

Jefferson Hansen

sky sleep

because they call it sky sleep
the eyes are wide all night
they give no quarter
talk no talk
and sing no song

because they call it sky sleep
the skin puckers and goes south
cat tales thump on the sofa
and marigolds drop their petals in June

they call it sky sleep
when the pelicans dive down
to your bed and talk
no talk and sing no song

to walk the icy streets of sky sleep
to remember pelicans diving down to ocean
while on the icy sidewalks
of the northern city

this is the memories of sky sleep
and in this sleep rivers of air
remind us of speckled dawns
and reversed anniversaries

this is sky sleep
and in this sleep currents of water
pull us where we never weren't
and ask of us what
we never were

because this is sky sleep
no time amasses like the present
and the skin grows soft against the transit
of doom

because this is sky sleep
streaks of sudden orange appear in the ether
and blue jays screech themselves into
a personal record book
having to do with retribution and climate

because this is sky sleep
the dawn never comes in an ordinary way
but you wake to dreams
of wearing vests with pockets full of small dolls
and people from your past
giving soft orders about
keeping up your resume

because they call it sky sleep
the end never comes
only waves and laps of sleep unto sleep
this is the sky sleep of dolphins
and lemurs
this is the sleep of thieves
and malcontents

this is the sky sleep of you wishing
for another self to try
at the receding dawn

Crows

three crows flew
through the glass
of my window as if
it weren't there

they stood on my bed
and told me it was
as if I were dead,
but I'd live a little anyway

the crows were
not my imagination
they were not not
my imagination, too

the crows were
not just figments
they were not not
just figments, too

the crows were
just three knots

The Rooted Man

The rooted man is aging real slow.
The elders remember him as a young man
when they were mere kids.
Now they use canes and their teeth
are gone, yet the rooted man is still
going strong. He ages like the tree
he, in part, is. He has no legs or feet.
Instead, he is rooted in the ground
just like a tree, though his torso and head,
exposed above the ground, are human.
And is he hairy! Thin red down covers
his shoulders and back and chest
and his beard and locks touch the ground.
The elders say it is to keep him warm
during the cold nights spent alone
in the forest with no one to talk to.
During the day the elders make sure
their fellow hominids bring him his
sustenance and stay to make small talk
while he eats. The hominids have kept
him alive for as long as anyone remembers.
The hominids' myths go back far,
but they all include the rooted man,
though the oldest refer to him as a boy.
Taking care of the rooted man
gives the hominids a reason to live.
And the rooted man gives to them
his wisdom, as he sways his stuck
hairy torso and gesticulates wildly
while talking about the way water
moves up the roots of grass
to sprout green in the sun.
"Grass is water turned green, but
water is not grass. Water is water.
I feel it moving up my roots
and into my blood system. Even
you hominids are rooted to water

in your way. Your heart pumps it
blue and red through your bodies.”
The hominids don’t know what
they would do without him.
That’s one of the reasons they feed him.
It is as natural to them as breathing
and has the momentum of history
and myth. The hominids live down
the path from where the man is rooted
in the woods. Their fields ring their village
all filled with vegetables to keep
them healthy so they can go on
feeding the rooted man and keeping
him company. This is all so cozy.
What the rooted man doesn’t tell
the hominids is that a group of youths
from a different hominid species
tease and torture
him at night. They throw rotten fruit
at him and say that he is IT in the game—
“come and get me.” The rooted man
never knows what nights they will come.
Sometimes it’s three nights in a row.
Sometimes they don’t come for weeks.
Picking on the rooted man at night
seems to be a rite of passage
for the youth of that species.
The rooted man knows this. And
he knows that if he tells his hominids
of the ill treatment, war would result.
So he keeps his counsel. Cleans up
what he can after the night’s teasing.
And regales the hominids with
stories of water and grass, leaving
them ignorant of what comes out
at night.

