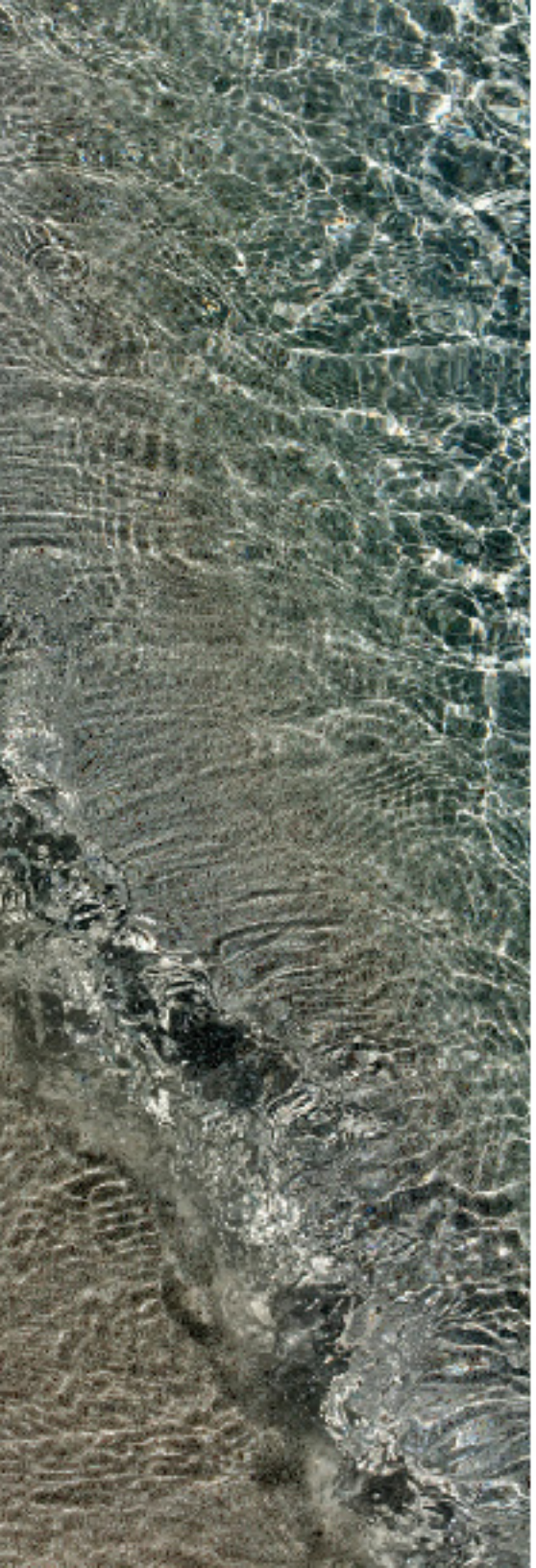

In Front of the Elements

poetry by
Devon Balwit

I. Earth
creation myth

the crow constructs
        the man, pebble

by pebble, ear, a wild
        thistle rustling,

pupil, a solitary seed,
        progenitor

of forests, each plume
        a lock of hair

ready to lift in wind.

December

Water pools in the tractor ruts,
a frozen scurf reflecting
the underbelly of crows,
the sky
pressing like a flat iron.
The homeless pitch their tents
further down the embankment,
nestled in blackberry cane
like fruit missed during harvest,
wizened and windblown,
invisible to passing cars,
to city workers
with ticket books
and rubber gloves.
Those of us on foot
peer through chain link,
drawn by flapping tarps,
clothes, rapture-scattered.
We are the only flesh
scoured by wind.
The rest careen by,
cocooned, urgent
for the next thing
and the thing after that.
A red-tail loops overhead,
oblivious.

ritual

fox meets me
at the fence line,
both of us
haloed in breath.
our eyes
refract snow.
storm clouds
sink us deep
as we inhale
each other's stink.
he waits
for what
I bring,
raw meat
bloodying
my fist.
over it goes.
he pauses
before
approaching,
then disappears
quick as smoke.
the trees lift
barren branches
in wonderment
while I remain,
still
as a cut stump.

The Why of It

Sometimes you are whole,
growing wild and for no
purpose but to catch what
light you can. In calm,
you respire slow centuries.
When the wind rises, you
rustle mournful or whip
to a clatter. Tickled by
feather and claw, you rock
and sway, rock and sway.

