

Poems written while on Isle Royale
Russell Brakefield, Isle Royale Artist in Residence, July 2016

WOLF HUNT

When, after what may have been years of looking,
I came upon a jawbone buried in the bulrush,

I plucked the teeth like sweet kernels
and filled my mouth.

My own jaw cupped like a nest, I gargled and swished.
The sound, on the wind, was like traffic—

molars swerving past molars,
a violent Canine clack.

Then static. Then the snap
of an ancient fire come back.

And it went on like this for hours, dusk settling
its fur down around my neck

a moon pulled up above the tree line
by a nearly invisible rope.

ROWING TOBIN HARBOR

How stealth the paths of animals
when I wake early to ferry the harbor
alone but for a pair of black ducks
ghosting the shore. As though my scull
cuts a shotgun rhythm in the water
which, of course, it does. Abundance,
after all, does not release us from instinct.
Sunk in the marsh, the bull moose
twitch antennae ears and trawl away
from danger. The black wolf shudders
her courtly torso, swaggers on in secret.
In the catalogue of longing, a new entry:
to see before being seen, to stalk
like an ancient hunter, clothed in burden,
clothed in ritual. Who am I to choose?
Ghost God or ghost prey—the line
is a whisper here among the islands.

ANTLERS

Forever relegated now to a softer world—
human as souvenir or rodent

as rations for the famished deer mice
beneath the early snow.

What else is so designedly fragile?
Teeth, the line between human.

Not quite a full appendage, bone
and keratin drop like a confession,

cut string of another hard year,
another onerous season.

The mountain, ash lit with eyes.
Jackets up, the owls bristle

and survey the shed and then the rot.
What is not, in this long life, deciduous?

ON THE PATH FROM THE EDISON FISHERY TO THE MOOSE BONEYARD

At the fork, a handmade marker
for the moose boneyard is blazoned in sharpie.
I veer toward death. Like a horror film,
someone had said on the boat over,
like a metal band would put on their album cover.

In the clearing, a wreck of scrap wood
and instruments litters the woodlot.
Trees cut through with blades of Moskey Basin,
Superior's blue intestines. A yurt stings
white life into the forest.

With new luster, evening encroaches
quickly through the spruce. My hosts are gracious scientists.
They usher me on to the scene
of a hundred dark deaths. Each skull marked by age
and cause of slaughter.

Death by wolf and death by ice.
Death by scrap or lack of water. Gruesome deaths
by toothache and spine rot, racks rubbed raw
in battle, racks blighted and deformed and crippled.
And hunger, collapse in its common form.

In Ojibwa myth, a hunter once turned snake
to reach the meat inside a rotting skull.
Turned back to man, he was caged
in bone, masked by his prey and then consumed.
My own body in the woods is neither

cut from worldliness nor made more
brilliant by this wild menagerie. Dark sockets see
what I lack. Dark sockets see me as I am.

On the opposite shore, another petition to survival
interrupts the sky. The Rock Harbor lighthouse
gawks over the tree line, crowned by glass
where men once passed time and cast lonely watch
against loss of vessels and lives.

Against recklessness. Again, against death.
I cast my own small light from the perch
this morning, a penny to the well of the breakwaters.
As an eyelid over the little spot of loneliness—

no cell service, etc.—opened in my chest.

Back at the docks, I press the fishery
into the linocut of my body. The way you can't recall
a moment perfectly but can hold tight
the particulars: net reels, buckets of coal sinkers,
sour smell of linseed oil, and a lamprey

pickled like fetal tissue in a test tube.
A slick river otter pares the bones of a trout
beside the pilings, lines his teeth with coins.

Across the bay a single eagle works the shallows.
The nervous loons break in a frenzy. One chick,
still blurry with molt, trembles in shadows.
There's no news here,
so none of the normal death I know.

The silence asks what I call myself, when back here
with the animals. A low sun births a blush of dusk colors.
A power boat, my ride, pulses like blood
through the lines in the harbor. An afterimage
of stacked skulls pounds my eyelids.

From the book in my pocket:
Any man's death diminishes me.
Because I am involved in mankind.
But there are beasts too to think of too, the membrane
bursting around me on this island.

The light sets down around me.
Questions of the living are stomped
to bone and fur. In my chest
I feel the sudden snap
of an ancient, warming fire.

SISKOWIT MINE

Years ago—a mother load of loam and ore.

A hymn unpinned and slid the Locks.

The first warning fires of the new, new world

threaded the tyrant reefs. *Living rock*,

called the Ojibwa and it was, and was again.

At dusk tonight a tanker sparks the harbor.

My mind across the water turns

to bedrock, to lichen. A viceroy

wrestles wearily a single strand of hawkweed.

And language, like desire,

betrays the living world again.

DASSLER POINT

Awake with the deer mice
I stumble to the edge—

a bed of starlight dredged
above a bed of stars,

black heads of calcite
scratched to the canvas.

What small sun can I cast
into this field of fires?

What can I lift over
this too bright world?

CELL SERVICE, ISLE ROYALE

An outboard drifts the rock point,
throws a switch in decibel
at the screen door. You'll forgive me
if today, finally, I've quit checking
my cell. The motor's hum
is just the motor's hum. And not
you, my love, casting your voice
across the living air.