Living With the Sea Peoples

We can see only their shadows,
the sea peoples, who rise up from
the water some sunny afternoons
to raid our pantries and pick
vegetables from our gardens.
It's hard to fight them off
when you have to guess where
their bodies are on the basis
of where their shadow is and where
a bottle of spice they just grabbed
bobs up and down in the air
in an invisible hand. And
they spray salt water at you from
their invisible bodies when you
try to shoo them away with
a broom. Rarely, we make contact
with an invisible body; we can
tell how quickly the shadows move
that they are much faster than we.
And they come from the sea.
We don't know how they breathe when there.
We know nothing about them
except that they like our food
and take it underwater with them.
This has been going on for generations.
The sea peoples are our special pest.

A professor decided we should have
had enough of the sea peoples by now.
He took to filming their shadows as
they emerged from the sea and had
cameras set up around town to catch
them sidling through the cracks in door jams
or windows. He studied them carefully.
He came to realize, from watching the films,
how the invisible bodies moved above
the shadows and how to anticipate future

movement by observing what the shadows do.
He was hoping to receive a prestigious award.
He got a grant and hired a P.R. firm to lobby
politicians about the importance of driving
the sea peoples from town forever. They
made up stories about the sea peoples
spreading disease and pestilence. They
succeeded. And then they brought on board
the military. Sharp shooters were trained
by the professor how to “see” the sea peoples
based on what their shadows do. The professor
wanted to shoot a few, and then figured they would
flee forever, maybe choosing to bug another
town down the coast. The sharpshooters were trained.

The professor arranged the sharpshooters
one sunny afternoon and waited for the shadows
to appear from the sea. They did appear.
The sharpshooters shot a volley, but no shadows
seemed hurt. They just flew down the beach
faster than usual toward the town and its food.
A few sharpshooters followed and shot again.
Again, they missed the shadows. But a volley
of bullets went into town, and through the
windows of an office building, and into the bodies
of three workers and one child, who was
with her dad on a take-your-kid-to-work day.
Two died, including the child, and two were wounded.

The professor received no award.
The sharp shooters were demoted.
And that is why we have learned to live
with the sea peoples taking our food.

The Headless Man

walking down a residential street of modest homes built in about the 50s a naked headless man appears in front of me walking quickly he does not hold his head he apparently sees with his skin because he walks quickly knowing where he is to go he negotiates a 90 degree turn at an intersection and walks naked down the sidewalk an autumn leaf flutters down onto his shoulder next to his raw gullet and he reaches up to flick it away

what is it to see
with the flesh
of the arms
chest and legs

without a head
we have no sense
of smell
according to
the experts

without a head
those same experts say
we cannot live
at all

the headless man continues down the sidewalk he is hairless and fit and looks to be in his 30s by the tone of his pink skin a couple walk toward him but show no signs of recognition he steps off the sidewalk onto some grass and walks around them they come to me and say "hi" only some can see the headless man and I am one of the lucky ones

sometimes I go
whole days without
talking to anyone
and I begin to wonder
if I actually exist
at all

sometimes my memories
seem of another person
entirely
hell sometimes my present

seems of another person
entirely

to be headless
is to locate
your body with the soles
of your feet

the sidewalk ends and the headless man continues down the middle of the street there is now nobody else around the older modest homes seem strangely empty and I feel a little lonely suddenly the headless man stops and turns toward me I stop too he points at me directly then points at a driveway across the street and behind me I look there and see only a small tricycle sitting on the driveway the headless man turns and walks again

pointing can mean
most anything
when the context
and criteria
are not clear

a headless man
just might be
a little confused
after all

how does
a headless man
communicate

I continue following the headless man down the deserted street we walk right down the middle of it when suddenly flames erupt from his raw gullet shoot straight up into the air and he continues walking a walking volcano I follow scared and confused his body now aflame he burns up right in the middle of the street I run to where he left us and there is a singe mark on the asphalt

burning up
is a strange option
given the alternatives

why is the internal
human temperature
usually warmer

than the outside air
what are we
burning inside us

a headless man burning
is a burning
headless
man

the earth starts rumbling on that deserted street and I lose my balance and fall onto the singed asphalt that now shakes as all around me shakes the walls of a house across the street shake and buckle the roof falls down upon them in a heap I hear no screaming or shouts nobody seems around a two-story wall of a gym building tumbles into the street bricks everywhere and still the ground rumbles

