

A painting of a laundry room. The walls are a mottled green and yellow. A sign in red, serif, all-caps letters reads "BEAUTIFUL PASSING LIVES" across the top. In the foreground, a wooden table holds a metal clothes wringer. To the left is a dark wooden cabinet. In the background, there are more laundry tubs and a person is partially visible. The floor is dark and textured.

BEAUTIFUL PASSING LIVES

POEMS

EDWARD HARKNESS

Beautiful Passing Lives

Poems by Edward Harkness, ©2010

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Rattlesnake Creek

Wind, bird, and tree,
Water, grass, and light:
In half of what I write
Roughly or smoothly
Year by impatient year,
The same six words recur.

—David Wagoner

AFTER THE FLOOD

This would be the spot where last August
a dozen chinooks shook their beaten bodies.
The shallows where they spawned
got taken out along with half the trees.
All that's left is a stretch of sun-hot gravel,
tumbled in channels and mounds.
Tame and silted green from the May runoff,
the creek glides closer to the highway now,
High water gouged the bank below the guardrail.
Stumps lie where they fell. A ponderosas pine
must have careened through the gorge
Its ragged roots implore an impassive sky.
Even the north fork bridge collapsed,
rebar and concrete blocks bouncing for miles,
then settled here like Roman ruins.
A raccoon left a sentence in the muck.
You can see why Leonardo sketched water
hour after hour, sluicing over stones—
the curls, the whorls. In a bed of cobbles,
a bouquet has forced its way to the light,
the trumpet of each flower blaring red.
Just when a landscape looks most wasted,
and your memory erased along with it, is the moment
you kneel and discover a flower called foxfire.

NORTH FORK

First one I've seen this far up the canyon.
Creek boulders have banged my shins raw.
I've fallen only twice. Lost my cap and bird book.
Now it's just me and this dead chinook,
eyeless on the rocks, side chewed by raccoons
to reveal the curved white needles of ribs.
This is it, what I was meant to come across—
the old metaphor for migratory cycles,
upstream journeys. Tiny yellow flowers
eke out a living in the basalt, so hardy,
so delicate, I want to remember them
as paint splattered on a dungeon wall.
On the return, there's the salmon again,
still dead, still examining my motives
for wading all this way.
I strip, step into a pool and take the plunge.
When I rocket up, I shout my explanation—
the first guttural words of a new tongue.

TRACKS IN SNOW

Bear, maybe, or, more likely, elk.
A day old at least, they wandered riverward,
blurred by last night's fall.
Smoke ribbons from the cabin chimney.
Cottonwood. Sweetness gave it away.
At the sound of snow crunch,
I turned and—wonder of wonders—
you stood in your blue parka,
tracking me to the gravel bar.
Those other tracks were mine, of course,
made the day before. I'd paused
by a wild rose, each hard hip
snow-specked, and remembered
their pink pungency in the heat of July.
Karma, call it. Call it one of those things.
It's not the first time I've covered
the same ground, looping back
to a starting point under spidery aspens,
back to words I can't let go of:
aspen, rose, river, snow, and,
wonder of wonders, *you*,
my blue guide, my traveling companion,
wrapped in the rasp of the river,
the snow crunch, by the rose.

SOUTH FORK

It takes half a day of wading to find
the deep eddies. Even in August heat
the current hurts. The creek does a better job
than me at accepting my aging face.

When I leap in, I know I'm a man.

It's the punch of a heart attack. Explosive.

I open my eyes to a storm of bubbles,
bits of wood and colored stones.

It has taken most of my life to get here.

I clamber onto the sand
and shake off the good pain.

The scent of pines is all I need
to love the world again.

UNFINISHED CABIN ABOVE THE CREEK

There's no sweeter view of water and stone.

The creek tumbles down from Elk Ridge to here,
a ledge where the cabin stands, vacant as air
passing through the missing door, windows open
to swallows or snow. A family of bats must live
in the half-built river-rock chimney.

The top logs are newer peeled pine, still tan,
knots like eyes of deer lost in the wood.

I'd say they've watched the ridge for twenty years.

The lower courses look older, darker,
split in places, though still sound, black gaps
where chunks of bone white mortar have fallen out.

At ground level, gray foundation logs list a bit,
out of true, in slow collapse back to dirt.

They must have been laid in the '40s—
someone's dream place the dreamer returned to
now and then for fun, for the creek smell,
the good ache of his arms after a day's work.

Maybe the dreamer didn't care what completion meant,
a summer here and there, the dreamer losing sight
of what the dream might give: ridgeline, star track,
wood smoke, hummingbird, heron, hawk.

Or—Who knows?—the dreamer tired and moved on,
married, divorced, or lost the need for solitude.

Or died. The dreamer got this far and stopped.

No regrets. Who can say the cabin isn't done?

Inside its useless walls, three seedling pines
climb toward light from the dreamer's rotted floor.

He'll never know his children. They're at home
in his dream, in a world that goes on without him.

OUT OF THE BLUE

Now and then it happens,
often in March, the sun
a dazzle in the bare aspens.

Blown from clouds
hidden behind Bethel Ridge,
snow will fall out of the blue
like sparks, a swarm of glitter,
floating first as feathers,
then cool specks on your cheek,
like tears from far away.

One moment,
you're listing all your failings.
The next, you're standing with your lover
on a gravel bar,
showered in a confetti of light.

Aunt Bea's Trailer

“Writing is a way of saying you and the world have a chance. All art is failure.”

—Richard Hugo

FINAL TRYOUT THIS SATURDAY NOON

That was the day he knew he'd never fit in,
Sunday, church just out across the park,
blossoms on the ornamental cherries
pink as a Buick convertible in the sunny lot.
He had his father's glove, his gray splintery bat,
handle wrapped with electrical tape,
and there he stood at third, alone on the diamond,
the only other soul a hunched woman in a shawl
tossing bread to geese in weedy left field.
The line of elms beyond the backstop filled
with wind and the wind said Kid, give it up.
You're one day behind in your life,
miles from home, Dad not due back till dusk.
Maybe never due back. Give it up, kid.
Your sneakers are dumb as dirt.
He felt like the water fountain. Broken.
No cap, no coat, four hours to shiver and play ball
in his head, winning the game on a triple,
the coach beaming, cheers from every neighbor.
After the long walk home he was glad no one
at the dinner table asked. If they'd asked,
he'd have said the nice coach gave him a lift,
he'd made the team, he'd be playing third.

THE LAKEVIEW WEEKLY NEIGHBOR

He'd ride in the January chill
before school, the canvas bag
slapping his knees on the up crank
to the green shed where the papers
waited in their bundles. He'd load
the bag front and back, glide past
the Lakeview Methodist Church,
its lone stained glass window
obscured by a billboard for Shell Oil.
He'd round a corner to Bud's Meats,
glimpse Bud through a side door,
in his bloody apron, cutting steaks.
The last few stars would close their eyes.
He'd enter dark tunnels of cedars,
coast down a drive toward the lake
as far as he dared, skid in the gravel,
dismount, fold a paper and huck it
high over a fence or laurel hedge
toward a porch light. He'd watch the paper
spin end over end, then pivot and pedal,
gravel crunching under his wheels.
That's when his heart banged loudest,
steeled for the Doberman or Labrador
he knew lay waiting in the trees.
Back at the pavement,
he'd pause for a ten-count,
thrilled by the streetlight on Densmore,
convinced more than ever
he wasn't cut out for this. He'd heard
of something called the afterlife.

As he coasted, wobbled and picked up speed,
he wondered if this was it.

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