Regional Reflections
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Metamorphic
Lifting slabs of metamorphic rock
pressed and fused a long time ago
for a long time, I stare underneath.

Worms recoil in a coppery iridescence.
Beetles glint and burrow. Pale roots corkscrew.
Sowbugs, resembling small trilobites,
roll into balls, hiding their gills.
And eggs with their sparks, eggs
that I touch with my hand suddenly mortal.

Leafskeletons, bleached snail shells, bug husks—
stretched out on the forest floor too long
I would become reduced to fine traces.

One respect I've learned, set the rock
back gently over the exposed ground
the way you found it. Close the door.

In The Heron's Heating
In the heron's heaving burst
of blue wings and white breast,
the wading legs pull their length
from the dull pull of current
and the droplet speckled flash
washes fresh the sunlit willowleaves.

With a span of slender feathers
as long from tip to tip as
a boy is from head to muddy toes,
the heron's flight cleaves the haze,
loping up above the slow, green
river carving walls of grey shale.
Staring at a Heron
I stand in the heron’s stare,
the heron stands in this stare.
Neither of us will move.
Lulled to the same leisure
by the weather we share
here, each other, forever.

This Heron Is
not a taoist painting,
though as still and able
to settle and fulfill
the space around itself.

Not the thought of the thing
I might have, painter’s or
otherwise. That too, but more
than the quiet of brush strokes.

The heron itself
that waded here yesterday,
unperturbed, that stands still
after these words.

Fisherman Snagging Salmon On The Chagrin River
Coho and Chinook, stocked three years ago, are spawning now—or trying to. They are two feet long and powerfully silver
to these weekend fisherman lined shoulder to shoulder
in rubber chest-waders. They tear through the green riffles
with lead-weighted treble hooks below the fenced-in dam.
Huddled around the garbage drum’s flames, we poke fun
at their seriousness and crowded determination.

As kids we used to wade the Chagrin every summer day we could,
soaked it in through our skin, and were familiar with its slow
carp, big as your thigh, their scales as coppery brown as pennies.
They would doze up and down stretches of sloughs over and over,
their big mouths unhinging and closing and opening again
to thoroughly vacuum up the foulest blooms of crawdad shell
and raw sewage hovering in the cool layers over the bottom.
We knew the old-timers too, who got up earlier than us and caught
stringers of suckers to eat that flesh most said was all mud.

Once down by the narrows we watched a bowfisherman for an hour.
His reflection stood as poised and keen as a Great Blue Heron’s.
Then the river was, for us, for a day, what it had been then
for the Erie people who understood hunger and hunting—that killing was never only power, but blood taking blood.
They were sure to make prayer over the flashings of the fish.
Evening Along the Chagrin
A brown winter sparrow
clumps down beside
a stalk of sumac berries.

The juice bright tongue
pierces the dusk
with 3...6...9 notes.

I bother up close
and alter the place
and singing altogether.

Cloudplates heavy and shift.
The river scours grey shale
a few calls downtrail.

I wish I could swing
my curious body backwards
filling a moment ago's space.

The first star appears,
one scale of a silver fish
drifted off elsewhere.

Wang Luei the Elements
Rain-soaked Wang shivers,
Kneels by the full stream—
His skin mottled blue—
Wrings his robe, and so
Adds water to the flow.

No food, cloak, roof, fire,
But a spark is there—
A single oriole
Pierces through hemlocks,
Makes an arc of orange.

Wang cracks his knuckles,
Breaks a sparse-toothed grin,
And begins to sing a tune
That ends midway through
His crafting of a fire.
Young woman crossing a field
The grown over field along the freeway
stands mostly as real-estate a square lot
of useless scrub at a practical glance.
A good location for condos or a shopping center.
She takes her time to picture corn rising.

One long stare and her everyday eyes
no longer overlook the sight—the field
contours to its former symmetries:
dark smelling furrows open and stalks line,
chlorophyl-vibrant to yellow flaring heights.

But the traffic keeps up its droning.
Shafts of sunlight splinter through the cloud plates
and sweep across the brush. The wind embers colors.
Here and there creatures are hidden dying
or alive from the inside out a caterpillar’s body.

