

ASPEN: QUAKE

Jim Papworth—Department of English

When the wind hits it it
shudders like anger
or giddiness.

Each yellow leaf shakes—
ten thousand tiny hands—
waving a sound
like rain pelting
concrete or canvas.

But these are human
things, and this is not a sound
humans make without brass,
strings, or animal skins
stretched and panting,
or cylinders yammering
under pressure and strain.

It is like the throat thrum
rumbling from a grouse
swollen in the feather quiver
of spring.

Or a hundred
hooves hammering
soft ground
in flight.

Or the ache
of water falling towards
the ocean.

Or the ocean
itself sheeshing rocks and shells
against land
in the incessant, percussive
song of the sea.

Here in the yellow
blast of fall this tree is October's
last solo: one by one
the leaves will drop
until one voice whispers
the final honest note.

DEATH: ASPEN
(OCTOBER 1989)

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I.

Late October. Once again
aspen stand
white arms
and hands

reaching to the stars for color
and for the sounds of space,

like rumors,
thumb-sized trunks, huge trunks, all
hooked in the root net of the mother tree.

An explosion of white-bodies,
a planet of trees
whose gold leaves slather
like tongues or flames
licking the new air.

2.

A woman leaves this life
in a pain like fire,
and her body is like fire,
brilliant in flame, white,
light and thin, coaxed

into crossing over
when acceptance arrived

in the night

like a silent glove
she entered without fanfare,
each finger a life counted sure.

3.

October is a silent month
full of bird migrations
and insects dying by the millions.

Rivers turn cold, rocks grow silent,
and everywhere the pragmatic
ratchet of squirrel talk
echoes through the trees.

4.
In the beginning
she came to me often,
in dreams, in thoughts that closed
around me, in the noise our sons made,
in the silent sounds when I was ready
and listening, a messenger,
an angel maybe, something like a touch
on my shoulder, but lighter, a breeze,
a noise I barely heard,
a bird without wings.

I caught myself turning often
to see her vanishing just out of reach,
slipping between the two worlds
where she lived, the one carnal,
the other like a bird burned
ethereal and hot
etched beyond some flimsy veil
I could almost see through,

5.
the two tortures of hell—
ice
and fire.

6.
Spring arrives.

I am not Tantalus
standing in a pool;
I sip freely,
water slides down my throat.

Some of the trees bend like the backs
of old horses, the weight of snow
a curvature of spine and thought,

but always the upright vision
towards the sun, always the straightening.

7.

Listen for the Lord's answers
to prayers,

His voice rises like the trees,
His body clings to ours,

the first phoenix to rise from the ashes.
He waits in the trees, His skin like the skin
of the aspen, His arms held out for us.

Rise and meet Him. Rise.
We are the trees, the birds.

ABOVE THE ASPEN

Jim Papworth—Department of English

I.

When the cerulean sky
took me back,
saying, yes, my son,

I entered her like I had left,
a body without blood or bones,
a weightless spirit, ready and nervous.

Tree souls: light and like-bodied essences,
courses and courses in song,
in dance. Swaying slim trees
white-silver-gray.

No sun, a place making its own light,
no clouds. And birds, white
and untroubled, in the constant
soar of bird.

2.

How easy I begin to forget.
How easy.

3.

I am pure music.
I am bird of paradise.
I am painted buntings.

My flitting from limb to limb
is a song of sweet notes—
cheeps and cheets.

I flash and whir,
perfect bodied.
My name is a song
a slight breeze says.

4.

Ophir's ships float off shore,
in something like the sea,

but no waves, no water;
they ride low, laden with gold,
jewels, and ivory tusks.

5.

I want to touch the trees,
their white bodies like skin
I remember,
inner thigh, inner arm, stomach,
breasts, and secret passages.

To walk through them
in my old body, late afternoon light,
to see trumpeter swans,
vain and black masked,
oaring the sky above me and the trees,
slow sweep of wings and feather-tip,
a V big as a county;
geese honk and flight;
and the quick spurt of mallards
rising off water.

Light filters through the trees
like water I want to touch,
dipping my hand and arm
to the shoulder. And leaves
quaking.

Colors I have worn.

6.

In the high order of stars
diagrams of constellations,
omphalos, the cosmic center,
gate and gatekeeper to God's land.

I stand at the four stars
like a cross, arms out,
reaching for what I think
is mine.

I awake.