

SAM ROBISON

*Roadkill on the Shoulder of Calving Season*

Yes, the world and the long brown  
path unroll before me, but my road's

soft shoulder's strewn with the lumps  
of animal carcasses, their older or newer

blood rusting in sprays all around them.  
Coyotes most often — gutsier amblers — but

all others too: skunks, antelope, the odd tabby,  
the lost dog. On some, buzzards have uncovered

a cage of ribs. Others, intact, might as well  
be resting, sprawled out in a graceless sleep.

I both hurtle by and don't. The insistent fact  
of them — dead there, bloating, in hundreds —

erupts against the scene just out of frame:  
fields of infant cows, lolling their heads

testing their legs, still wet with the grease  
of their mothers, at play in the fresh alfalfa.

If I look closely, I think I can see them  
daydream. They drift off and come to

and run, so full of this pink spring, back  
to the udder, to the perfect warmth

of a milk-full belly. I am not interested in  
the metaphor here, spring and all, but

the barbed wire — unspooled for uncountable  
miles — and the strange membrane that

it, in its tines, makes all around me. On the highway,  
an unimaginably fast wilderness, grown dense

with shatter and slam and maggots.  
Beyond the small fence, a soft meadow.

## *Dog and Coyote*

And it's not the gulf of misunderstanding  
but its character — that it's composed of  
what feels to me, on my skin, up the trail  
a ways, looking at my dog nose to nose  
with the coyote he's rustled from the scrub,  
like violence.

Maybe, misunderstanding is a mistake —  
I understand nothing about the coyote, its  
hunger, its practice, and little more about my dog,  
small there, duff-colored, the quickening crank  
of his little mutt-heart.

But they stare into one another for a handful  
of slow seconds, each to the other uncanny and  
strange. Maybe, recognition is too slick, too.  
In that yellow field, I think mutant cousins; I think  
of the time between them, the grayness of it.

And the coyote gives chase, hard. I start to yell  
the clean, guttural sounds I've learned to use  
to move animals — the stubborn horse, the bear  
lavishing the dumpster. These are embarrassing and  
very loud and don't work.

I run toward the two of them running toward me  
and am resolved: I will shove both hands into the thrash  
of fur and jaw-muscle, let my own blood into the snarl  
and snot and kick away this wild dog. Beast, I think.  
And I will carry the leftover tatters back down  
to the road, however broken.

I don't have to — the dumb volume of my noise  
or stumbling stops it all. My dog makes it to me  
and I cradle him, coo a little. We start to talk it over.  
The coyote ducks into the vast spread of bramble.

Later, headed home, I know it won't be the brawl stuck in my head. Not blood, not heat, not the prying off of jaws. but the soft moment just before — three motionless animals looking for a way to look at one another, caught in the the precarity of distance, slow in proximity's honey.

## *Wildflowers*

Walk far enough into the woods above town and you'll find  
apple trees, the odd asthmatic lilac.

They are there, the pamphlet at the trailhead suggests,  
because there had once been a town.

A post office, good road,  
something like a school.

The apples were planted in the backyards of homes  
now gone, whatever roughhewn wood, soft chinking, shingled roofs  
now eaten by the soil which bore them.

McIntosh, if I had a guess—the apples. A Wealthy or Wolf River, maybe.  
But not bittersharps. Choices versatile: sweet enough for a pie,  
tart enough for cider. Cultivars worth snacking on here and there.

Somedays, I think of hiking up there, taking a cutting, letting it root out  
in a pot back home. Or else, a simple graft.

Harder, I could go up with a thick sack and haul some fruit home, see  
what the seeds do.

What stops me? Usually, it's: leave them  
for the bears, those critters who've enfolded them into their own ecology.  
Or it's: better let the old things rest, whittle away  
their last slow decades spared the crude pestering of my picking.

As I think of them today, they're ghoully. Tattered flags of an occupation  
gone sour. The clinging red signposts of a ghost town  
with virtually no ghosts. The remnant whisper of some folks  
who, for loss of profit or premise, ceded to the howl and press of these hills.

What needs saying: apples themselves are not invasive.  
They're persnickety and non-rhizomatic. The fruit that falls  
or is by bear-gut taken away won't set seed. If it did  
the resulting apple would be uncategorizable, a lonely  
anomalous pip.

In winter, lacking the decoration of fruit and leaves, the trees are undistinguished.

Each spring, their understory thickens and spurts, their deadfall falls.

In May, they bloom and waft out only a faint sweetness.

How long until they're wildflowers?