

From Outside the Settlement

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*but here Death is already chalking the doors with crosses,
and calling the ravens, and the ravens are flying in.*

—Anna Akhmatova, translated by Stanley Kunitz

It's hard to balance
the pads of your feet on a railing.
He hadn't thought of that
until just now,
with the sound of water
skirting below him.
He'd thought of his people,
of belonging,
the way smiles are like sign posts
marking the miles home
but the mileage always reads
the same,
marked in zeros
as big as their eyes.
And he'd thought of the men
up north that would soon
be circling in preparation
like ravens.

Just south, his people
would be setting out dinner now.
He knew there would be
potatoes, carrots,
and venison.
He knew the children
would play games
beneath the table,
little fingers tracing pictures

they found in the patterns of the floor.
There would be words of prayer
and the low vibrating hum of hymns.
He knew this.
He knew that after the evening sermon,
after parents let go of children
to hold onto each other
beneath blankets
stitched in a history
of always hoping
the future might contain
the light their god had promised them—
instead of clouds and ash,
tar, torn flesh,
and shallow hurried graves—
there would be dreams
of fields and sky
and harvests without retreat.

He also knew he'd grown too weary,
knew he held no more space inside himself
for prophecies or light,
ghosts or grace,
gods or the doleful smiles
of this people.
He knew
behind the clouds
there was no light,
just the flap and crack
of wings
and the ravens flying in.