I live
on no conventional
fault line

what's supposed
to happen
rarely does
simply

the age tumbles
through to no completion
not even an encore
it just stretches
on and on

a chasm cracks open in the street and the rumbling ceases I walk to the hole and look down into its fathomless darkness what worlds could be there I jump into the darkness and fall and fall I flap my arms to see if I have turned into a bird but I have not I hear the earth rumble as I fall suddenly I emerge into a blue sky and below me I see the fairways and greens of a golf course my descent slows I land softly in a fairway I am naked golfers are around in their 60s and 70s with their carts and clubs none seem to see this naked man having fallen from the sky

I have never
felt comfortable
naked
but here I am

a strange loneliness
to know you are there
but nobody
can interact
with you

I am living
gibberish

I watch a group of golfers hit their approach shots to the green and then walk across that fairway onto the rough and across another fairway I ignore the golfers there and end up on a tee where some men and women wait on a bench to tee off an old man asks me what I think I am doing I tell him nothing a woman perhaps his wife asks him what he's talking about he says that naked man over there she says there is no naked man there are you all right are you seeing things I get out of there before things got really weird

it occurred to me
that I may have
no head
a parallel with the man
in the world above

I reach up
and touch
the skin of my scalp
I know I am not
decapitated
for now

what is a head
good for
after all

walking across a fairway and into a woods at the edge of the course I step over a fallen trunk and work through some long grass the soles of my feet not hurt by the rough twigs and leaves on the ground I come upon and trail and turn down it I see a black bear in the middle of the trail down a ways it stands on its hind legs and seems to consider me then charges straight down the trail I run off into the woods and the bear continues down the trail past where I was standing did it even see me was it charging something behind me

to not be seen

has its distinct
advantages
at strange times

what does a bear
actually know
next to the obvious

I've lost my head
several times
throughout my life
in a figurative sense
of course

towards the sound of falling water I walk and come upon a small waterfall at trail's edge I am thirsty so I lie on my stomach next to the creek and drink but the water going down singes me my stomach feels like its burning I leap to my feet and see flames come out of my stomach and chest soon my whole body is burning I am living fire I walk back onto the trail but dried dead autumn leaves on the tree above my head start on fire I'm afraid of creating a conflagration I sit down by the edge of the creek and burn

we are all
burning up
just some
more quickly
than others

I look at my arm
and see no skin
only flame
yet I retain
my bodily frame

some angle
on reality
has been revealed
to me but
I don't yet know
which one

a white horse appears on the trail and drinks from the creek it too goes up in flame yet retains its shape it comes up to me all aflame and nuzzles me I can only think of leaping onto its back though I don't know how to ride it allows me to get up there and it gallops down the trail I hold on to its burning neck and can see that with each step the autumn leaves beneath the hoof start on fire and above us the leaves on the trees start on fire as we go past

perhaps this "I" character
stands in for all people
in the developed world
living off the fruits of
controlled fire
who keep their food cool
through the distant fires
of electrical plants

they travel through their
lands using
internal combustion engines

maybe
I don't know
"I"

I am tumbling on the dry ground the horse suddenly gone and the woods not burning I am clothed and a little bruised but not badly I shake my head get my bearings then stagger to my feet I am on a trail in a woods I don't recognize I pick a direction to go and soon find myself in a parking lot I recognize from a state park where I hike and my car is there I reach into my pocket to find my keys get in my car and start driving home

on the radio
on the way
the news says
the largest wildfires
in Virginia state history
are threatening
suburban Washington, DC
and may make it
to the streets
of the capital