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Prelude

IMPRESSIONIST CALENDAR

While we slept, June gave way to July,  
Monet's wheatfields to Sisley's canal.

Time is passing: that's what all  
calendars say, and all music.

The heart's thin lightning  
walls won't stand forever.

To know the summer in winter  
and the winter in summer

is our curse and consolation.  
Those French painters accused

of poor vision saw more clearly  
than most the circles within circles—

the boats held by the harbor, the blown  
cloudstacks held by summer sky,

the summer sky held by longing.

## STORM ISLAND

At first it was a single downed trunk  
jammed up against our downtown bridge  
footing, wishbone shape wedged broadside  
the current. No one thought much about that  
river-washed roost for ducks and geese.

Years passed, and the rains returned. The river  
spread its muddy cloak over the bottom-  
lands, gathering flotsam of storms to hasten  
southward on its brown, fast-moving flood.  
More branches hooked onto the lodged tree trunk.

With each storm the woody mass grew until  
it became an island patched together  
from the disparate, far-flung wrack of  
generous rains. Its tight weave collected  
a soil in which new green life could root.

The island, now a solid tangle of storm-  
debris shaped by forces of gravity  
and weather, challenges with its right  
to be here. Who has the strength or will  
to tear loose those implicated limbs?

Disasters uproot us, carry us along  
with their flow, lock us into each other.  
Surely bigger, wilder storms will bring  
new detritus to thicken our island. What  
right have we storm-borne to refuse them?

## NOTE TO SELF

Well, we die whether we stay together or fall apart.  
Finally the world goes on its way without us.  
The most scourge-like name alive today will one day  
be spoken seldom if at all. To what purpose  
this sighing and raging? To what purpose this pain?  
The main thing is to be a part of one's time,  
no matter which side seems to be winning. It's OK  
to be a noble failure, a fool in the eyes of the world,  
to die in the relentless faith of a Pete Seeger  
or Rachel Carson. The big truck taking up so much  
space will one day come to the end of its road.  
Insults will be forgotten. Offended decency  
will be forgotten. In a hundred years, new  
people and new problems. And we can be  
sure there will be some glory in being alive  
in just their moment, as there is in ours.  
Even as I write and as you read, the termites  
of ruin are chewing day and night at the under-  
side of the hypocrite's mask that shines with  
such shameless intensity in the national  
spotlight. The time to speak is always now.  
Say your truth if only for those who may be  
listening from the galleries of dead and unborn,  
if not the childish public locked in their  
death tango with destruction. Reserve for yourself  
days of uninterrupted silence in which to hear  
those things that have settled in your heart most deeply  
sing their faithfulness beneath time's altering sky.

## POEM FOR HOPE

I wake, mind and spirit clouded by the news.  
The gray sky says that things have been both  
better and worse. How did the woman interviewed  
on NPR put it — *Americans have  
developed a preference for certainty  
over hope.* That's the current we swim against.  
Damp as it is, the air is surprisingly clear.  
Suddenly I'm aware of another.  
A small hawk, a Cooper's, alights on  
a low branch, not flying off as I  
come nearer, giving me a good look at it.  
I've never seen a Cooper's hawk in this  
place, much less at close range. I pull my  
breath inward, beholding in sharp detail  
the small shapely head with its hooked beak  
and burning eye, its wings and tail that so  
elegantly charge with life the space around  
them. Friends, the greatest realists are those  
who, uncertain about their certainty,  
keep a door open to hope. This is still  
a beautiful planet. You know how geese  
before migrating will all at once start  
into motion and with a great discordant  
orchestral cry rise *en masse* from the water.  
The day is coming when we'll do that too.

## TO KRISTA SLEEPING

Your face sleeping is a rose at rest.  
All ages meet in your glow of peace.  
I sense myself on the perimeter of your  
dream. There are so many places inside us  
where no one else can go. If I can't  
enter, then I'll be your guard. And will you  
guard me also when I sleep? When we  
both sleep, who guards? Fences come down, and we  
are free to go together wherever  
we wish. I know it's not up to me, but  
I hope never to see your sleeping  
face with all its dreams gone. When we leave,  
let's fly together like two of Chagall's blue  
lovers whose bodies have dissolved into song.

## THE LONELINESS

Already a vast loneliness has seeped  
into our souls with the cancellations  
and closings. We miss the conviviality  
of the restaurant table, the church service,  
the joy of the jamming musicians,  
the natural camaraderie of  
sidewalk and supermarket. We're not  
meant to be alone, not meant to deflect  
the approach of neighbors. Now each locked-down  
house becomes a grave where small, dismembered  
pieces of community lie scattered alive,  
waiting to be called back to wholeness.  
We ache for each other, ache for contact.  
We knew it would all break down someday.  
Not sustainable. *The center cannot hold.*  
We are being shown something bigger.  
We are being called to something higher.

Shall we come out of this changed, finally  
able to hear each others' voices across  
the social distance, the voices drowned out  
by fear? When the theaters and bars reopen,  
when the hospital beds are vacant again  
and the world resumes its old business  
of getting and spending, how shall we think  
on these days withdrawn from one another  
and the communal heart, the dead civic air?  
Will the grief still eat at us, as it does now?  
Is this how it happens, a lesson we need  
to learn, overshadowing all our other  
learning? In the enforced quiet we have

space to ask these questions and listen  
for answers. How will we love each other  
and ourselves in the upheavals to come?