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Northern Literature

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Camelops hesternus

Must I fly to Old Crow
to find you, arctic camel?
Here, weary of me,
I finger-rasp the ripped
cardboard tube of your tibia.
I shouldn't remember
the bamboo necklaces
my father made under
the tarpaulin shade
on the beach in Spain,
that I and my sister
were still wearing
in the photograph of us
in front of Notre-Dame.
I want to think of you.
You're the surprise:
north as well as south,
more Sahara than llama.
Your humerus is knuckled.
I want to wrap my grasp
around it – paddle handle –
canoe the Porcupine River,
catch your bones
from sloughing banks.
Why must my human
mind think *tool*?
One-humped, long-legged,
pelted. Your giant originator
escaped us. But you,
we hunted you.

Helmeted Muskox

Your cervical vertebrae
is as rough and light as sand.
I'm diminishing you,
rubbing off grains.
I put you down, tap the bark
of your high-skulled horns:
I slide my hand inside
your head and quickly out.

*

Two vertebrae.
Bison in one palm,
muskox in the other.
The palaeontologist
closes her eyes.
She can tell you apart
without looking.

*

I saw you, shaggy palaeo-palimpsest,
at the wildlife preserve. Skiing,
I slid beside you, dark colossus
of loamy, stringy hanging fur
brushing high bright snow,
hunkered, sturdy, the most
perpetual animal I've ever seen,
the most impervious
to ice and evolution.

Beringian Wolf

You I couldn't find, until I saw,
on Main Street, through clean glass,
the man with the tall broad back,
fixed rectangle of moving poise.
He was the wolf, an ecomorph
off course on the Cordilleran ice sheet.
Or the slim woman, hand in raincoat pocket,
with waist-belted confidence I've never had.
Or the man dressed for rustic blending
on a false-fronted road: bark jacket,
lichen trousers. The lean are on the streets.
The fat are in the coffee shops, grasping lattés;
we're watching skinny wolf hips
and broad-mouthed skulls grappling chatter.
That man, by the truck, black jacket,
blue jeans and sneakers, has never
had to tug his sweater down over his arse,
has never hoped no one's noticed he's worn
the same top to work two days in a row.
He's never believed he's a subspecies
that needs to be extinct and, kissing,
pushed away a pelvis.

Waiting

A raven sits on a lamppost, waiting.
All he has to do is wait.
With the way the road goes, something will die, sometime.
Then there will be something to eat.

Wait long enough, it will happen,
Something will die.
Even now, wrinkles deepen under your eyes.
Your breasts slide downward.
Cancer cells divide.
Your arteries stiffen.
Just wait.

But it's also true that this evening,
a cloud has thrown an arm around that mountain.
The day moon brightens towards night.
So whatever is important, whatever small delight
might be made to happen -
why wait?

Mid-night, wooded lot

For JB and TL

the animal, whatever animal
bear cub, raccoon?

a porcupine
its coat sharpened spears

in the dark brush
past night's middle, I approach

some low scraping animal
alert along the outhouse path

whatever animal: desire

in the blood
of night, a predator –

silent in its keys of sound

shadow
incidental, hesitant, roused

animal, whatever animal
hunched, roving,
whispers

to the absent light, the forest,
fear's blurred eye

what moves, moves

Moose

Dempster Highway, Yukon

One must wait a long time to see a moose,
have a quiet soul longing

to see, not what one hopes, but what, for a fleeting moment –
the sun's slow slip over blue, before cloud,
the cold lakes, their grassy bottoms –

I am looking into the wild places,
I am searching for movement.

The road a trajectory and the bush a blur and shadow –
a wolf or moose. In the low scrub, above

the tree line, a caribou hoof, lower leg
gnawed off. Wild, this, and ordinary.

Elusive this index finger of want: oh, there,
no there... I take on the scent of animal. I take things on.

Hide. Hidden. Den. The roar of traffic, of road construction.
Antlers of plastic bottles skew-wiff in trees.

What am I hoping for?

A sign. Not all is human along this gravelled road
between trees and mountains, settlements,
overwintered deadwood, after rain.
Not a pale rock, but Grizzly –
Not the bent drain pipe in the river,
but Moose or American Dipper –

Call me city girl. All I have is imagination, yearning
as we roll the road out behind us.
The lichen and shrubs, from nothing, stir
on the green green slope
going north.

