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Bare

Trish Lindsey Jagers

Western Kentucky University, trish.jagers@wku.edu

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Bare

I.

Daddy knew naked
trees intimately
by their skin
against his fingers; he knew secrets
of bark that his father once whispered.
I want bared intimacy with winter.

II.

A ring around a winter moon
means snow in a day or so.
Ever heard that? Count the stars
caught inside the ring
for the number of days
the snow will last.
Maybe it won't even snow;
perhaps it's just
a celestial bowl
of moon soup
peppered with stars.

If you put a hair from a horse's tail in water,
it'll make a snake.
Ever heard that one?
Neither did the horse
I tried it on, and she wouldn't listen
to reason when I tried
to tell her that old sayings
hold fresh truths.

Old truths belong in your deepest pocket,
and just because someone
accidentally told you the truth
you subscribe to
does not make you squint
at bright or turn your back
to the sun or lift your feet
while swinging.

III.

Rivers can't run backwards,
unless, of course, a major earthquake
rings the church bells in Boston
like one did in 1811 when

life turned on a simple axle—
flat, edgeless; nothing fell,
so no one got crushed;
now we rotate, rise like comets
until our air gets too thin,
then we pretend as though we lived
on CO2 all along, act stunned
if we fall, as though we didn't think
we could, as though no one ever has.

IV.

No, old truths won't sue
or harass you to tell your story
until you run from them, twist and stomp
through waist-high grasses where woods
used to be, hide face-down
beside your flattened path;
so easy to just lie—
or be placed—
remain where the road crawls
to the left and the view kneels on the right,
with mountains behind
clouds burst with sun;
just sunstreams, no voice
like in the movies
but you have stories;
words arc inside the uncracked you,
sparks within geodes.
Touch your pocket for proof.

Did you know that geodes grow
from the outside in?
Hollow rooms of crystalline walls
do not insist that all space be filled.
We grow like geodes,
if we're lucky. And if we're not,
we grow filled with dried mud and grey
clay, without round
stones in our pockets
or green leaves in our hands.

V.

We don't know trees
without their clothes on,
in the winter, when touch
turns our fingers blue,

the color of numb.
We search for identities
that the wind shed
in a serrated-edged heap at our feet, pick
through jagged crimsons, saffrons, ochers, coppers, maroons,
chestnuts, hennas, ambers, and umbers,
look for perfect; press their swells
and veins between pages
of a hand-me-down book;
both crumble with age,
turn the color of cardboard;
blame the glue, the paper, the leaf;
start over. New year, new clothes,
new resolutions to do it right
this time. We mean well.

VI.
Never thank anyone
for flowers;
the flowers won't live
if you do. Ever heard that one?
Flowers belong to no one,
I'm told. Every flower
I've transplanted
from tight plastic sleeves
seemed grateful for air
but wilted for water.
True, flowers don't belong to me;
they belong to water.

VII.
Sweet gum makes the best whistles.
I don't know sweet gum in winter,
and I forgot how to make whistles.
I want to know sycamore
by more than height,
sumac by more than red-rung ladder leaves,
scarlet maple by more than blood veining;
sassafras and teaberry ache
to burst the red buds
swelled on the back of a pink tongue,
spray a dry mouth;
cedar's spice preserves
warped chests
filled with paper dust,
makes fenceposts—

crooked, like tired farm hands—
outlast the shade of birches.
Trees bleed when cut;
cedar blood never clots.

VIII.

I once found a pod-like cocoon;
black and ridged, like it belonged
to the belly of a large cockroach;
I put it in a jar.
Weeks later, I checked it;
a bittersweet-crimson moth,
the irises of a god's eyes in its wings,
lay dead at the bottom of the air-tight jar.

IX.

Don't worry; you're alone now.
They never read past the moth;
moths eat spaces
in the winter clothes they make,
leave us bare.

X.

Last spring, the two-hundred acre farm up the road
auctioned as "parcels" of one acre each;
now, crisp, young houses sprout; bare-naked
saplings—greenhouse grown—
supplant fully-clothed trees.
I walked through winters'
wind-strewn garments there,
hunted mistletoe among branches of one-hundred-
years-old oak and elm.
Mistletoe is a parasitic plant
that wants to evict the host that entertains it;
life is the rent a tree pays.

XI.

Ever heard that a whirlwind in summer
means dry weather? Leaves dance
to wind instruments,
broken sound through trees,
and they leap, spin, and fall
like drunken ballerinas.
Not many leaves blow
into my yard these days;
and the ones that do

splatter the yard with accidental color
like smocks of four-year-olds
with jars of fingerpaint.
My leaves blow into a neighbor's yard
where I get blamed for the mess.
From up the street, a white
whirlwind spins foam cups,
gum wrappers, and straw papers
then dies at the foot of my silver poplar.
Squirrels walk electric tightropes.

XII.

You ever hear that
a sundog is a sign of foul weather?
a rainbow's promise
of lightning, rain,
hail, and strong winds?
Red sky in the morning
and a sundog in the evening
of the same day means
"nature is seething."
I saw two last week.

XIII.

You know a good man
by how many animals he loves.
A man who loves cats
will adore his wife.
Have you heard that one?
Nature knows our intentions
are good, believes in our faithfulness;
that's why she hides
cyanide in peach seeds.

XIV.

Hairs from horses' tails
do not make snakes;
you can prove that.
But if you can prove
that you know heat
from the inside out—
the way blisters hold
liquid fire from the sun—
as payment, I'll give you
three peaches a week.