

## MICHAEL SOWDER

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### My Grandfather From Kentucky

was like a stranger coming into our house,  
taking a bed at the end of his life.  
And through his last months I sat with him—  
making sandwiches between classes,  
buying lighter fluid and Lucky Strikes,  
changing his bed clothes, cleaning every day  
his bedside toilet.  
He talked about his old life—  
the tobacco farm, cat fishing on summer nights,  
his wife the best rifle shot in the county—  
while the months became weeks, then days.

One morning in the room in St. Francis’—  
where they moved him the day I found  
his toilet full of blood—  
he turned to me eyes as clear  
as ten o’clock light, and asked  
when I would take him across the street?  
There outside the window cars stood gleaming  
in the lot, where he said the grass was soft.

In the last days, there was little to be done.  
He could no longer talk. Yet his eyes watched me  
as I rubbed white lotion on his feet, and counted back  
five generations until my father’s family  
disappeared in the Kentucky hills.

I wasn’t there the last night.  
I was out in the field behind the house.  
The trees stood around the field like great dark birds  
speckled with stars, and at a certain moment, *I knew*,  
and kept walking—remembering trails with my father,  
the first owl I ever saw, first indigo bunting  
in its ecstasy of blue,  
the first fawn, spotted and awkward,  
all the exquisite strangers of the world  
my grandfather released with open hands.

## My Godfather's House

—for Jim Mersmann

Coming home to my godfather's house,  
the big yellow house on the hill  
where now he lives alone, I unlatch  
and swing open the gate, and the dogs  
come running—big dogs he raised for guarding,  
but too much like him for that,  
they won't stop jumping,  
taking your hand in their soft mouths.

The yard slopes up under hickories,  
hackberry, oaks, pecans. White doves  
he raised and trained to stay  
coo their five-note phrases. I come around front  
and he's there on the porch, standing square  
and smiling, blond hair and beard,  
this man born on Christmas day.  
We embrace like old friends and soon  
are talking about the real things, naturally,  
as though people talked that way all the time.

The house is full of silence:  
a church he made a home  
of secrets, little doorways, alcoves,  
odd-shaped rooms, attic dormers  
looking down on the distant city.

In an upstairs room that I call mine,  
I sit at a desk by the window, like a captain  
in his cabin, and gaze down on the garden  
we fenced together, posts we set,  
the orchard in newest leaves,  
the maple stumps set around a fire ring  
where we cook and drink late into the night  
and Koi hold steady under the fountain.  
At night in my bed I hear the water talking.

There over the hill leans the elm we trimmed  
to let light into the garden. I perched  
on a ladder as he pointed, and cut  
branches that fell around him softly

like feathers stolen from the nest of some great bird.  
These last fifteen years, I've seen him  
maybe once or twice a year.  
But what does that matter?  
In those days we read Rilke, Neruda, Whitman,  
and he showed me the names of things.

## Learning Names

All my life I heard him call her *Mother*.  
*Dad, can we camp out in the back yard?*  
*Ask mother. Or, Mother, can you*  
*pick up the shirts at the cleaners?*

Now retired, they've left the city,  
moved to a house overlooking a valley  
in North Carolina. She tends tiny junipers,  
rain trees, elms. He nails and glues maple and birch  
for bird houses, toys, and hand-carved signs.  
In town on Tuesday and Thursday  
they teach farmers, mill workers,  
to read and write.  
But they, too, are learning names:  
*evening grosbeak,*  
*honey locust, yellow trillium.*

In the quiet before dawn,  
I sit under a lamp by the window.  
A visitor now. I hear them stirring  
in the next room, talking in low voices.  
Outside the window, slate-colored juncos  
are chirping and flitting in rhododendron leaves,  
and I hear him softly say,  
*Kathleen*, the way he must  
have said it, thirty years ago.