Rivers turn to Arctic
here. Creatures here seek and avoid.

I have come to believe that to see would be to understand.
Would it? To see with eye,
rather than mind. To pursue, to hike, be part,
hear what is breathing –

– find that tawny animal rump, that muzzle, those antlers
not the raised roots of a fallen tree, there,

look there, in the lake centre, in the shadow, antlers,
a mother and her calf. Mossy hide, stretched light.

Hawk

For days,
a hawk haunts our clearing.

We watch it take down

a fat brown squirrel,

my boys in a hush
on the porch.

The hawk
rips another strip.

My baby cries
for milk:
accipiter, startled
takes flight.

Carcass abandoned,
black spill of blood on grass:
the kids rush to look.

I sit
on the porch step,
breast bared.
Contented baby sighs.

Hawk circles
and screams.

Bush Kids

Teethe on rocks;

suckle sweet water as it springs
from Earth's hummock teat;

comb wild raspberries, rain wet,
into their mouths, not noticing
tiny green worms secreted within;

fall asleep to
the woodstove's lullaby tick,
the thrum of mating grouse in spring and

in dreams,
chase Orion's dogs
through black spruce forests.

Crop

In his days of forget-me-not
wild iris softball trips
he was a shooting star of bat,
chocolate lily drink & story.
From Dustball to Mudball,
I'd stretch my columbine
ears to hear the details
giggled over by dogwood men,
until one by one they bluebelled
into self-proclaimed beer-
league retirement. Lupine,
blue poppy, like fireweed
we burn summer bright,
flashy, charismatic,
until we settle
into seed & soil.

Da Vinci's *A Bear Walking*

An eerie likeness
between a bear's paw
and a human's hand.

We don't realize this
until the bear is skinned,
splayed on a blue tarp,

cracked open for viewing.
Hands hold the power
to grab, fend, and cuff;

protect the young, sustain.
Our hands can dart, miss
the mark, dispatch

the wild beast roaming
the dark woods, travelling
its enduring trails.

Aboard the *Redoubt*, October, 179_

Thirteen bells of this fog and still no end to it,
Though the evening air is upon us.
We can but guess our position;
Accuracy lies only in the imagination.
Things fail, humans err, all ships sink,
Or lie forgotten in obscure anchorages,
Rotting timbers broken by tides and time.

“Say gull, what news?”

If the crew could have known the possibilities
Would they have signed on?
Their passage is difficult enough,
A Master cannot express doubt, must maintain
A certainty his crew’s labour suffers some gain.
Mist condenses everywhere, damp tiller, beards
Carry beads of the sea – some order is necessary

“Heave Her to, Mr. MacKenzie.”

In the doldrums: clear horizon,
Bare steerage, the men pulling Her by oar,
Blisters, faintness, some talk
Of madness then. But, when the wind came up
From the West, the cry they gave!
Extra tots all round that night, no thought
Of land, or the hope of land, that night.

“Oh, for some breeze to clear this air..”

The need is for movement, forwardness;
Some illusion of gain provides all recompense.
Aye, some shore is there, to starboard, somewhere,
And men of wisdom or demon's lairs?
The Mate reports yestereve the bos'un swears
He heard a voice: "Twas Charon's shout,
From the far side of Styx, no doubt."
I instructed him to belay such talk,
We've no need of such superstitions here.
Yet, it's always there, nagging.

Since the *Griffin* went down
We ourselves have become ghostly,
Lack corroboration of our existence on this sea;
We could be Dutchmen for the silence.
I swear the young Skipper aboard the *Griffin*
Lacked inspiration; royally trained and appointed,
He had no suspicions, and twenty-three men
In all and all . . .

"By Christ some air –
Harden the sheets, helm alee!"

This ship has purpose, now.
We'll bring Her downwind to a destination.
No matter the position cannot be fixed with certainty,
It is the limits of intelligibility
I seek.

from Fishing For My Father

XII

It's been a long haul for the both of us to make this port.