She lays down below the weedtops,
but hears her mother complaining again,
“Really, you never see things as they are.”
Stick-tights and burrs snag the blouse
She was never supposed to get dirty.

She pulls handfuls studies their shapes,
and sows them. Turning, she looks at the field
again and feels it fluxing through her older
and younger. A quail bobs through the undergrowth
somewhere out of sight its berryblack eyes glistening.

In A Field Above the Freeway
The August sun lazes along.
Dull, yellow grasshoppers float
and collide from stem to stem.

On my break, my hand under my head,
I loll. The long weeds sway
and I just want to go with the flow.

But I have to head back down to work.
We’re patching from here to Painesville.
I wave an orange flag, a single wing.

Standing, stretching my back to cracking,
I shift my weight, and the field
clutters outward in every direction.
Old Woman in a Slovenian Church in Cleveland
Her husband gone years ago yet her requiem
hums through diffuse light conducive to mourning.
Her tongue flickers like a red-cupped candle.

She keeps arthritic hands warm with the flow
of solid beads, the seeds of the departed
she plants over and over, rising as black wheat.

She tells her decades every evening during novenas,
creaking Hail Marys in an accent that trickles
down the gutters of a village in Slovenia.

Her devotions hover and ascend as she ceases,
roosting in a darkness as deep as her upturned eyes.

The Sustenance of Light
Every winter was grey skies for Mass for Sundays on end.
Inside the dim, immigrant cathedral, arches holding space open
glowed with Medieval weight. I stared up and up.

Huge on the ceiling over the altar’s gleaming bazaar,
over the cassocked priest gesturing us to rise as a body,
over the crucifix, the light of the world contorted there,
over it all on outstretched wings, the holy ghost
sailed hosanna through the vastness.

Light, I saw, could blaze golden, carrying me
away from Cleveland where it can sleet or snow
or both for more than forty days easy, clouds
sliding low and steady off Lake Erie in layers as continuous
as the shale that hardened beneath the inland sea
that once covered these parts and receded long before
the Holy Roman Empire raised its pinnacles.

And long time before palls of smoke sagged
down from stacks of plants in the Flats,
where haggard faced steelmen shuffled off the nightshift
through gates of mills into a dawn rain of iron filings.

All during the service, I watched pale seraphims pause
red and blue in the stained glass
before falling mottled on the doughy faces of the faithfull.
On both sides of the altar, row upon row,
the hearts of the departed flickered present.

When the chalky effluvium wafted from the censer
and tingled my nose, I believed I smelled the burning
bones of ancient Saints ascending. The bells shivered
when the host was held aloft, small as a solstice sun.
It was what we had come for and it was broken
and passed down the line onto anemic tongues,
dissolving in the smouldering murk of each body.
After the Mass, huddles of babushkas, their English knocked loose from clumps of old country earth like potatoes, their breathes rising like vapor from boiled dinners, plowed through the swirls of snow-flurries and fly-ash from the Illuminating Company. As they hurried home they scattered pigeons on the sidewalk that hopped and flapped up above the cross—the cross silhouetted against the smudge of late winter sun.

**Grandfather's Breath**

“You work. You work, Buddy. You work.”

Word of immigrant get-ahead grind I hear huffing through me, Grandfather’s breath when he’d come in from Saturday’s keep-busy chores, fending up a calloused hand to stop me from helping him, haggard cheeks puffing out like work clothes hung between tenements, double-over under thirty-five years a machine repairman at the ballbearing factory, ballbearings making everything run smoother—especially torpedoes. He busted butt for the war effort, for profiteers, for overtime pay down-payment on a little box of his own, himself a refugee of the European economy washed ashore after the “war to end all wars,” cheap labor for the winners.

