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Thunderbird

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Thunderbird

Black granite, ash, warped pews, overgrowth so dense it takes hours to hack through, a tarnished brass cross slanting the thin streamlets of sun, and one turquoise egg half-shaded by a limb. The pastor who left parish 11 for New Staunton, left his robes too. I come here alone, unnerved the way I came years before to run side-by-side setters and pointers. They were the first closed under good bird cover.

Six miles of oak loom, thickened, curling like paint on walls where dim-wit yokels plead, half starved near drying fields with something to consider and plenty to hate. One contractor sits children on his right knee, a gesture like an earthquake. Soil caulks their nails. I am one of few who hiked uphill through gullies of vine to pull back his tracks, scared to death.

Now only hunters find the stained glass if they're lucky, if birds have coveyed and dogs go on point, if light hits the grove just right. This time there's no secret being kept. The pews are riddled with shot: 7 1/2's, 8's, 9's, a slug or two. My grandfather hoarsed-up when he told the story. His father, the leader, bought by Virginia power, needing his family more than the land. On this hill crest I think of all the sweat poured over the ascent in barrow and cinder block. I stare through the looped honeysuckle circling the bell tower and catch a stuttered glimpse of faces hardened like troops on leave, women wearing frocks, black as famine potatoes.

Wendalough (St. Kevin)

Stirring into the conscience of this shrouded
wayside, I feel the alter start to tremble and I prod
my memory to bury a boy killed
near Spotsylvania, a farmer straining
alcohol from tubing out a still.
Where I stand in this darkened, hateful home
will not leave me. The echo of bells I hear
more like coon hounds at bay,
runned scared and lost with scent.

Father, you and I bore barrels flush
in late November hollows, swapping tales
mothers should never hear, fumbling for shells
in briars we named by each rigid point.
You never stopped here? I've been sitting in the pews
thinking about us a long time, long enough to see
weathered stones pushed awkward against
a rooted birch. The dates our family owns.

I keep promising I'll forget, I'll leave them,
this chapel yard, and get on with my life.
A year ago a man with sanitarium eyes
stumbled across these broken floorboards and sang
from a hymnal and pulled out a bottle of Thunderbird
and nobody gave a damn because nobody heard
a thing from that podium or even listed to find out
what was sung: old verses, "Onward Christian
Soldiers" above the strip-mine clangor of drills.

Thunderbird

I'm the boy who stole up to this promontory
without your knowing to summon mercy
for ungrateful years. I stand deranged
on the swelling ground to curse the sermon
in this room and to catch the faces
aged to stone. All I catch are mossed numbers,
nicknames, and fabled quotes, rusted brass
shells scattered like an archaic testimony,
an empty language only a grim handful can understand.

Outside bobwhites whistle their broken lives
back together and you and I sit miles apart.
Every crack in the wall speaks of age
and father, I hear the leaves brush it all down
like the wind was a final, silent voice
shaking the land just enough to turn things over,
to pull from the ground whatever it needs to hide.

Kelly Bondurant