The white sheets lie down along your body
and I am compelled by long habit to straighten them out,
fold them over, so that there is absolute order to the scene
—as aboard, so too ashore.

The fact that this is your deathbed hardly registers at first.
I do what I know best at such moments,
assured by the knowledge that you would approve
of such attention to detail.

And it was always about the details, wasn't it?
Which took me so long to appreciate about you,
and our life.
Always too quick to look for grand trajectories,
I was a bad novice aboard a boat,
where the difference between wreck and safe passage
is precisely in the details.

But we were shipmates at the end, weren't we?
I left the North to come to your side and hold your hand
while your vessel slipped away on the ebb tide.

We committed to different courses, of course
—no two navigators plot the same.
But, there really isn't a lot of difference between
a fisherman who runs a B & S one-lunger
and a sailor who looks to a broadside wind to get along;
both share this simple fact:
Salt water is the principal component of our being.
We need it to survive.
Even when it comes to us in a gale
We must embrace it

Alaska Highway

April 20, 2017 | 10:32 p.m.

Seven hundred and sixty clicks with only one close call, an arrow sign misread, collision neatly missed. Ages since I'd seen another car, but straight into my flicker of confusion drove a truck, I'm guessing a Dodge Ram. It is always a Dodge Ram. On my ass in morning traffic, passing me reckless in storms. What is it that bursts inside the chest, fires in the plexus, when real horror skitters by? A ball of heat that heaves. My legs began to shake. I could not let the Dodge define my day, though it was my mistake. Averted, yes. I got away. So near to the summit, having come through cloud, snowy peaks of the Seven Sisters settling in mind. Why are they so named? For me they summon Pleiades. I'd wanted this drive perfect, proof that I could make it on my own through narrow gaps and keep control in spite of being gobsmacked by the ranges. Ridges. Eminences. Domes.

I sat in Skagway gathering myself: that disappointment, imperfection, not dissuade. The town was still half-shuttered and I had to pee. I thought I'd cry. I thought I'd have to squat somewhere, to hide, until the fire hall let me in. Look: doors will still swing open in those final moments, when it counts. The owner of a bakery, the Lemon Rose, saved me with a sandwich. I was starved. Her kindness and her coffee. Everything she knew about her business and her world.

I tried to let the Dodge dissolve, but it is with me still, though shadowy, in dust, swallowed up by mountain. Just a wraith. A meaningless misgiving, signifying nothing, gone the way of glaciers. Going. Going.

Just now, I peered in at my youngest, sound asleep, and saw him roll onto his back and stretch. He made a little sound of peace, a little mouthy noise, a baby sigh. I could so easily have woken him and spoiled it. I could so easily have died of ill-timed error on the highway to Alaska, on a hurried search for something to inspire transformation, change of course.

I love this little boy. That love hits like a vista after hairpin when you shirk the corset of steep rock and narrow road to see the nimbus shot with sunlight sketching mountaintops above a marbled pool.

The eyes of both my sons are marbled pools.

I stopped again in Carcross, headed back from Skagway, and I watched the swans just being, near to shore. On a strip of beach, I found a dime and let that be enchantment. Sure enough. As one hour is enchanted, so another. No paucity of smooth stones to bring home, not that we need many.

I gathered driftwood also, took two steps and turned to see another vista. One I almost missed. I stood and raised my arms like swan wings in the late-day, water-kissing sun. One baby step and nothing looked the same.

I could see a bridge slung shore to shore, held by a great mountain in reflection shot with light, and all the spiraling potential of its span. Innumerable crossings in one thought.

I stood a good long time upon that gently rocking dock.

