

Death is a Work in Progress

My mother says *fox* while gesturing toward an old red wagon abandoned in our yard for decades. A word so cavernous her entire body vanishes into it. Body of misfiring electrons. Scattered images, contexts. Body that is mainly just body now. No other animal knows how to be this incomplete. I think: if you were a fox coyotes would have eaten you by now. I say: *yes, I'll climb into that fox and let you pull me through the high grass one more time.*

John Sibley Williams

It Was a Golden Age of Monsters

The sickle moon bobs like a child's paper boat
between silhouettes of paper mountains. I am watching

steam swell off a herd of bison in a black and white
book about the American West. Too young to read

much into what I'm reading. The world is all image,
unfinished rail track and Douglas-fir, level saw cuts, rings

tracing back to the beginning. The dozen spears projecting
from a felled paper beast are replaced the next chapter

by rifles and iron and the same falling. Tomorrow
it will snow and my father will drive me down

to the hospital again. Snowflakes crazing
about our headlights. Paper moon between

the mountains. I will be thinking about bison,
blood on the page, the pillow. The road

that curls home always seems to erase itself.
And the steam coming off it, frail as breath.

John Sibley Williams

One Horse Town

and so what
if—disowned—this hometown

~

named after some other town &
spidered by streets named for

trees you've never seen

~

sounds like fire, now. like

~

flint spark plume. smother. escape. trying
to erase your name from the too-narrow
-one-lane entrance with your heel.
severed—

~

you've repeated to the morning
mirror—the thread. the past. the apples
that gripped your baby teeth, still
raining down.

~

in the garage, upside-down,
your old bicycle, wheels spinning along
an open road of air.

~

everything but your bones
a trespass. and your bones, too.
the map in your palm. and the flame.

~

and that one missing shingle,
all the unpainted interiors,

and the bones interred
a week before your return

~

and, finally, your return.

~

the rain, and moving through
the rain that same horse

you named after a king
who saw home even in
the furthest edges of the world

~

nuzzles up to the mound

as if smelling you in it.

John Sibley Williams

St. Helens [1980]

Sometimes deer stop returning to the river to drink. Just like that. Ash lacquers the surface for a few months and over the bodies it compresses into a kind of stone. Funereal, the sky returns to those Biblical days our grandparents recounted over our tightened eyes, feigning sleep. When we dreamed it was always of this. Of them, angry gods. Of constant featureless night. And still. Perhaps it's true: I haven't lost much recently, at least compared to the deer that won't be here when the water cleanses itself blue again. I'd like to say we are a patient people, a stone people, that something good will come from waiting for the sun to reemerge to lengthen our shadows.

John Sibley Williams