

A Star in a Stoneboat

For Lincoln MacVeagh

Never tell me that not one star of all
That slip from heaven at night and softly fall
Has been picked up with stones to build a wall.

Some laborer found one faded and stone-cold,
And saving that its weight suggested gold
And tugged it from his first too certain hold,

He noticed nothing in it to remark.
He was not used to handling stars thrown dark
And lifeless from an interrupted arc.

He did not recognize in that smooth coal
The one thing palpable besides the soul
To penetrate the air in which we roll.

He did not see how like a flying thing
It brooded ant eggs, and had one large wing,
One not so large for flying in a ring,

And a long Bird of Paradise's tail
(Though these when not in use to fly and trail
It drew back in its body like a snail);

Nor know that he might move it from the spot—
The harm was done: from having been star-shot
The very nature of the soil was hot

And burning to yield flowers instead of grain,
Flowers fanned and not put out by all the rain
Poured on them by his prayers prayed in vain.

He moved it roughly with an iron bar,
He loaded an old stoneboat with the star
And not, as you might think, a flying car,

Such as even poets would admit perforce
More practical than Pegasus the horse
If it could put a star back in its course.

He dragged it through the plowed ground at a pace
But faintly reminiscent of the race
Of jostling rock in interstellar space.

It went for building stone, and I, as though
Commanded in a dream, forever go
To right the wrong that this should have been so.

Yet ask where else it could have gone as well,
I do not know—I cannot stop to tell:
He might have left it lying where it fell.

From following walls I never lift my eye,
Except at night to places in the sky
Where showers of charted meteors let fly.

Some may know what they seek in school and church,
And why they seek it there; for what I search
I must go measuring stone walls, perch on perch;

Sure that though not a star of death and birth,
So not to be compared, perhaps, in worth
To such resorts of life as Mars and Earth—

Though not, I say, a star of death and sin,
It yet has poles, and only needs a spin
To show its worldly nature and begin

To chafe and shuffle in my calloused palm
And run off in strange tangents with my arm,
As fish do with the line in first alarm.

Such as it is, it promises the prize
Of the one world complete in any size
That I am like to compass, fool or wise.

—Robert Frost

A Stone Knife

December 26, 1969

Dear Kenward,

What a pearl
of a letter knife. It's just
the thing I needed, something
to rest my eyes on, and always
wanted, which is to say
it's that of which I
felt the lack but
didn't know of, of no
real use and yet
essential as a button
box, or maps, green
morning skies, islands and
canals in oatmeal, the steam
off oyster stew. Brown
agate, veined as a woods
by smoke that has to it
the watery twist of eel grass
in a quick, rust-discolored
cove. Undulating lines of
northern evening—a Munch
without the angst—a
hint of almost amber:
to the nose, a resinous
thought, to the eye, a
lacquered needle green
where no green is, a
present after-image.
Sleek as an ax, bare
and elegant as a tarn,
manly as a lingam,
November weather petrified,
it is just the thing
to do what with? To
open letters? No, it
is just the thing, an
object, dark, fierce
and beautiful in which
the surprise is that
the surprise, once
past, is always there:
which to enjoy is
not to consume. The un-
recapturable returns
in a brown world
made out of wood,
snow streaked, storm epi-
center still in stone.

—James Schuyler

Cascadilla Falls

I went down by Cascadilla
Falls this
evening, the
stream below the falls,
and picked up a
handsized stone
kidney shaped, testicular, and

thought all its motions into it,
the 800 mph earth spin,
the 190-million-mile yearly
displacement around the sun,
the overriding
grand
haul

of the galaxy with the 30,000
mph of where
the sun's going:
thought all the interweaving
motions
into myself: dropped

the stone to dead rest:
the stream from other motions
broke
rushing over it:
shelterless,
I turned

to the sky and stood still:
Oh
I do
not know where I am going
that I can live my life
by this single creek.

—A. R. Ammons

Riprap

Lay down these words
Before your mind like rocks.
 placed solid, by hands
In choice of place, set
Before the body of the mind
 in space and time:
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
 riprap of things:
Cobble of milky way,
 straying planets,
These poems, people,
 lost ponies with
Dragging saddles—
 and rocky sure-foot trails.
The worlds like an endless
 four-dimensional
Game of *G*o.
 ants and pebbles
In the thin loam, each rock a word
 a creek-washed stone
Granite: ingrained
 with torment of fire and weight
Crystal and sediment linked hot
 all change, in thoughts,
As well as things.

—Gary Snyder

The Stone

These junipers growing out from the yellow rocks
now in the sunlight near the top of the steep slope
under its split cliff face and these dwarf oaks returning
in silence not yet believing after so long
out of life and this hawthorn with its white light in flower
this tangle of hazel and eglantine drawing
tight below the cliff where the hidden water slips out
from its green lips darkening the stone in every
season and nursing a trailing shadow of horsetail
and osiers below it these fresh holes clawed in the ocher
clay these traces of fox and badger these invaders
have come back from before there were names for this place
before my friend Herault planted the pear trees here
that have gone back to be quinces flowering with
the wild things and planted the peaches and the rest
of the late orchard that is dry wood covered with moss
and before the Cavannes harvested their grapes here
for generations when the whole village tilled the slopes
by hand and before the road from the valley was a cart lane
and before the Romans and before it was understood
that the source in the cliff and the vipers living
in the rocks were the same woman and that when they rolled
back into one brain they made from their breath a stone
that would float in the air like a forgotten day

—W. S. Merwin

Song of a Stone

there was a woman from the north
picked a stone up from the earth.
when the stone began to dream
it was a flower folded in

when the flower began to fruit
it was a circle full of light,
when the light began to break
it was a flood across a plain

when the plain began to stretch
the length scattered from the width
and then the width began to climb
it was a lark above a cliff

the lark singing for its life
was the muscle of a heart,
the heart flickering away
was an offthrow of the sea

and when the sea began to dance
it was the labyrinth of a conscience,
when the conscience pricked the heart
it was a man lost in thought

like milk that sours in the light,
like vapour twisting in the heat,
the thought was fugitive—a flare of gold—
it was an iris in a field

and when the man began to murmur
it was a question with no answer,
when the question changed its form
it was the same point driven home

it was a problem, a lamentation:
'What the buggery's going on?
This existence is an outrage!
Give me an arguer to shout with!'

and when the arguer appeared
it was an angel of the Lord,
and when the angel touched his chest,
it was his heartbeat being pushed

and when his heart began to break
it was the jarring of an earthquake
when the earth began to groan
they laid him in it six by one

dark bigger than his head,
pain swifter than his blood,
as good as gone, what could he do?
as deep as stone, what could he know?

—Alice Oswald