Flying at Night

Although we are putting it off,  
the New Year is coming. Midnight  
in Times Square, the dropping  
of the electric ball, will find us,  
we hope, in Utah at ten o'clock.  
Meanwhile this hiatus—  
hours at once passing forward  
and back, and we hundred passengers,  
seeds in a tight pod.

Our pilot has flown far north  
into Canada around a storm.  
Even so, we're harrowed  
by a two-hundred-mile-an-hour headwind  
in seventy degrees below zero.  
The blackness out there  
thickens like cloth,  
far below interrupted  
by a brilliant gem—  
some city on the edge  
of one of the Great Lakes,  
the dark pool slicing away  
its patterns of light.

Then a barrage of stony air.  
The plane jolts through. Ice chinks  
in my plastic glass, and I wonder  
what friction between molecules of air  
is forming what imbalanced fields,  
and when the whole churning mass  
will spit out its electric charge.  
Air travel, someone said,  
is hours of boredom interrupted  
by moments of terror.  
This we pretend

not to know, chattering in the tight  
lozenge of our jet, hoping  
those blank square windows,  
like the calendar ahead,  
will fill with land and light.

We watch the movie, ask for complimentary  
champagne, float along in the current,  
ignorant as salmon  
the eagle has picked out.  
Is death chance, or the fact  
of the bird's eye? I tell you,  
there are forces building up.
Lessons of Erosion

To hike to the spires, you climb
Over two hundred million years,
Language and breath your sacrifice.
This is no temple. Everything growing
On red stone you cross, broken
And deep, twists against light.
Splayed and shredded juniper trunks
Show you to adapt, so you match
Your stride to the scars
That split rock, the path rain
Took down the stone face
Into the wash. There is no water,
Just its memory: a gouge
In the escarpment, dry bed below.
Ripples over sand become stone,
Stone ripples broken like shards.
More ruin waits for weather—
Cloudburst, blizzard, ice.
As you walk in this high, hot air,
Sun sears color into cliffs, and
Breath comes dry from your mouth.
Silken and lush in your body, a drum
Full and tight, water throbbing
Inside, you are learning
The long version of silence.
Few things are less personal
Than how the land needs you,
Saliva, blood, bile.

To a Recreational Parachutist

The Lord upholdeth all that fall.
— Psalms 145:14

1.

Humans imagined flight
by watching birds,
but we have seen
ourselves fall,
from trees, mountains,
 grace.

In one mortal winter
twenty feet of snow
will seal a crevasse
till spring erodes
the underside
of the snowpack;
a climber learns
the treachery the instant
he breaks through.
Thus, in a lifetime
many who don’t understand
shall fall.
Like the boy, eighteen,
who jumped where you jump,
with Cedar Valley Freefall.
Both his chutes opened,
the main tangling
the reserve,
so he spiralled too quickly
but not fatally
down, till
he released the main,
and it, in dropping
away, collapsed
the reserve,
leaving him
five seconds,
four hundred feet.

Had he lived,
his instructor
could have said,
"This is what
you did wrong."

I can only imagine
you up there
in that light,
flimsy craft
that is mostly noise,
captured in the whole
human yearning
towards what may kill us.

When they open
the door, you refuse
to be shattered
by wind, already
knowing the errors
you can’t make.
I see you climb
through the gap
into full mortal risk,
brace against the wing,
lower yourself to hang
from the wheel struts.

In that moment
you drop
through sting and thrust
to boundless, complete release.
Silence and time.
And what you have to do.
And the great bloom
of the earth, rising.
**Freak Accident Claims Rhino**

The female rhino and her mate were playing in the open pen at the zoo when the female fell and caught her nose under a rock ledge and suffocated.

She blundered to her death, like a woman running into her husband and his lover in a dusky restaurant downtown.

“David,” the woman says, “I thought you were going to Boulder.” She stumbles to their table and the truth, and the air escapes her so that she has to fall.

The rhino’s name was Minette. In her brute innocence she came out to lumber around in the sun. But her bulk and her tiny brain behind the one horn and pig eyes couldn’t grasp the possibilities—the crack, the ledge, if it is there, is hidden and is always a surprise. She bumped against her mate; she stumbled about. Ignorant, she made the stupid mistake and rock closed over her, wedging her down. Extremity claimed her: how knowledge comes to the body—heave and throe, heave and throe.

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**Mary Keeps All These Things**

I stir the innkeeper’s sympathy only when my water breaks and runs down my leg, soaking my blue robe, and I have to lean against his shabby door; he looks at me through splintered eyes.

I have come down from the donkey in the great bell of my body, the weight of the child and him kicking inside, so the next guardian of those gates that open only to money, much more money than Joseph can pay, will have to see me, my travail. My accident is not a cheat but the urgency of birth, and I am not ashamed. He considers, refusing my eyes. Beard stained with mutton grease, he finally says, “Stables. In the back,” and jerks his head to shunt us to one side.

The cave of the animals is dark and warm, smelling of straw, urine, dung. Our rushes give off only a smoky light. As we walk between the pens, our donkey follows under his pack, then another brays; disturbed, the sheep baa. Joseph worries for me as he cleans a stall, spreads fresh straw and a blanket where I can lie. I am big and awkward as a camel sinking down. What relief, to give myself
to pain, guessing the hours these knots
will come and go. Between them
I feel straw prickling my hair
and ears, scratching the back of my neck.
Then my body clenches, legs
and back and belly tight.

Each cramp I feel the pain can grow
no more, O Lord, no more. And yet
I have given my word and will
to bring this child. My body
opens and opens its passage between
my womb’s constraint and the chaotic
clash of life. I will, in my extremity,
remember I have a name. Mary is
my name. I will split open, part
the shadow that keeps this child
from light. He must come, is coming,
comes. At last, his brash infant cry.

I watch Joseph clean him, bring him
to my arms. I am seized
by his perfection—tiny hands, clear
unblinking eyes. This dove, this calf,
this young and wondrous lamb squeals
as I take him to my breast.

Tiny gums grip my nipple; he sucks
and sucks, butting me with his insistent
head. When the liquid comes
into his hungry mouth, we are joined
in ache and pleasure—circle and dance;
I give him comfort and he gives it back.

Our small animal noises belong here
in the shelter of the poor and dumb
who break their bodies to sustain
life. I have saved clean wool
from the underbellies of the lambs,
carded it, and spun the softest
cloth to keep him warm. Tonight
he will sleep above us, in a manger
of sweet hay, and we will lie down,
our faces low upon the ground, hands
joined, sheltered in the shadow
of this small and brilliant life.