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Vestiges of the Drum Teacher

*What we require is silence; but what silence
requires is that we go on talking.*

--John Cage

You made me listen
to silence

between notes
and to space

around beats. To prayers
inside of rhythms
that smoldered
in our hands before
we gave them names
and burned them
into bonfires. Silver fog

scatters the morning sky.
A quiet blackbird looks

then turns away.
Last night I dreamed
of cracking eggs
into a black frying pan
and of someone offering

to sew me up.
So many pieces. So many
edges. So much space

between the stitches.
When I call I still hear
your recorded voice.
Sounds you left behind
to allow for silence. All accent
you said

means no accent.
All absence is no absence
at all. Just the beats you left
behind leaning against
the sills.

Bruises of the Bully

You have become the vulnerable one.
The weak branch in a strong
wind. In a way you've had enough
of it. You beat me out of habit now
with unwilling fists and eyes begging
me to stop you. I see you

in a decade with a child
on your lap. The dexterity
in your hands freed
from the anger of your fists
lacing his shoes and zipping
his jacket. Such ordinariness.

The bruises now are the ones
you see in the mirror.

Dissimilation

(Manzanar, 1942)

You try to forget
the way they brought you here
shrouded
in silks of euphemism. The way

you were unhomed by fear
and taken while you slept

just inside the promise.
Maybe you don't see the barbed wire
sharpen into focus

and the skeletons of apple trees
that black and white
the distance. Don't feel

your eyes sting with smoke
from bombs that settled
on the wind of somewhere far away.

The almond sand clumps
in trails of tears.
Children grow up. Men transform

the desert into gardens
and waterfalls and women wash
the ashes from their shirts.
Tarpaper barracks become
the ghosts of home.

And maybe you wonder
when the inside
became the outside

and when
the last traces of astonishment
faded from your eyes. When
you stopped looking forward

to the horizon and began to speak
in whispers.

Missteps

(West Elk Mountain, Colorado, 1967)

That one day I wanted
you to want to man
the rifle's wooden stock
stable the aim
and clean-kill the elk.
To want

my slap of proudness
on your back. But the gun
was a doll you cradled
as you backed away
further and further

from the elk. A twelve-year-old
stepping on sticks that snapped
the forest to attention. The elk

faded in the distance

and the moment spilled
like water
from our last canteen.

At dusk
our hobbled gelding stumbled
on a ridge
of rocks and bellowed
his death down the canyon wall.

Campfire embers spat
like bad omens against a gathering silence.
That fog of silence that merged
into us and around us that night
and never really left.

And I saw

the thinness of your shadow
trembling in the tent

and hated
myself for hoping
you would believe
that sparing
the elk had somehow killed
the horse.

Bobby

(Pueblo, Colorado, 1978)

That year the autumn leaves
seemed to fall on us as shards
You fled them
arms above your head
but they demised you
on the very edge

of healing Somewhere a song
stranded in an old guitar
was calling you out instead
of pushing you back

It was never about the lack
of words
Or about the bridge or the fall
or the concrete slamming
into you
It was never the essence

of remembering the quiet fields
or the longing for a storm
that always hovered

It was simply to absorb the softness
of abandon and continue
on your way