

Dear Doctor Frankenstein

John Sibley Williams

It's never taken lightning
to cobble a life together
from scraps or waken
a town to its most primal
fires. Don't you remember
how we sealed the well
when that boy who'd fallen
wouldn't stop wailing
mother. Or the carnival
we chased out once the oddities
turned from monsters to mirrors.
How we come to know animals
by breaking them, our bodies
only after the liver has failed,
every lover and stranger
as shadows of ourselves.
It's a mistake to think
everything is an invention
of man. The world does not turn
but is born to winter.
In some versions I am victim
while in others I cannot help
but add my torch to the burning
house. It's a mistake when I say
this is not my house.

I Dream My Grandfather an Alaskan Trucker

John Sibley Williams

There are no names,
he tells me, for veer,
for elsewhere, for love

when for months at a time
the sun never sets. Only small
towns ahead, but the names

frozen to them take longer
to say than a continent:
Nunapitchuk, Tuntutuliak, Kasigluk.

Through where names converse
with the dead and carry on
down blood, I imagine him passing—

blizzard after blizzard unskinning
both lanes, the spaces between homes
widening into elk. *Remember what I haven't*

*told you about the distance between stars,
John. Please imagine me unbroken clouds
gray as a whale breaching the limits of sky.*

When We Slept Together Beneath the Covers with a Flashlight

John Sibley Williams

This was back when the forest was one thing and our bodies searching the forest for your body was another. A dozen scattered flashlights brought the darkness into focus. And the whistles we'd never use reminded us of your voice.

This was back when looking long enough meant finding, when my family found god in the absence of a shovel, before I knew you had to love something to lose it so it was long before I knew I had lost.

Back when being lost was map enough. There was an animal asleep between us and another waking inside. There was no denying the wildness. Backing out slowly empty handed didn't make the forest less dense or dark. We would move among the trees like echoes, leaving little prints for the snow to erase.

There is always a morning after, and this was the early morning after we'd tunneled under the bedsheets and read to each other of wolves and ovens and happy endings and the curiosity of youths and the forest that swallowed them, and from those stories we would always emerge alive and stronger from not being found.

This was back when the light in your eyes meant one thing and the absence of their light didn't yet have a name.

The Length of the Field

John Sibley Williams

Like the switch that steers a train
down a spur that ends in grass, her legs

straddle the loose stones of a wall separating
battlefields. Even the goneness

of musket smoke ever-present. Even bodies
related by blood: divided, unmarked and

overrun by meadow. Horses, mostly broken.
Her hands so small inside

each other. The dead so small. Rusted-out cannons
and so many people nearby playing at war.

There are things never meant to last
this long. Like wounds and flags.

My sister who was born with a river
in her skull and these never-ending latitudes

of white ash and hickory. I keep coming back to
the translucent flesh of her legs

splayed over stone: papery, impossible, still here
with us. Like the hollow bones of a baby

bird; an old smoke rising from this peaceful
lit-up acreage.

This Is Language Too

John Sibley Williams

When we spoke backward
in secret, unhid the young parts
of ourselves we didn't know
existed. When we sang
and stomped the ground
to provoke the sky to rain,
then did the same to make
the rain stop. When sometimes
it stopped. When we were
those little earthquakes faintly
rumbling undersea, bunching
waves into pillows and slapping
down hard against land. This
we called a language. This filled with
versus being full. Waiting
for that one thing that would change
everything. That fire. That waiting.
All our makeshift wars with plastic
green reversible casualties.
How a flashlight could illuminate
a battlefield, then sweep it all safely away.
When we could pass our shoulder blades
off as wings, and we made sure to leave
wings on those we'd lost, were close
to losing. When writing a love poem wasn't
an act of breaking, wasn't really a poem,
just heels scratching symbols backwards
into mud. [This *is* a love poem. This *could*
be a love poem.] And when it started
raining again, how we'd just make that
our fire.