Milepost 57

Together they squandered their seven ivory clouds
at the sky's small edge — salted away a hundred
landlocked sea swells of quarter mile rise — dug in
where the thaw would oblige. They were up at all hours
all summer, scavenging wildfire's garden for morels
in moss triage, kindling in armless charred spruce —
any standing to be gained out of struggling lushness
knocked on its back. They flared against squirrels and strays
and warrants and easements and their only neighbour —
miles up the road — who dared to call them squatters,
but ask around — the fact is, ambition and reclusiveness
have been shacking up here for years. You think they've
ever once held a deed to these tussocky slopes?
Their sprawling, marginal claim? And now August gone,
now facing fireweed silk and the sterile chill, the empty kettle,
she tells him *to hell with it — eat your damned overburden,*
and your fine flour gold — then bold again she storms
the same gravel washboard to her dear desperate highlands —
scorched over languid prickly crest beyond ridge beyond
crest, scarred flanks cleft with cut banks, or scalloped
in sluiced heaps of crumbled rock the ravens inspect.
Those creeks ran clear of fundamental yearning long since.
But hopelessly distant, north and west — *that's where the fabulous*
lode must lie! where steeper faces part the headwinds —
where dawn was conceived, and dusk will be buried
a few inches more ...

In his old black truck
with the star-shot doors and the crescent headlight,
he'll find her shivering, halfway down the hill.

The long way home

We discovered a slow distress seeping out of our
reconciled years — from freezing, and melting,

and freezing, it had cracked the compass rose.
Now we almost always choose the long way home,

circling the airport perimeter road to stay gone —
and circling again this afternoon, we draw

the winter solstice down from fretted high clouds
rusted pink, the only petals left unscattered.

The windshield's vellum frost lets thawed soft
islands of distance disclose, to the west,

the world's white nest scraped flat for safe flight —
to the east, tangled centuries of willow scratch

and dwarf black spruce shanks out of true —
valiant small gestures hobbled in knots of dry snow.

Due south, beyond reach, cold heaven's seventh
blue half-life bows over the river's jumble ice —

a curtainless window, its glaciated sill. At home
in the moment, we might have called it a day.

Angel to cobalt, we bend with the evening north.

Secret Santa

for Chris Greenfield-Pastro

At Fred Meyer's on Sunday,
I inspected the sickly cacti
and chose the least damaged one

for you. It is tiny
(snatched from Mexico? Arizona? some other hot place?)
and I've planted it, this porcupine football,

in a new small pot
in the wrong soil, probably. At least
the pot isn't plastic. Neither is it coated

in paint. I want the orange pot
and the cactus to *breathe*—
and all the white prickles.

A bright red ribbon,
hugging tightly the smooth clay vessel,
has been tied into a bow.

You will also find
a small card, typed
to keep you from recognizing

my handwriting ☺.
I had planned to slip
this frangible, green life

through the ice fog
and into your mailbox
at school this morning, but

Oh, no! It wouldn't fit.

Quickly I unfurled
another red ribbon
(extra long) and taped one end

to your mail slot
and the other
to the brown paper bag.

I hope you don't pricker yourself.

The Black Bird Gang

“crows break off from the rest of darkness” (Mary Oliver)

You speak of crow and
I will tell you of raven
his eye a bold black bead
his ruff of head feathers
a well-oiled pompador
his three-pronged talons
a scaly imprint
of his dinosaur relative
his beak a magnificent wedge
the profile of a roman emperor.

I will tell you he is trickster
who rides the wind
with such skill I mistake him
for soaring eagle,
yet on the street, he hops absurdly
sideways and swaggers with the strut
of a spaghetti western cowboy.
He lords it over us
showing off his ventriloquist voice
quicksilver shift from underwater gurgle
to commanding squawk,
yet he hangs out in the bed of a pick up
shoving his buddies aside
over garbage bags
like bored teenage boys.

Come night, he's left town
rounded up his rowdy comrades
returned to darkness
known only to him and his kind.
I tell you he'll be back
freewheeling into town where
he sideslips through
the windstream of our days
one steady eye
watching out for us.

Dreams of yarrow

I dreamed of twining yarrow
with the scent of blood.
Snow at my feet,
I harvested almost silently
against grey sky.
In my mittened palms I could see
the buds almost burst with the cold.
I pulled whole arms full of the tender plant,
carried it home in my pockets,
in my sleep.
I covered the stems in oil,
the flowers in water,
stored the bounty in lidded jars.
Essence to take from wooden spoons.
Salve to be rubbed into ache.

