

Thursday, March 4

Turn

The sky then was stapled shut,
the day worming toward gray.
I was walking through brown leaves,
but this isn't about color.
It's about the flat curve of spine
I found in the grass, an arch of coyote
or maybe dog, about the one vertebra
I brought home as a keepsake.

And today my cat wants her chin rubbed
so badly she's fallen off the chair,
made a fool of herself
in front of me out of need—
like the man who moved to town
but found no one would love him
for fixing the rickety house he bought.
Even though it was an eyesore,
even though we all thought
it was a good idea.
But forget his fussy balconies,
his gazebo and lattices and pink roses,
forget our petty city council,
the voluptuousness of government,
the new appraisal he wouldn't pay
hand-delivered by the cops.

This isn't about the lies boys told
or didn't tell reporters, the way he did
or didn't put his hands down their jeans,
or the crowbar he took to his windows, then,
or some hatred I feel for the small towns
I've lived in. People all over the world
make lives in small places, load their donkeys,
wear their hats, cross the river to market
and back. But forget the donkey,
the air full of implosion, the Bible verses
he sprayed read and black on the siding:

“Give them sorrow of heart,
oh Lord, Thy curse unto them.”
“ Let death seize upon them
and let them go down quick in to HELL
for wickedness is in their dwellings.”
“God (B)less America.”

This isn't about the absolute angles of our streets,
the maps small towns are always misplaced on,
or our big spring tulip festival,
or the holes we dig the way our fathers dug them,
or the way we crawl into them. This is about the last, red words
we wrung from him, the confession
blotched on the alley side of the house:
“I am not a queer. I am not a faggot” –
when faggot is just the broken end
of a string, a lump, a bundle.
And queer is the twist in us, the turn,
the oblique torch we light and lift
like a lamp beside the open door.

Think of the bone I found as a representative
of all bones, a congress of one.
No matter which way I set it on my desk
a face looks out: the Lone Ranger's,
a buffalo's, a Spanish pilgrim's
under a wide-brimmed hat,
a prize fighter's, a dog's,
a one-eared rat's, an ascendant angel's.
He wanted to be a citizen among strangers.
But this isn't about democracy,
it's about the open oh of the spine
that is who we are: a little story
of armor and ego, a little thread
strung through a few beads.

Keith Ratzlaff