And I hear his youth plodding through the hayfields above Srednevas, and the train that wheezed and lumbered to the boat where he heaved-ho consumptive sisters one, two, overboard. I hear him scuffling along the factory-smoke choked streets of Cleveland, coughing out chunks of broken English—how he grunted out a week’s worth of grime hurling ballincas down the pressed dirt court, a sweaty wisp of grey hair wagging from his forehead, “This is how the world turns. You work hard. You practice.” I hear his claim as we climbed the steps of the Stadium, higher, into the cheap seats, slapping the flat of his hand against a girder, “I built this, Buddy.”

But mostly I hear how he’d catch what was left of his breath after Saturday’s keep-busy chores, when he’d pour out that one, long, tall, cold beer that Grandma allowed him, and hold it aloft, the bubbles golden as the hayfields above Srednevas. He’d savor it down before taking up the last task of his day off, cleaning the cage, whistling, letting Snowball, canary like the ones once used to test coal-mines for poison air, flap clumsily free around the living room, sitting on the plastic covered davenport and easychairs that they only sat in twice a year.
And I’m still breathing, Grandpa, the day you took me
down the basement to the cool floor to find out
what was wrong. “C’mon, Snowball, fly. C’mon, fly.”
The bird splayed out on the same linoleum
where they found you, next to your iron lung,
where Grandma mopped for weeks afterwards,
pointing with arthritic fingers, “See, there,
there’s where he fell and bumped his head.
See the specks of blood.” She can’t work out.
One fine morning when my work is done,
I’m gonna fly away home.
“C’mon Snowball, fly. Fly.”

The Laughing Lady of Cleveland
Do I remember her? How could I forget,
Twelve feet tall and bigger in our fears
She guarded the “fun-house.” The grown-ups
always stopped in front of her first as she
cranked back and forth on her rusting steel spine,
hands on squat hips over potatoe dumpling legs.
Bulged cheeks, gap teeth, slug lips and nostrils,
She was a wall of loud yellow and red polka dots.
Her garbled, vibrating hysterics would not let up
no matter where you were in the park, no matter
how many pillows you put over your head that night.
She was the mirror for my Slovenian great-aunts,
Rose and Flo and Josie. By god, they needed to let go.
After the din of the machines from seven to three,
after coming home to scrub linoleum and formica,
after resting their backs and soaking their feet,
they had to laugh. Behind them, bug-eyed, we stared
transfixed. Looking from her to them breaking up and
down, we laughed and laughed and laughed and....

The Revenge of Cleveland
*a menu against nouvelle cuisine*
At a restauent a la arboretum in a trendy alley
back of Harvard Square, I sit down to a platter of minimalist philosophy—
a little-bitty food smack dab in the middle
of gigantic plate—and wait for more.
When none comes I realize this is
the entree, and it hits me; this will cost.
Three slivers of salmon looking, for the life of them,
like playdough cut-outs; a spot
of goose-liver pate nudged
under a scrap of spinach grown in a petri dish;
a dash of tortellinis—that disgrace to pasta;
an upscale garnish of designer legumes;
and, existentially enough, a single olive
sans pimento. The whole plate
could be a display of new-wave jewelry.
Enough of this “less is more.”
More is more, and I want some.
Let’s start with dumpling soup, the aroma
buoyed by globules of chicken fat—
the hundred suns that never shine on grey Cleveland;
then the dumplings themselves, behemoths
of cholesterolled ambrosia; bring on the perogies,
and put a tub of cheez-whiz
made from artificial imitation processed cheesefood
at one elbow, and on the other side, a mound
of sauerkraut steaming like the Cuyahoga
stirred by a scow on a Spring morning;
eggnoodles too, rolled and cut
and steeped and ladled by my heavy great-aunts—
noodles steeped in margarine
from the contented corn of the flatlands;
And, oh, the loaves of seed-choked rye
and pumpernickle smeared with lard.
Give me a bellyfull of kielbasi-inspired,
stadium mustard lathered indigestion any day—
the revenge of Cleveland.
I’ll take you there, my friend, to a pile
of comfort food that makes you spout,
“Lay on, MacDuffski, and let no mouth cry,
hold, enough!”

And, of course, to top it off, a roll of peticza,
and a quivering dollop of pink-jello salad
straight from a truckstop off the western pike
all frothed with non-dairy whip.

