Four Passes on Mount Horeb

I Kings 19:11–12

for Matthew Lyman Rasmussen

Les Blake

Pass I

In winters it soothed me,
the wind blistering peals
through naked willows in the dark
outside my bedroom window,
while warm and bound I marked
lost spirits sounding in the cold.

But summer waned,
the threshold pressed upon my racing ear
for Father’s midnight pacing, broke with
stark measured swearing
at what death blew through the wheat crop
in that godless zephyr’s breath.

Pass II

Stakes driven into loose dry beans,
each anchored root waits proof
that nothing holds in quake
outside a roof of holy soil.
Atop each grating plate a voice
bodes, layered in the noise—
“There is no other ground or stand
that I cannot destroy.”
Pass III
The ingredients are spare—
heat, fuel, air.
I saw the conflagration
of a several-story pine,
a wildland fire, south Utah,
just prior jumped its line.
Felled branches melting bootsoles
dry O² crisp in lung,
a desperate snap consumed by
one last worse and cloven flame.
Before I could exhale
the same, black and white
the burns the ash
immersing whole the frame.

Pass IV
This is the new tongue.
This will be your tongue.
Hold your breath, your pain.
Root yourself to the still-moving mount.
Feel the heat of the word refrain
as God rushes by
bosom bent to the Earth.
Straining.
Straining.
Strain.