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PIG / IRON

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Up a difficult stairway, it's the new year, or nearly. I knock on the door of a strange apartment and ask the anxious man who answers if I live there. We're like Biblical figures meeting by providence at a well. The effort to think clouds his face: the orgasm of a pig lasts 30 minutes; how long does death last? Down in the street, terrible dreams pass each other with a nod. I wouldn't trust someone like me either.

2

At the reunion someone said someone was dead. I look in the mirror. A stranger's face, pale and impassive, looks back. I should turn up the Bach sonata. I should set fire to the prairie. Every night I should lie down and travel out along the black branches of the interstate and return to the same address – a room full of light, bread and knife on the table, and a weepy bride shrouded in the glare of a sunny window.

3

I woke up speaking another language. At the store I couldn't make myself understood. The aged stockboy backed away. The girl working the register shrugged. I started home, but cops were beating a man on the corner. It might as well have been the fall of France, or the day Sacco and Vanzetti were executed. The sky was the dismal gray of neglect. A street musician played the same song on his horn over and over. I also kept weeping. The border was near, sometimes in the guise of helpless firemen, sometimes in the guise of helpless fire.

4

The moon enters in a dark overcoat. It's possible to see the suicide in people's faces, the slope of their shoulders, the way their clothing is worn, their gait. There are days – many, in fact – fingers drum impatiently on the roof. The stairs that lead up also lead down to an iron bed, rumped sheets, a photograph of insomnia. And always the same ending. I'm hunched over, tightening a screw with the edge of a dime. It does a bad job.

5

The tiny bird riding on my shoulder only uses words I haven't ever looked up. Better to live life, I answer, than to write about it. I walk out of the room followed by the man Chekhov said we should hire to hit us with a hammer when we're happy – and who has, of course, a face like trampled snow. If I turn this way, the sky appears barely mended. If I turn that way, the last few Jews in Krakow are hanging from lampposts. Everyone should listen to everyone the way a doctor wearing a stethoscope listens to a heart.