

The Marten Called a Fisher

Fishers don't fish unless you call
pawing a sick sucker out of a stagnant eddy
fishing. Fishers can scamper headfirst
both up and down tall spruces
to rob crows' eggs because their ankle sockets
twist three-sixty. And because they've got hands
for feet like zoo gibbons gone crazy
in their cages who race poles top to bottom
all day long until you move on lest
you go nuts yourself. Maybe you've sat
on a rock for a spell to watch a fish
twirl slow circles in some skuzzy foam
on one weak caudal, curdled sky
glimmering in one milky eye. Probably not,
though. The fisher I saw yesterday
when I scrunched crotch deep in icy snow
down to the still-frozen brook to saw up
the dead birch for March firewood
was sniffing his way upstream
with a lean and angry look to him
that told me in what we call the gut,
though my own hunches seem to quake
lower from some cloacal region, that
I should stand by to let him pass on
with plenty of leeway. One mean
motorscooter, a phrase from time gone
by, came to words in my brain.

Porcupines, that slick-pictured book
lying on your little table tells us,
are fishers' favorite food, but mine
that morning looked ready to be happy
to gnaw on a scrap of freeze-dried
vole fur. Porcupines' favorite food,
the same book will say, is salt,
if salt seems like food to you, though
it's not in my book, nor would making
things favorite make anything
matter in any book I'd care to read
or write. First a fisher leaps face-
to-face with a porcupine, baring teeth
in a hideous dragon mask,
and howling a scream that sounds
exactly how witches die in the flames
and this freezes the porcupine
in terror. Then the fisher pounces
wherever her prey turns, batting
off its nose until faint from blood-
loss its spines subside and it mews
itself to death like a baby cries
itself to sleep. I, myself, have heard
that scream jarring from nearby woods;
it never made me wiser. How can eyes
that black see, I marveled, as she
haunched her slinky self to take me in,
to see if I was worth a detour
on her weary meander up the frozen
fairway of the muffled stream. No,
no hurry in her scurry. Once well gone,
I barked the saw to life, and for a while
that whine that everyone, even you,
has heard filled an icy wilderness.