Sometimes, though, fate
plays rough. Felled and
stripped, planed and pressed,
you are made to keen from
the grain. The ones still
standing do as you once did,
look elsewhere, leaving you
to transform loss, alone,
tapping deep into heartwood
for a tale, if not for a song.

Exhumed

With every turn of the winch, the alabaster corpses rise, torsos graceful, water streaming from chiseled eyes, reaching arms, broken off at the wrists.

> How the sun hurtles, no matter how gently we are exhumed. The shock of it crumbles our edges, dropping bits of us earthward to be lost among pebbles.

You the living, fingers interlaced, imagine you will stay whole. Yet, someday, fragments of your caress will adorn a small pedestal among all the others, circa and date on a yellowing tag.

> Help me find my own remains, a still-living infant pulled from rubble. Set me to suckle at a stranger's breast, plaster ghosting our tear-streaked cheeks.

Kin

The winter wren in the canopy and I, here,
belong to the same guild, not by mere analogy,
but by analogous expression of more than fifty
genes, letting us work syrinx and palate to
advantage. Small and dun to any looking
from the path, inwardly, our synapses blaze
brightly, letting me give epitome its fourth syllable
and the passerine to sound its trill.
I am not too proud to claim kinship with tool-using apes
fishing for termites, with octopi gathering
coconuts shells for camouflage, with corvids
dropping stones into water to bring food
within reach. Also a teacher, I stand with teacher ants
who instruct more callow nestmates how to return
home or bees who dance coordinates to flowers.
Why do we always measure from our own
chests? The farther away we place the creatures,
the more we diminish. Reducing them
to meat, to ornament, to hide, insisting on comfort,
on superiority, we render ourselves brutish.
Sooner than we think, we alone will deliver our eulogy,
and, solitary, hear, when we might have lived
in euphony, in a plenitude of forms most marvelous.

II. Air
Envy

…My heart in hiding/ Stirred for a bird,
—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!
("*Windhover,*" Gerard Manley Hopkins)

And what wouldn't I, chair-bound, tethered, give to rise, wheel, lift myself above concerns and pettiness, entrust myself to gust and updraft, look down on humankind become mouse-like in their burrows, furrowed brow smoothing, heeding only current and breeze, released from those grounded, founding joy on wingturn, banked pinions alone, the only gold, sun-dappled flap and eye-glare, hunting small scurryings, whirring wings pulled abruptly in to arrow down to blood reward, the hot meat of the sought picked from bone, feeding future flight, nothing wasted, nothing mourned.

Storm Warning

The masseter and temporalis control the jaw, but what
emerges is a whirlwind gathered since you first gusted

into being, blown from a roiling sea, pushing everything
before you the same direction, away. The lateral and medial

pterygoid belong to the amygdala, growling and snapping
at its command. You lash top to bottom, but like shutters,

they bang, unhinged. You return with boards, nails, a hammer,
determined to stare down the next storm or the one after.

How easily each pries you open, gale force stirred in invisible
channels. On a barren bluff, you would only bend smaller.

Dangerous as it is, you must remain among the living,
but belled like a cat, to let them know you are coming.

Beekeeper

Every day, bees expand and contract
about his balcony like exhalations, their
dancing motes lifting work from my
anthers, translating the hard hours into
beauty. Some days, he waves to me,
wearing winged laborers as lightly
as petals. When finally we meet, he is
both still and agitated, hive and cloud.
Wait, he says, and disappears, returning
with a jar heavy as bent peonies. I cup
palms, receive his story. Standing together,
embodied, we are shy. Easier to salute
from motile spheres, the quality
of our light, the thrum of our passage.

No One Hears Us

unhinged, even a bag screams,
handle-jaw aghast at the way life
can flatten us.

the seam is not where we split, but a place
wholly unexpected, everything spilling,
skin pleating into ghosts,

a shadow puppet or blastocyst,
an elegant crane or an African mask,
ripped from context.

gusted, we butterfly open, soles
arching to shoulder blades,
contortionists under kliegs.

breaking in tenterhook silence, we wait
for applause that doesn't come.
aghast, our handle-jaws unhinge.

Velleity

Light through branches frames dancing motes,
shadowing a rim for flecks falling like rain

on steaming ground. Too hot to respire, leaves bide
their time, lifting brave architecture over the unseen.

