

Henry Carlile

Mercy

One afternoon a raccoon blundered into camp
wearing an overcoat of flies, its skull
and eyesockets sizzling with bluebottles.
It kept bumping into things, and each time
the flies rose in a cloud and settled
they pulsed with a blue electric light.

We'd heard of a mother bear nearby
and imagined her maternally murderous
in defense of cubs, the coon a curious
intruder raked beneath her paws.
What we needed was a gun I didn't have,
a bullet through the sightless skull,
and the trigger's merciful detachment.

Do something, you cried, as the coon
bumped against a post and the flies hissed.
Almost as if you had dared me,
I chose the stoutest stick I could and
struck three times through the fly squall
before its skull crunched.

On its side it ran, mouth and ears
oozing, legs pumping it nowhere, already dead.
I buried it, patting down the earth
where flies circled in empty, angry arcs.
A common casualty this one, no worse
than others left on highways
or caught in sprung steel.

But I could feel its bones crush

through my hands and see you writing
 in your book, and thought of Leonardo
 sketching corpses at the executions.
 It seemed a metaphor for what
 our marriage might become.

That day, the death you wrote of
 was faceted with panes
 like a rose window or compound eye.
 I had a singleness that viewed one side
 or else was blind to what you
 saw and closed my eyes to every
 blow I struck, every hurt.

What did you feel then, writing,
 but the growing clothes, the first words
 red with mutability and menace,
 love, blood,
 and the hands letting go.
 Years my hands shook at the thought of it.

And only this morning, beginning this,
 did it occur to me how sight
 compounded could also divide us.
 That all our lives it had measured us,
 probing our common weaknesses
 toward some final meretricious mistake.

One night, while a friend lay dying,
 a raccoon came and stood on its hind legs
 and scraped its paws against the bedroom door.
 "Get it out of here!" he screamed until
 his mother-in-law, armed with a broom,
 drove it into the woods.

Days later my friend died,
 his lungs and liver eaten by cancer.
 It must have seemed, masked and furtive,
 like Hemingway's hyena, its breath

a darkness reeking closure.

What else make of this but some
 commonplace coincidence of loss:
 my friend is buried, my wife gone.
 In his last letter he announced
 his marriage, and his happiness,
 after a quick trip to Reno,
 one of those twenty-four-hour chapels,
the minister oily, not the kind
you'd buy anything from but the kind
who'd show up on your doorstep
with a valise and a hopeful smile.

I call it mercy, the way
 my friends went gambling after,
 counting their winnings from losses,
 the years behind them, the weeks ahead.
 The years they didn't have together,
 a preparation; the years they won't,
 the chips, the bits and bites of memory.
 Words whose mercy they believed
 in, a gathering, like my friend's
 last to me: *I'll close for now.*
In haste, but with love, always, Ray.