

## Something Else

Suppose, one spring, the birds decided  
not to fly north, and the animals  
sleeping in the woods decided this year  
they'd rather not wake, and turned over instead  
for another dream.

Imagine one summer the butterflies decided  
to stay in their cocoons, or the caterpillars forgot  
to wrap themselves up inside themselves  
and simply gorged themselves instead  
until their season passed. One day the tide forgot to rise.  
*This is only one way of speaking for the world.*

Suppose the spiders stopped weaving, mosquitoes  
forgot how to suck our blood, bees  
decided not to pollinate flowers.  
Suppose the sea turtles never returned  
to the beaches that bore them, to lay their moon-drawn eggs.  
Or suppose for a moment the rivers held still  
and the leaping salmon held still in mid-air.

Imagine fire stopped burning things to ash  
although it still burned. It was no longer hot.  
*Of course that couldn't happen.* So think of something else.

## The Jam

So one day he woke up, opened his closet  
to get dressed and found all his clothes hanging  
in tatters, falling to the floor as dust.  
All the towels in the bathroom looked like spider webs.  
His wife was sleeping peacefully at last, after days  
of fret and obligation. He didn't want to wake her  
and he didn't want to stay home from the office, but  
he was naked. What else could he do? And so  
he picked up the guitar he hadn't touched in months,  
sat down on the wood floor and strummed like he used to  
in the old days. He woke her after all,  
who lay there a few moments remembering when he'd  
sung like a young man. Then she got up, opened  
her closet to find all her clothes tattered too.  
Her husband was howling now. What could she do  
but slide her old cello out from under the bed?  
And so they jammed for hours. Then they lay back down  
exhausted—it was afternoon already—  
and slept, and dreamed vividly. And when they woke up  
refreshed for the first time in months, laughing  
at their predicament, they found their closets  
replenished with stylish new garments, sharp suits  
and elegant skirts, freshly pressed and perfumed.  
Astonished at their luck, they tried on these new clothes  
but found that none fit, not even close. This could go on  
for a long time they realized as they undressed again  
with a kind of glee and giggling, until  
they realized their bodies had grown unfamiliar,  
thicker than they used to be, calloused where they used to be  
pink with small veins scribbled everywhere, and nerves  
that had danced at the slightest provocation  
and had now moved far off to some hideout in the distance  
that would take at least a day to hike to, climbing  
rocky terrain over poorly-marked trails,  
naked and numbed from this hunger.

## Extinction

The creature my mother had been once was hiding  
in a supermarket magazine photograph, as though  
she were a stylish shoe; the animal my father  
had fancied as *himself*, was howling at the moon  
like the wolf in that famous ad campaign  
that taught us how to act wild and stylish at once,  
like a new kind of gesture. We had lost all the creatures  
that weren't of our ilk, like we'd lost certain aunts  
and uncles to their snapshots. And then we started losing  
those animals inside us, as our sleep started dreaming  
in languages of follicle and cuticle, fingernail  
and ear wax, sand and snot. Until something  
moved around inside again, wilder than we'd ever been  
and almost as vivid as the world, and it hurt  
like language must have done once, or maybe even love.

## The Milky Way

If we could imagine that every word we speak were an animal or insect, the last of a species ever to be born, that the very act of speaking brought extinction even before our words had been heard and replied to, we might get a feeling for the vanishings we witness but don't see. And if every conversation were understood as a kind of holocaust denuding whole landscapes, some people would simply fall silent—as far as they could—while most others would keep chattering on. Just imagine the vast forests of lives, the near-infinity of forms brought to a halt with a simple conversation. And I would be one of the talkers, despite the fact that I knew what my talking destroyed. And so I would mourn every word I said, even while I argued passionately for silence and for learning to honor the sacred diversity of life. Just imagine watching the stars go out on a dark night in the far north, a clear night, one after the other until the sky was black.

Once, when I was taking out the garbage, just walking dully across my back yard, a huge bird— as big as a vulture but glittering and sleek— rose from the grass and flew into my body, knocked the breath out of me, then flew up and away with a powerful pull of its wings. I could hardly

see it in the darkness. Then it was just gone.

## The Ghost Trees

And now a certain kind of scientist says  
the weather in various parts of the world  
is growing exhausted and just wants to lie down  
for a nap, or maybe for a longer dose  
of oblivion, so its dreams can be  
re-spawned, its creatures large and small  
replenished to wildness, the air re-folded  
into its invisible origami, even  
human language shot-through again  
with sap. In the clear-cut woods--  
raw ground and stumps--invisible trees  
are learning to move from one place to another,  
blurring paths and meadows; the people  
who live there call them *fathers who turned  
away without waving goodbye, and learned  
to dance slowly*; they contrast them with the boulders  
and rocks, who truly know how to dance  
in slow time, even as the humans and the creatures  
in fur and the creatures in feathers leave  
their bodies and all the bodies they passed through  
to arrive at now through eternities--but still  
we pretend they cast shadows across the ground,  
and still we pretend they bear fruit.