**Former Attorney Offers Prayer of Thanksgiving  
For His New Job**

— for Ford Swetnam

I thank you, God, for this poem today, whether or not it'll be  
any good,  
and for a new home in a town called Preston with a desk under  
a window of sky and the cries of cranes,  
for a full moon that rises over the Bear Mountains at twilight  
and falls past mountains at dawn,  
for a river named Bear that tumbles out of a canyon, meanders  
by our house, with hot springs, kingfishers, osprey, and  
trout,  
for our neighbor, Ezekiel, who comes to the door with  
cucumbers and carrots for the forgiveness of sins and hopes  
for our redemption,  
for new words, like *jack-Mormon*—reminding that even in  
Zion apostates like dandelions grow,  
and *gravity water* which runs down hills, which the city doesn't  
charge for, which rises over fields in silver jets, swords  
crossed against the desert sun,  
for my commute across the bed of an ancient sea that one day,  
14,000 years ago, broke its dam and spilled north for  
hundreds of miles,  
for the oranges and reds of autumn spilling down watersheds  
of Oxford, Bonneville, and Scout,  
and the aspens that etch the fir-dark peaks in gold,  
for light dawning clear as the Mediterranean,  
while magpies rise from the nameless dead of the road where  
they dine in tuxedos—Republican cousins of the crows,  
and for my arrival in Pocatello, where treeless hills fold over  
each other with a Renaissance love of the naked body,  
a U.P. town of rails, cowboys and poets who, it has been said,  
actually—and I shit you not— like each other,  
and for a boss who says, *Write poems, not briefs.*

For this is a beginning, and it's good to be beginning,  
as Whitman and Merton and St. John of the Cross said,  
for we'll always be beginners any day we're alive.

And now the streams are tumbling with syllables,  
and the sea's rhythms are printed on the land,  
cranes trace calligraphs across the evening sky,  
and rocks break like words on the ground.

## **The Strangeness of Crows**

Winter begins like this:  
A cold, clear twilight,  
black branches crack-  
ing the pewter sky.  
Songbirds not flown  
south are all bedded down.  
And me walking home  
through empty streets.

Suddenly over the hills,  
over the trees and roofs,  
mounting the freezing air,  
legions of crows come flying—  
hundreds, hundreds  
in wild, bat-like flight  
like black stars falling  
filling the bowl of the sky,  
yet silently—  
not one crying out.

I sit down on a lawn to watch.

Seizing the tops of trees,  
like leaves snagged on river limbs,  
they sit in the gunmetal sky  
hooded and robed  
like Caesars over Rome.

And then as quickly they're gone.

I walk home dizzied  
by the strangeness of crows,  
that they are the way they are,  
and the world the way it is  
rather than otherwise,  
that there should be anything at all  
and not nothing.

## **November Suns**

Jennifer and I look down  
on Swan Lake, Highway 91.  
Next to us a young maple is curling  
its dark orange leaves.

The sky falls asleep under a tattered quilt  
of clouds. Blue holes let down lights  
that telescope the land, flash on a farmhouse window,  
the windshield of a truck,  
turning ponds to silver, Cherry Creek to gold.

A shaft climbs toward us  
arriving in a soft flood  
and broken by leaves  
prints granite  
in patterns of rose.

Behind the tangled black trees  
a dark orange circle slowly falls.

Only November suns  
go down like this.

Then, things darken.  
Clouds pull apart like batting.  
Venus shines like a bead of mercury  
spilled from the cup of the moon.

We break some sticks and start a fire.  
For three days we will not go home.

## **New Snow, Ann Arbor**

The Huron tumbles gray and blue  
through the Arboretum woods. At dawn,  
the snow glowed rose,  
held blue in the shadows.  
At eight it was blue and gold,  
and at ten it was white and blue.  
I looked to the south,  
and the white became silver,  
a field of lights, prisms,  
like infinitesimal stained glass.  
A cardinal emptied its quiver of songs  
and as the windows opened,  
I could hear Eckhart reading a page  
from his own book  
*how the eye with which I see God,  
and the eye with which God sees me  
are the same eye.*

I stood there, snowflakes swirling  
through sun, landing all over me,  
melting, vanishing into my coat  
like arrows loosed  
from a thousand invisible bows.