I shelved the jars
next to the rows of other dreams—
a cellar full of medicine for the splits of winter.
Already here, the cellar keeps the jars warm
and humming with images not quite forgotten.
And, I can taste the residue of gathering,
alone with my collection,
waiting for the opening of eyes,
the baring of skin.
Only the sound of roots
and the gentle prediction
for more snow.

baroque spiders

(on listening to Handel's *Tamerlano*)

clavinet a metallic spider
miniature lunar lander
binding together the recitatives
on the edge of notice
unremarked
stitching together the threads of the violins
the cellos
the interregnum between arias
—flies trying to break through its web

Prospect

Years turned castoffs
into artifacts and hard work

into history and spun autumn
and nighttime from alpenglow.

What geologist schemed
a motherlode of bright summers

veined by winter snows
laden with olden quiet?

An epoch's worth of water seeded glints
into the mountains' dark interiors.

Wars, worlds away, boomed close enough
to temper the clanks and rumble of mines

back into clean winds. Those winds, or laughter,
with avalanches, shudder hand-blown windows

over dirt growing tundra flowers
atop limestone, rust, riches, quartz, ghosts.

Recession

This is winter repeating
its little lexicon, this is
an epoch's soliloquy
become summer
where sun sings
the crystalline mess
back out. This is
the melt pond
reflecting the ice wall
of a glacier whose
melting made it.
Later, rockfall will clatter
downslope, sun-loosed,
its splash eliminating its own image.
This is the snout the face the toe
and the opaque grey lake
left in its wake.
Not far, cabins cluster, growing.
The rock and ice
get quieter, retracting,
flowing forward by one step,
flinching back each year by two.

Song of the Barium Swallow

Siberian barrens fill
with mines and dams,
minds trained by one purpose,
the gut.

Mud nests hang in sluiceways,
from crossarms of power poles,
from armpits of miners and linemen.
There's a pile of porcelain line insulators
smashed at the foot of a pole.

A silver-throated
string of chromosomes
dives from her perch
with unlikely liquidity,
eyes filled
a thousand ways

chirrup barcode
to x-rays.

The Difference Between Undetermined & Undermined

Instead, in the eastern sky, a flower.
From the road we accept the substitution
without question, the highway
and the fossil of the highway, the same.
The theme is played on a strip of balloon rubber,
the player camped under overpass
unapproachable tune blown thin
from the place in his hands.
If not cars we wait for something else
our waiting undiminished.
We misread the postcard of light
and are better for it.
Baroque or barbeque,
hinges on a squint.
We set the west ablaze with our portfolios,
our substance turned to silhouette.
Each roadside hideout more hideous.
Deep frieze of fryer fat upon the range hood.
Toilet at the filling station,
low bog of chlorophyll,
concentric rings terracing the porcelain.
The life that crawls from that neglect
belies neglect. We give a résumé
of false references and carry on.

On Coming Out of Nowhere

The earth near our place
 was cradle,
it rocked us—
 became our skin.
House doors opened,
 spilled us out,
we disappeared into trees—
 they clothed us
in delirious green.
We wore them like coats,
 learned from black branches
and bent trunks
 their sun and rain
vocabulary.
 We grew up astonished, whole,
but ghosts of ourselves,
 shushed, mourned by wind.
Our tongues tasted sun, our shoes
 muddy, scouting creek.
We chewed dogwood berries,
 learned later they were poisonous,
lay in tall grass
 as clouds revealed their animals.

Saw iris petals
 like purple flags—
walked to cranberries,
 picked some, scarlet like lips.
Claustrophobic walls
 exchanged for this—
light and shadow,
 everything unresolved, lonely.
We knew the song
 of this place, made it up,
sang it—
 not a lament
until years later.

Along the Print

Grass-of-Parnassus grow along the path to our swamp,
their waxy petals like stars
bursting white above the black mud,
and narrow petals of yellow flowers we call peanut butters,
because we never learned their real name.
Footprints of night creatures linger in the soft earth,
draw me in—
a record of those who passed unseen
so close to our place.
Rocks form stepping-stones to my sister's boarding house
where I build a room without a roof,
furnish it with a rug of horsetail.
Nearby my brother plays the superhero,
slashing at us with his willow branch sword.
Tomorrow is following us,
but we are children, not carrying coats or coins
or memories yet.
We still believe the black spruce
are lords of everything.

Don't Hurry to Hootalinqua

Quips the sourdough on Lake Laberge.
The current fast, four, five miles an hour.

