

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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