

Hunter's Visitation

Most of my life I've believed what these eyes see
 these hands can touch,
 that seeing and touching—being touched—
 ends when they nail the coffin lid on.
 But, my mother—your grandma—had the last word
 on this creed the fall after she died,
 when I saw her one last time.

I'd started late, ridden slow, dawdling
 thinking, if at all, of her and the frontier
 between those that love that you're always crossing,
 never conquering and that darkens and closes
 suddenly and irrevocably when one of you goes.

When you're like that in winter mountains, night
 slips down sly, a panther's shadow,
 first a hint of something dark in shadows
 then suddenly, it's on you quick. Blank and cold.
 So, it was full brittle winter night
 when I reached camp and learned a visitor
 had been to dine and left a mess for "thank you."
 Bear by all sign. It was leveled, tent shredded.
 Just white mounds in snow. My late night breakfast
 gone to a gamier paunch than mine. Gone,
 with the job not done and fifteen miles to the Lodge
 and it closed by the time I'd worked down
 those winter ridges through night. And suddenly,
 it was dark, with dark you could almost touch.
 Wind has a sound in winter mountains—a mournful,
 hymn-like thrum—that tells you nothing's there
 in a way that teaches hope there might be.

I salvaged what I could by touch in the dark,
tented tarp scraps and tatters over
my lariat, tree to tree. Swept a floor
with my mittened hand down to ground.
The fire shook shadowy fringes in the dark.

I couldn't sleep. Started thinking how iffy
the drift is between wake and sleep,
quick and not, just a slip—
like a fish you've touched, nearly landed,
your hand numb in water, almost feeling—
Then it's gone, a shimmer in water shadows.

Then—she was there. Jennie.
Your grandma.
Mother, the way I knew her before
the war, not young—
like her picture there,
but in her prime, the way
you always know your mother.
She was there—
like your hand is there
on the table, and
she spoke to me.
Why don't you have more faith, son?
Where's your faith?

She said my name in her gentle voice.
That's all she said. I don't know what I answered.
I said something. Don't remember sleeping.
It wasn't sleep. Sleep I would know.
But I was sitting there with the air of something
I'd been saying lingering in the frost of my breath.

I'll stop with that because it's all I know.
Besides, your smirk tells me you wonder if I'm touched—
if I believe she breached the grave to caress,
cool as stone, the rasp of this old beard?

'Course not, no more than I fingered that bear
that welfared on my supper in the mountains.
But both were real as the shadow of your thumb—
there, where you rub it on your cup of soup.