So, none of this lightweight stuff that lets you off
to play squash or the stocks.
None of this nuance and dabble on the palate.

I want a heap of carbohydrates so I can’t move
the rest of the afternoon,
chowed down in a bar with the Brown’s game blaring.
A meal as heavy and murky as an immigrant cathedral,
as bland and fulfilling as a busload of Slovenians
coming home from Polka Varieties dreaming of Sunday dinner.
White-Tail Deer
I've come back to the fall banks
of the Chagrin river after years
of my life passed by unnoticed.

Around a bend, a deer startles out,
skids across a sheet of ice
and pokes through near the shore.

Crashing out, it bounds logs zigzag,
its white tail flashing and fading
into the darkening treeline.

In the clear silence afterwards,
a snowflake lights on the sleeve
of the plaid jacket I wore as a boy,
the spokes defined, dissolved.

A Mongrel on the Edge of the Flats
(for the Annual Labor Day Junk-Stock Reading)
From the middle of this Dinosaur Junkyard
at the edge of the chain-link-fenced Flats,
it does not look like the end of the world today
to this dog. The gas-guzzling hulks that once drove
long and shiny out of the plants are sinking now
into oil-pits, gulls stuck on their backs.
There's nothing left to guard here cause ya can't
fit an 8 cylinder, 357 tranny on a computer chip.

Fried food smells and over-priced drink laughter
waft up from the new clubs along the Cuyahoga
that burned off its stinking skin two decades ago.
For fun, the dog chases his raggedy tail, bedding
down tall grass no longer there—force of habit.
Summer rots fragrantly away somewhere south.
He sniffs a shred of it on the breeze
expiring across the exhausted freeways.

He dozes and twitches, dreaming of running
through fields of plump, stumbling rabbits.
He nightmares Dick and Jane prancing
over a green sward along a picket fence
with him as a clean Spaniel trotting behind
smiling—startled awake, he looks around
and wonders why dogs ever began hanging
with two-leggers in the first place.
They seemed to be heading to the top
of the food chain at the time. They had those
pointy sticks and fire to cook the fat.
Couches couldn’t be too far down the line.
He barks at nothing but steel Cleveland sagging
and rising as glass boxes in a magnificent ignorance.
The sun sets over the Flats warming him.
He yawns, his pink tongue curling and uncurling.

**Tackling**
Stosh Zerucha, Ned Bindokas, Keith Zelazney, Chuck Dobish,
Jeff Marva, Woody Woodrow, Bill Uhaus and Todd Plewacki.
Man, what a close music your names are now,
coming to me here, far from Willoughby, like they are
the shouts and thuds and oomphs of backyard football.

Some of us listened to our uncles and went into computers.
Some pumped gas or moved furniture, or did the shifts
our fathers did at what factories were still left open.
Some are married and back in our tract-house neighborhood.
Some have a kid already, or kids, and Todd is dead.
None of us, as far as I know, go to Mass anymore.
None of us are born again, or really rich, or anything
terrible like that. I guess were getting by somehow.

This evening, after my work, it is autumn again.
Walking home from a bar, I take in the crisp air
and it is like I ran out for a long pass in the dusk
at the end of the vacant lot on Kilarney Drive.
I'm waiting for it to fall, standing there smelling
leaf-mulch, torn grass, and sweatshirts our mothers washed.
There's a rucus of laughing and tackling at the other end
of the field—you're all piling on top of the loose ball
with that good feel of holding on to each other.
Winter Solstice
Late December grinds on down.
The sky stops, slate on slate,
scattering a cold light of snow
across a field of brittle weeds.

Each bootstrap cracks a stalk.
The pigments have been dragged
earthwards and clasped. The groundhog
curls among the roots curling.

Towards home I peel blossoms
of frozen mud from my pant legs
and pull off burrs that waited
for wind or the flashing red fox.

In my jacket pocket I find
a beechnut, slightly open,
that somehow has fallen there.
And, enfolded inside of it,

a spider that unclenches
yellow in my steaming palm—
a spider that is the sun.