Certain Constellations

...of a silence so vast all sounds have meaning.
--Lisel Mueller

Our star fruit tree, *averrhoa carambola*,
produces at least three crops each year,
so many succulent fruits with each harvest
that over half of the fragrant, flower-shaped,
delicate-tasting delights rot
in the grass, despite our best intentions
to pick and eat or give them all away.
The tree is just too generous, though
we do nothing for it. In fact we pay it
little attention, as we putter
in the garden, breathing its perfumed shade.
But imagine if we simply let the fruit lie
and rot where it fell in the grass: soon
a small forest of *carambola* trees
would start moving across our back yard, each tree
spreading thousands of saplings as far
as its branches extended, a slow motion migration.
Imagine the bees and birds, the feasting
rodents and raccoons, the insects. Such fecundity
boggles the mind, if you really think about it,
which I don’t, or not often—or not often enough,
even as I cut and savor a slice
of sweet *carambola*, or pass it to my wife
and guests, as we sit here in the evening with a glass
of wine, talking movies, and politics, and friends
we haven’t seen in years, of friends we’ll never see again—.

And soon we are telling these friends about the cabin
we stayed in at Christmas, about the hunters and skeletons
we found in the woods there, about the deer and alligator
bones we gathered and took home—they’re inside
the house now, waiting to be fashioned into something
by our daughter, a sculptor—and we talk then of backpacking
in the wilderness a little bit deeper in those woods,
as ambient music our son gave us whispers
from the kitchen where the vegetables, cut up and skewered
and ready to be grilled, soak up their olive oil
and just-picked basil, and a jet groans across the sky,
heading east, toward the islands.

This morning,
a student came by to show me his new poems imitating the writers I’d suggested he read the last time I saw him—yesterday—and he happened to mention in passing, that since he has no electricity in his house--his mother’s lost her job--he was staying with a friend on his couch, and when I asked him how that was he said “fine,” just “fine,” and shrugged dismissively. He just wanted me to look at his teeming new poems, which were about everything he could think of and some things he was feeling, mostly love for a girl he’d known briefly in high school, who’d moved away now, to college. As always, he asked me who to read now, thanked me, and shook my hand as he left. He’s the real thing, I say, as we feel the evening settle down around us, as we look up to see if there are any stars—which reminds Colleen of a man we met this summer at Chaco Canyon, on the evening of the solstice, a naked-eye astronomer with a telescope he’d carried from Colorado, who would talk to anyone willing to listen, about constellations, their names and the myths they’d represented in Ancient Greece and the Far East, in various Native American and European cultures—and the current scientific designations of each star in the pattern. He knew their distance, how fast they’re moving. Everywhere we pointed up into the teeming sky was a story and another story. Next morning, the solstice, we got up before dawn to watch the sun rise at the central kiva: First light would shoot through a chink in one wall, to land in an indentation carved into the far wall, then move across that wall, precisely as it had done at every solstice since that kiva was built, 1000 years ago.

At the site, the astronomer prayed silently, off by himself. All around us the ground seemed to glitter, and if we had walked along the canyon we would have been able to study the petroglyphs etched across those walls gleaming in the first light.

Are we ready for the food? Colleen asks now, lighting a candle,
as the music from inside the house dies away
   for a moment and we hear something singing from the firecracker
bushes across the garden, a creature
   none of us has heard before, a gentle warbling-
   coo that sounds like any mother-mammal
watching her baby sleep, and we all

get up quietly, pushing our chairs back
   slowly, slowly, so as not to make a sound
as we tip-toe across the grass, careful
   not to disturb whatever’s been singing,

   so we might move into
   the circle of its song.

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