

Thoughts on a Woolly Bear

For once the caterpillar is more famous
than the butterfly or moth it will turn into,
taking the heat off transformation
as a metaphor—to let it be
what it is, this bristly inch-and-a-quarter
of tubular life nudging itself forward through
a jungle of grass. I can never remember
whether it's the black bands at either end
or the auburn band in the middle which
foretell the severity (or is it the length?)
of winter, but when I pick it up, it
rolls into a ball, so that the black ends
meet, becoming a yin to the other half's
coppery yang—like an amulet I might
wear around my neck. Then I remember
the story of how my former colleague's father
swallowed one on a dare when he was a boy.
And I begin to wonder what it would take
to induce me willingly to swallow
this quilled pill of caterpillar,
whether I would puke or keep it down,
and if so how long it would take
for it to die inside me, and then turn
into shit, which would surely be its
only transformation. Nor would I
be magically transformed. But look
how far I've strayed from the actual
caterpillar, which still lies coiled and
almost weightless in my very palm,

immune to all my musings. And so
I let it go, waiting a moment
for it to uncurl in the grass and take
its place again in the diurnal round.

Pump

Before the screened-in porch was glassed in
to become a TV room, and the chest full of kindling
and pile of split logs that shrank and grew
were replaced by a sofa and coffee table,
the old pump of rusted iron stood like a relic,
though we still used it to fill the dog's bowl
or a watering can or a bucket for some chore
(there were still chores then)—or just for fun,

grabbing the long curving handle and pumping it
hard, three or four times, before the water
started streaming out of the fat spout
in a coarse rope. It wasn't the same water
that came out of the faucets in the house
but rainwater that collected in a cistern
underground, our father explained. It tasted of rust
and old leaves, though we weren't allowed to drink it.

And then one day when we got home from school,
it lay beside the driveway, the long pipe that had extended
into the ground unseen trailing behind it,
badly bent—a vulnerable thing,
its magic gone, disconnected I sensed even then
from a whole era, as it was from the cistern...
which is still there, under the earth, full of dark water
I would taste again now if I could.

Stolen Draft

(For SH)

When someone held out a book for him to sign,
I happened to be standing next to him
and he handed me his glass of beer.
Then, while he was inscribing the flyleaf,
I turned slightly, raised the glass to my lips,
and drank as if from a cup made sacred
by the great poet's having drunk from it,
but feeling the mischief of it, the way I did
sneaking a sip of beer from my father's glass.