There is almost a cloud, but the sun slaps it away.
I set my fingers to keys then retreat, letters sealed

then secreted away while the dog, panting beneath
the table, lifts his head to gaze at me, then presses

back against the boards. On just such a day, God
made the world, letting it roll from fingertips

into the void, too enervated to retrieve it and begin
again. In a day or two, the heat will break.

In a hundred more, no one will remember when.

First Mover

If I stood behind all prayer, I would know
how to muscle wings

to thermals' hover, how to unfurl
stem to fruit, know

the finger pad corrugation
of hidden pit. I would send

the song welling in the bird, but keep
the seam of gold silent

in its earthen bed. I would sew an answer
into each question

like a medicine bag, potent against despair.
From the far banks of death,

I would wave a lantern, laddering
dark waters. I would be the intention

before breath, and before that,
the bright flame universal.

III. Fire
swan song

when nothing remains to burn,
you use yourself as a wick,
flames
sputtering from your fat.
the stones reply in kind,
offering their density
for the flickering,
leaning in where they can,
or standing solemn.
from a distance,
the stars welcome you
as kin
and semaphore
a greeting.
even if you cannot last,
they have seen you.

After the Burning

Smoke plumes from your empty bed;
The what-was rustles. Far from here,

a brook tumbles—you know it does—even if
your hands clutch dust.

Tuck a crow feather behind your ear, swallow
caws till your throat bleeds.

The photographs' high gloss retards flame, but
briefly. Soon his arms around you

flare bright enough to char the decades
heaped in the burn barrel.

Dig the ash into the garden, bite hungrily
into what you can from it.

At the end of your crowbar sings the nail, each
note weakening old walls.

La Cueva de la Araña

For eight thousand years this man has been climbing a tree,
smoking torch in hand, purposeful.

Bees swirl around his head. One imagines the saliva
pooling in his mouth, the stray sting

as he pursues sweetness. He carries a basket
for the honeycomb he will steal

for wife and children. Millennia separate us, but I recognize
the striving, the grasping after dripping wax,

the willingness to suffer for what one cannot get another way.
This man from Valencia and I are kin,

carrying fire to the task at hand. Years hence, I too will be
faceless, hoping another will see me rise.

Hot

Now, scientists confirm
what we've long known,

that our earliest ancestors bloomed
in Sulphur, bubbled from magma.

In the distant distance, we labored
hydrogen like stars.

Daily, we still burn hot, tasting metal
on our tongues.

That our organism formed in calm pools
was a kind fiction

when any mirror reflects four billion years
of tending embers in cells' braziers.

Sunken Ships on Fire

Here, the sun
is only a rumor.
Any glow,
we create,
rubbing against
one another,
passing coals
mouth to mouth.
With the right cuts,
skin releases
a feathering of rust.
A ruby
remembers
the flicker
of lost candles.
We feed
the burning,
the swell
tipping us
through
compass points.
Down ribbed
passageways,
strangers bear
stalked lanterns
as, gathering barnacles,
our jumble of bones
sighs,
then settles.

Motes at Play in the Halls of Light

We always glance slantwise at beauty, turning
to it our Janus-faced wonderment and envy,

wanting to be of and in the light but dragged
downwards by cracked-clay heaviness, a base

that can only hold the glowing filament, so easily
jarred to breaking. See the eyes, shadow-traced,

refracted into panes? Each holds the painter's
palette, the aperture, the pen—missals to summon

the muse, nets to trawl for awe. We must catch
the spilling while we're quick. We won't be long.

IV. Water
In front of the Elements

The oration of the worlds is untiring

I can repeat all of it from the beginning
with a pen inherited from a goose and Homer
with a diminished spear
stand in front of the elements
(*Mr. Cogito Considers the Difference…*, Zbigniew Herbert)

Wants surge towards the shoreline,
frothing panic. No sooner does one

shoulder a line upon the sand, then
the next rushes to erase it. The sky

presses a steely lid on the roil, caging
both animate and inanimate. Now and

again, the wings of a gull close the sun's
furious eye, letting us all draw breath.

Bluffs tilt ruin above shattered tide wrack
as, shaking diminished spears, we challenge

the elements. We wish to be spared.
Somehow, ours must be the hand to lift

the globe and shake down shining.
The oration of the world is untiring.

