who had herded  
fifteen hundred head of horses across the steppes,  
from Turkestan to Samara. He must have been well armed.  
An English woman described corpses stacked like cordwood  
then buried shallow as survivors hoarded their strength.  
Men had eaten wolves and wolves had eaten men,  
which explained one more rifle in Quaker hands.  
He noted scratch marks where people had scraped fresh  
dirt up over the graves. Riding third class, he granted  
the practicality of roof riders' passing down the corpses  
at the stations. The secret service agent, minding him,  
asked about emigrating to America. Would there be  
good land to farm? At Buzuluk, on the Samara River,  
he watched the setting sun back light a pock-marked  
courtyard wall. Admiral Kolchak and General Denikin  
had been through, names soon muffled under the creak  
of saddle leather and the slow thud of horses' hooves  
in a snowy and distant Russian forest, with often a crow's  
wings, folding and unfolding, that least hinge his horizon.

## Gaudy Fox

I didn't do the owl any good,  
Or the brown thrasher either, in his wood

Of one small tree, a cedar, seeking shelter  
As I was passing, walking Ramón, and caught  
His eye, enough to hint he was, he ought  
To realize, quite closely looked after

For reasons he might not entirely admire.  
So off he flew, across the street, like owl  
From way up in the spruces while crows "crow-eled"  
Unceasingly around him, their guns for hire.

Our trespassing—my willful seeing—focused  
One pair of eyes too many and off he too,  
Then, unlike fox, in repose by our path, the dew  
Lavished on fur the flies had just noticed.

## Our Oldest Oath

A hummingbird has chased away a bee.  
She hardly missed a beat, made it look easy.

She was a she; she had no ruby throat.  
I almost said “because,” because she lacked,  
She was. With white-tipped tail, wings wide, she tacked  
On fragrant air. Nor did she misquote

Expressive hostas loud in their half circle  
With nectar she’d defended from the bee.  
That was the day that summer ended, carefree  
As the air turned cool, an oracle

Of autumn, its lightest touch. I dug up  
Clematis and a rose, transplanted both.  
I could have bet she kept our oldest oath,  
To keep on probing whatever’s most corrupt.

## Not at All Byzantine

Can you believe I spent four years polishing their balls? Every day, in the equipment room, where high on the wall, between the top shelf and ceiling, plaster had been chipped away around a pipe into the girls' locker room, and where, if you wedged half of yourself onto that shelf and left one foot dangling toward the ladder, you might win peeks at lots of very white underwear, but where, routinely, I tumbled eighteen, twenty or it usually seemed forty basketballs out of a sack, squirted sucky pink cleaning fluid on each and wiped each off with a towel so the balls were ready for practice and our boys for the game before which and at half times I ran a push broom over the floor, working across center court from one out-of-bounds line to the other. I packed the trunks, handed uniforms out, took them back sweaty, and loaded it all on the bus. Once I locked the keys in a trunk, and the A-team wore the wet rags of B-teamers after their game.

So passed four years as basketball manager,  
sitting the bench, home and away, writing  
the number of each player on a chart,  
for each shot, and circling his number  
if he made it. Reloading that trunk, riding  
the bus with the team, and getting my dollar  
peeled off a wad Coach pulled from a front pocket  
of his pleated slacks, one buck for a burger,  
shake, fries, and very small change, at the drive-in  
as we returned to town, where cheerleaders waited,  
and I'd squeeze into a booth with one or more girls  
and an equal number of players, all  
of which proved an apt limousine, set on cruise  
for my career with a small magazine.