

The White Field

Woke up feeling anxious and bone-lonely.
Unable to give my attention to anything
beyond coffee and cigarettes. Of course,
the best antidote for this is work.
“What is your duty? What each day requires,”
said Goethe, or someone like him.
But I didn't have any sense of duty.
I didn't feel like doing anything.
I felt as if I'd lost my will, and my memory.
And I had. If someone had come along
at that minute, as I was slurping coffee, and said,
“Where were you when I needed you?
How have you spent your life? What'd you do
even two days ago?” What could I have said?
I'd only have gawped. Then I tried.
Remembered back a couple of days.
Driving to the end of that road with Morris.
Taking our fishing gear from the jeep.
Strapping on snowshoes, and walking across the white field
toward the river. Every so often
turning around to look at the strange tracks
we'd left. Feeling glad enough to be alive
as we kicked up rabbits, and ducks passed over.

Then to come upon Indians standing in the river
in chest-high waders! Dragging a net for steelhead
through the pool we planned to fish.
The hole just above the river's mouth.
Them working in relentless silence. Cigarettes
hanging from their lips. Not once
looking up or otherwise acknowledging
our existence.

“Christ almighty,” Morris said.
“This is for the birds.” And we snowshoed back
across the field, cursing our luck, cursing Indians.
The day in all other respects unremarkable.
Except when I was driving the jeep
and Morris showed me the three-inch scar
across the back of his hand from the hot stove
he'd fallen against in elk camp.

But this happened the day before yesterday.
It's yesterday that got away, that slipped through
the net and back to sea.

Yet hearing those distant voices down the road just now,
I seem to recall everything. And I understand
that yesterday had its own relentless logic.
Just like today, and all the other days in my life.

The Far Field, Section 2

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At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower,
Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert,
Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the field-mouse,
Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,
Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,—
One learned of the eternal;
And in the shrunken face of a dead rat, eaten by rain and ground-
beetles
(I found it lying among the rubble of an old coal bin)
And the tom-cat, caught near the pheasant-run,
Its entrails strewn over the half-grown flowers,
Blasted to death by the night watchman.

I suffered for birds, for young rabbits caught in the mower,
My grief was not excessive.
For to come upon warblers in early May
Was to forget time and death:
How they filled the oriole's elm, a twittering restless cloud, all one
morning,
And I watched and watched till my eyes blurred from the bird
shapes,—
Cape May, Blackburnian, Cerulean,—

Moving, elusive as fish, fearless,
Hanging, bunched like young fruit, bending the end branches,
Still for a moment,
Then pitching away in half-flight,
Lighter than finches,
While the wrens bickered and sang in the half-green hedgerows,
And the flicker drummed from his dead tree in the chicken-yard.

—Or to lie naked in sand,
In the silted shallows of a slow river,
Fingering a shell,
Thinking:
Once I was something like this, mindless,
Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar;
Or to sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire;
Or, with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,
Believing:
I'll return again,
As a snake or a raucous bird,
Or, with luck, as a lion.

I learned not to fear infinity,
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
The wheel turning away from itself,
The sprawl of the wave,
The on-coming water.