We learn it by mimicry. Eventually, we
mouth it, even in our deepest sleep.

Evolutionary

perhaps the full moon routed sleep / or the front-page photograph on my lawn of mouse paw & fish fin / Hoxa 13 markers glowing / a green trail back 430 million years / to when all of us paddled the same pond / back to before

we tinkered with genes / crafting mice with long leg bones / but no arms / or fish to spin finless / to before we interfered / with the creatures / stripping them / of skin & habitat / before we made them sit up & beg / or swim circles

the moon's flat disc / offering no commentary / as it spotlights / our progress from cave painting / to screen / from spear point / to gunfire / only we humans can say / enough / or say nothing / bank our roads / this way / or that

a jet grumbles in the night sky / a fan whirs / I await bird song / as a supplicant the host / promising to make something / of myself / while elsewhere / floodwaters recede on silt / brushfires ash / a child walks the long road / for water

the moon covers itself / in branches / as the sky greys enough to see / the newspaper & its ephemera / awaiting compost / their journey back / to the vegetal / together with the ancestors / swimming in me / as I set oar to current

Liminal

An estuary is liminal, like a once-beautiful woman flowing
into stateliness. Fresh mingles with salt,

yet not enough to dilute crystalline fate. The unseen bubbles up
from clumps of reeds, plashes and disappears.

Exposed by tides, tree roots' knobbed joints make a final desperate
grab. In movies, the hero is always lifted back

to safety. Here, tears already flow. One must be realistic.
The horizon keeps its distance, watching with its single eye

as wrack delivers secrets—shells, feathers, glass, a lone shoe.
Footprints well bowls of light before dissolving in slurry.

You can look for yourself here if you are willing to let each impression
seep away. Not a single witness shares your tongue.

What Floats

It's the time of year
when small ants

invade the cupboards,
marching from outside

in files as if underscoring
the encroaching weather.

All night, rain
burbles in the gutters,

rustling as it falls
with TV static.

I expect to step from bed
into knee-deep water,

but the only pool
is in my head,

a catchment of decades,
ever-rising.

Some days, I fish out
the dead, others,

whatever floats
from watery darkness,

wrung from the world
by its turning.

הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי אֱלֹהִים-- כִּי בָאוּ מַיִם עַד-נָפֶשׁ.

Save me, God, for the waters have come up to my neck Psalm 69:1

I awoke in the night to the murmur of rain
and my dog puking seawater.

My daughter had flicked on the hall light
and stood helpless in its glare.

I rose and pulled on the garments of a mother,
one unafraid of the body.

The dog apologized with fawn-soft eyes, my husband snored.
I told my daughter, this is how it's done.

Don't be afraid to grapple with filth or expect to make
the dirty clean. We live amidst swirling waters,

put our mouths to their source and find pleasure there.
Enjoy the tumult before the clog, the tumble in brine.

Even up to our necks, the drenched world drunkens.
Let the waters pool on your tongue and run down your chin.

Sad Night

We flee from our burdens across the causeways of night,
but the road has ghosted. We bring each other down,

then use the twisted limbs to keep above dark water.
If we survive till dawn, it is because we are guilty.

Ravens clack from purple-black hoods, eyes fierce
with knowing. We accustom ourselves to shame,

newlyweds twisting bright rings about captive fingers.
The story snags at the joint and cannot be sloughed.

Every two a.m., we relive the harrowing, always running
from a city that casts us out. We bruise beneath offal,

gag on the taste of iron. Grudgingly, dawn releases us
from where we sprawl in mud patterned by flailing.

walking on water

(inspired by Christo's Floating Piers)

yes, let's walk
on water

toes sinking
slightly

into wavecrest.
let's stand

above murk
the drowned

be light
miracles

bobbing figures
the shorebound

can just barely
make out

let's clasp hands
in the dappling

certainly
we will arrive

even
if changed.

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Devon Balwit is the author if five chapbooks: *How the Blessed Travel* (Maverick Duck Press); *Forms Most Marvelous* (dancing girl press); *In Front of the Elements* (Grey Borders Books), *Where You Were Going Never Was* (Grey Borders Books); and *The Bow Must Bear the Brunt* (Red Flag Poetry). She lives with her family in Portland, Oregon. When not writing poetry, she teaches. When not teaching, she studies happiness from her dog.

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