Be sure to pull off and look:
trappers' cabins, rusted cast irons,
moss-chinked logs carved with names.
Don't rush the Thirty Mile to get
to Dawson. So many have.

Gold-era ghosts rivering the aspens
ask us what are you chasing so hard
that you're willing to miss U.S. Bend?
Don't hurry to Hootalinqua

past the high honey slopes, bore holes
of bank swallows. Wolf willows
line the shore. So quiet you can hear
bumblebees drunk on river beauty.

Don't hurry to Hootalinqua or
you'll miss the best part.

Loss Carved in Coastal Waters

after "Raven in the Pink" by James Schoppert

for Kristina Miller, in memory of her brother, Alex

In the Museum of the North,
an imperceptible breeze from Schoppert's carving
upwells cold, nutrient-rich waters.
Curtains of light through skies and seas
blur the horizon between real and reflection.
Outstretched hands from earth and water are fed here.
Alex's hunger was deeper than an ocean could satisfy.

Trickster eyes gaze down,
searching for something more.
Is there just one raven?
Are other eyes illusions?
Wings make indigo strokes
in pastel morning skies.

Aligning with dim panels of light,
you swim alone through chop,
where you struggle to breathe
and swallow salt water
as surf breaks over your loss.
Your brother flew away without warning.
Raven in the pink.

Planktonic Pantoum

Calanus copepods molt their opal teeth
Lost like fecal pellets from euphotic waters.
Tooth fairy nickels flung in the sediment,
Pelagic grazers munch spiny diatoms.

Lost like fecal pellets from euphotic waters,
Glassy snowballs plunge to the ocean floor.
Pelagic grazers munch spiny diatoms
Deep beyond photosynthetic light.

Glassy snowballs plunge to the ocean floor
Made of frustules fragile as dreams.
Deep beyond photosynthetic light,
Calanus copepods elude hungry fish.

Exposure

A young man, 16 or 17 years old,
walks home alone after a party, passes out
in the snow. His body's found
the next day. It's nobody's fault.
He didn't have a death wish.
It was just
cold.

My mother's yellow '76 Corolla
has a rusted-out frame and a hole in the floor
where you can watch the road fly by
underneath. A piece of plywood covers the hole
but everyone wants to see the road. February,
one of the coldest days. A two-hour drive
from Haines Junction to Whitehorse. The plywood
can't keep out the cold, ice ferns flower
across the crack on the windshield. At 35 below
the tires become more square
than round, the vinyl seats brittle, the door bangs shut
like a hollow tin barrel. Full blast the heater
barely warms. We wear parkas and blankets,
my grandmother's scratchy handmade
mittens and toques she sends every year.
I'm 12. I've never been so cold.
My toes are pins and needles,
then numb, a dull ache,
a steady burn. I'm crying
by the time we reach Whitehorse,
stop to fill the car at the gas station. We drive
to Hougen's department store to buy the warmest boots
we can find.

No cellphones, food,
emergency supplies
or sleeping bags. We see only three
cars on the road. One is stopped,
a man and woman reclined in the front seats.
The next day we hear on the radio that a couple died
from carbon monoxide poisoning
in their car outside the city. It's
nobody's fault. They fell asleep
with the motor running.

Still life

"There will be time to murder and create." T.S. Eliot

a leatherbound Bible
and the works of Louis L'Amour
bless every room
in his family's home

more strikingly,
some quarter million dollars worth of taxidermy fills the house
& spills into specially-constructed, heated outbuildings
designed for display

every creeping thing that creepeth in his palette,
framed within the crosshairs of a Bushnell scope,
the powers of creation and destruction the same

snuffed
then
stuffed with obsessive reverence
the spirit breathed into these dried and salted hides
freed from the dull and constant search for food
the essential moment realized
the ecstasy

hundreds of glass eyes
sparkling ever more greatly
than in life

Unvanquished

We chewed until our jaws were sore,
then took the moose meat from our mouths—
now grey, torn and haggard,
leached of all nutrition, blood and flavour
but still far from something
you could safely swallow—
and placed it back on our plates in disbelief
that something dead
could fight so hard
to remain unconquered

Rotary Peace Park Station—The Child That Heals the Trolley

from *The Stations of the Trolley*

There is a child who believes he can heal the trolley
because every time the trolley stops
at a station, he believes it is broken, and so he comes
forward to lay his hands on the steering tower,
his hands covering the words JG Brill, and he closes
his eyes, and when the trolley starts again, he knows he has done good
work.

