

St. Valentine's Day Walk in the Farmland

James Owens

Gobs of snow fleas
like flung handfuls
of teeming soot
on the plowed berm—
ichor of glycine
to keep the ice
out, they nuzzle
in rotting leaves
and tick invisibly,
the unlit seconds
of winter hours.
A day of drizzle
and glassy roads,
they rise and swarm,
the most numerous
life in this country.
They harm no one,
neither biting nor
stinging, unhungry
for our blushing hearts.

Albedo

James Owens

—25 Feb. 23

Having gathered the frail sun to their matte surfaces, a scatter of brown leaves from the sapling oaks nestles two centimetres deep in the perfectly leaf-shaped beds, their darkness warms into the packed snow's icy glare.

This is the pyre where the bones of nations will burn.

Neuraesthetics

James Owens

—Kagawong, Ontario

I have never seen columbines along this stream before,
but here they are, red blossoms in the shade on the bank,

small folded lanterns nodding in a curt breeze, as water
swift with the slope of its bed ruffles and gurgles

toward Lake Huron, a cool suffused clarity over rocks
bronzed in the June sunlight and green-striated with streamers

of moss waving in the flow. The flowers wave above in the afternoon,
and in response my brain reshapes itself to code the memory

in a fine thread of protein, a wisp of me as sleek as the chalaza
curdled in egg white. It is physical, an electrically excitable,

unique chemical sequence that means these columbines'
thin stems and the points of blossoms like the bent legs of insects,

this colour of petals, red just emerging wet from a sugary pink,
clustered around a yellow interior velvety with sex organs.

So a neuronal aesthetics is born, which goes beyond noting the bare fact

that columbines grow here but represents *what it is like* to know them
through this memory's cross-linking with other encoded wisps,
a mesh that gleams with specifics, the shine of slick-washed stones
under the tumbling water, an aspen shivering, birds, the fungal smell
of dirt licked away where the bank has caved beneath a mat of roots,
and the linkages also extend through time to the autumn day
when Erin and I breathed cold here and watched golden-flanked salmon
punch tunnels through the current, and to another day another summer
when I sat alone reading Miroslav Holub and sweating, over-dressed
against mosquitoes thick as pepper-spray in the air, but stubborn to be here.
Why? Why such complexity and over-indexing in memory,
the simple, reportable fact, useful to the tribe, woven this deeply
into the web of sense impressions and association, smell and hue
and taste of a never repeated breeze, the warmth of particular skin?
Is it because the aesthetic makes the useful fact richer, more likely
to be recalled and told and attended? Or is it because
I find myself imaged in this, where the ramifying signal-flicker
ghosting in gel beneath an arch of bone seems a compensatory mirror

for the world always slipping over its horizon, already lost,

but weighted, real, incarnate still in detail, drenched in meaning?
A bit further along the trail, a wooden footbridge crosses the creek,

a few metres upstream from a fallen pine whose branches
break and braid the fast water to icy lace, where the plank handrail

is littered with maple samarae. And lovers must have passed here,
strangers to me, who left traces scored in boxy, knife-point carving:

DEVLAND

CHARLENE