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AN ODE FOR LEAVING THE PLACE YOU CALL HOME

Joe Wilkins

I scramble down the weedy bank,
crawl across the rocks, sit on my heels
beneath the bridge.

Everything is mud and rust,
Charles and Katie are forever.

The river, of course, is quick, deep,
a great dark thing refusing to be ignored—
the flood line runs up the iron height of a man.



Now the sky blazes
above mile after mile of cornfield,
slough, gravel road, and those always
white two-story farmhouses—
and the grown son slings hay to the goats,
and the old father curses the tractor.

Look, here is the world!

*The world of light that lives between darkness
and darkness! Here is the world!* the herons cry,
those river lovers, those iridescent brothers
of sun and moon, white winged
pilgrims who make their home
wherever silver fish rise for nymphs—

and now the son looks up,
and the father,
and here they are,
two men grown like corn from the dark
earth of the Middle West, staring at the bird-shot sky.

This is the poem I'd show you,
if you were alive.

But you've been gone
these twenty years. And I'm living

in this land without mountains,
without pines, this place

of slow waters and hogs,
the late summer leaves of corn—

I guess you wouldn't like it.
At least that's what I tell myself,

hunkered up beneath the bridge
here, my chin on my knees.

I don't really know.
I've long forgotten every moment

we ever shared. There's nothing
to be done for it, really—

my breath already so much dust.



Now the sun is gone.
Now the aluminum plant clangs
with shift change—

across the gravel road, a hulking man
in blue jeans and suspenders and that's it
stands in his doorway, sucks on a cigarette.

He stares into the lights of the flatbed trucks
and beat-up Buicks streaming out the lot towards town,
his white belly curving like the earth curves, dark seas
of hair at his nipples. He shivers. Says *Hurry now,*
Bitsy. Hurry! to the small dog

shitting in the rhododendrons.
And turning from it all, a boy runs across
the train tracks, sidesteps through the pokeweed

and silver cans littering the ditch bank.
This is my world, he thinks, *pokeweed,*
gravel road, that man

without a shirt saying Bitsy.

He realizes he is not happy about this,
he wonders if he should do something. But what?
What can he do about the way smoke leaks
from that man's lips?

What can he do about weeds cracking
like bones beneath his steps? He doesn't know,
he doesn't know—

he jams his fists in his pockets,
hunches his shoulders against the wind. Above him,
a wash of herons darkens the moon's pocked face.



What can I say?

I am sure only of highways and dust,
afternoon cigarettes,

thunderstorms, the dark night shot with stars,
the sadness of white houses in the dark.

Tell me, what should I do?

Here I am in the Middle West,
a thousand miles from my father's grave—

I still dream Montana. I still believe
for each of us there is a country

we call home—

where the river always rises
and the moon burns its white hole in the sky

and like prayers the herons swing
between wind and water,

where the son sometimes turns away

from the father, where we die
but die home.