Oh, if only it were a simple task to heal the trolley,
I would bring him in every day, every day, to bless us,
bless us for this trip,
bless our generator that overheats,
bless our oil pans that catch on the railroad ties beneath,
bless our short-circuiting steering,
bless our door fan that gives in at high temperatures,
bless our windows that won't rise, and the wipers without their blades,
bless the Canadian flag that wraps around itself too tightly,
bless the American flag that is knocked off by the branches above,
bless the Yukon flag that blocks our view whenever the breeze
doesn't catch it and lift it high.

Bless our passengers for their stories of the road dangers they've
encountered,
Bless them when they don't see enough Yukon animals as Canada
promised they would,
Bless them when the people who need to run their country are not
running their country,
to their satisfaction, or at all,

Bless them when the Yukon brewery fails to give them free samples of
beer,
Bless them when Walmart is the only place they can think of to go,
Bless them their hankerings for McDonald's and A&W,
Bless them that they only know one restaurant in Whitehorse,
Bless them when their tour group arrives too late in town to take the
trolley,
Bless them when no one will open up early in the morning before they
must leave,
Bless them when the rain pours on their heads,
Bless them for when it is sunnier and hotter than they expected, or
colder than they heard.

Bless every single soul walking by,
biking, skating, every person who sees us pass,

We wave at them, desperate to share our blessings far, far beyond
the trolley, into the rest of the world,
and for a moment, as they wave back,
I think we have healed them
so they can move forward again to their next stop,
to their next breath,
and I close my eyes and believe
like a child that heals the trolley with a touch.

The Roundhouse—Say *Beautiful* When You Tell Them Where You're From

from The Stations of the Trolley

On the Waterfront Trolley, I repeat
the stories of Whitehorse history till
I cannot speak; the words get fainter,
harsher, till, at day's end, they are
part of the trolley engine's drone.

Later, after we've let the trolley
into the roundhouse to sleep it off,
a couple comes to visit. I'm the only one
left at work, just locking up.

He has hairy arms, a T-shirt with the sleeves
torn off. His wife wears neon yellow,
her hair jet black. Their faces are burnt
around the cheeks because they've been
riding motorcycles from Denver, Colorado
to the Yukon. They smile broadly, just
happy they made it before we closed.

They want to see the trolley. I think
they'll want to hear the history of Whitehorse.
I tell them, "I'm sorry. I have no voice left."

Immediately, he signs that he can't hear me.
They are both deaf. He points to his eyes and then
into the room behind me;

Can we see the trolley?

Sure, I tell them. They murmur little gasps
of pleasure when I invite them
into the roundhouse, and gesture for them
to board the trolley.

We communicate with a small pocket notebook and pen,
and he can hear just enough when I speak.

I write down when the trolley was made, where it came from,
and he writes to me of trolleys in New York City and San Francisco.
Is this the brake? How is it powered?

He repairs pinball machines, signs to me
what it is like to play pinball, and I recognize
the flippers and the handle you pull to launch
the ball into play. He loves the lights
and vibrations. He has 40 pinball machines, he says.
He's very happy now that he's left his postal job.

Our conversation, half an hour, with few words.
We do it with expression, big playful gestures,
more than others might use in polite
conversation where the rest of the world
counts on the turn of a word,
or wit, to make their points.

In the silence, I can hear the creak of the boards,
as I use big hand-expressions about how beautiful
the Yukon mountains are now, or to show how
the trolley moves down the track
if it could, fast and bumpy. The bell would ring,
the horn blast. Their smiles explode from sunburnt
faces. If they could ride, I know he would
think we were *inside* a pinball machine.

They keep signing the word for *beautiful*
to talk about the Yukon, and it's the only word
he can speak, like a whisper,
and I know then, that if I only said
that one word on the trolley
all day long, to everyone,
it would be enough.