

Simon Perchik

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Even the dying wince, their stench  
makes you gag --you can't ask  
must rely on their skin  
and its yellowing glaze  
with just enough sunlight left  
for directions back

--they languish at night  
looking for what must be  
those tiny rocks mourners leave  
as if the dead could still  
find refuge in a few simple words

placed near --the dying need this doubt  
to go further, not sure why  
their eyes once had such power  
and now can't open to demand

where to make a boundary line  
that's safe once inside  
with all those stars, far off  
not yet arrived  
as still warm dirt and mornings.

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Attack and this hillside  
shows its teeth :each stone  
drips with saliva

and even the glaze  
can't tell the difference  
-- you dig till the sun

enters at last  
staggering the way each evening  
is burned to the ground

laid bare in the smoke  
all stones smell when struck  
one against the other

and the dirt dragged away  
still struggling  
--you only want to share

though your hands won't dry  
and each year less room  
--you dig as if each hole

is filled with shoreline  
could be held back  
rebuilt from waves

from valleys and mountain streams  
that whiten these stones  
with cheeks and emptiness.

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And though your shadow just  
by cooling down  
dries the way leaves bring back the dead  
with not even a footpath  
the snow can hold on to --cold

is how galaxies are held in  
huddle weightless in the window  
closest to the street, empty from the bottom

then wander off in the dark

flecked with gold :a star and its mother  
still calling to the others from a window  
and what sounds like gunfire  
is just more snow throwing out its light

for the circling approach that guides  
her shadow safely to the ground  
the just above the branches  
step by step torn open by their leaves  
and on their back the pieces.

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As if risk was still involved the group  
doesn't move, struck head on  
though the flash has too much sun in it  
--the class wants the yearbook to command  
flame with that relentless sound  
only a chorus can ignite :a single voice  
caressed by others and you almost touch  
the face that once was yours, half  
at a stand-still, half telling you  
directions  
--its eyes left open the way every grave  
puts together those small stones  
left alongside :flawless voices  
--a cleared mountain pass  
letting you through where the Earth  
is almost nothing in itself.

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Still warm and the paint  
darkening the way all walls  
grieve --in just an hour

another coat though the floor  
will cool first  
lose its hold and the ground

--you're careful not to touch  
where the corpse is listening  
comforted with skin and bones

and gloss --over and over  
that sing-along-song  
where no one weeps

or remembers the words  
and you let the roller drip  
kept silent for so long.