

Poems by Corey Marks from *The Radio Tree* (New Issues Press, 2012)

The Radio Tree

All night she walked until she came to a forest
and in the forest a hollow tree split like two waves.
A radio yammered from inside: her mother's
voice—not as it is now, but as it was once—
and then her father's, answering, though what
and for what reason she couldn't catch, the way
at times in the backseat she would hear them
speaking less in words than strings of sound
that tied and untied and unraveled into silences
while she looked out the window at the long
black wires stretched pole by pole into the open
distance that carried other voices she couldn't hear
and where birds settled in ones and twos to make
their own declarations lost to her in the whirl
of the car gliding over gray rural roads. So many
things not speaking to her across such distances.
She would look through the near world
pouring past to the far points that remained
almost steady. They'd pleased her, those moments,
with a loneliness she knew was her own,
but she would listen differently now,
wouldn't she, knowing what she knows.
The radio's round face glowed inside the tree.
She turned a dial. Static rushed sentences
stripped of words and still strange to her,
estranged, as though she remained a child.
But these voices weren't her childhood,
they were that other world of her parents' lives.
A bare wire sparking elsewhere in the rain.
A thrush scuttling into a clear cut's far bracket.
She thought of how, once, she woke in the night,
walked out of her house across one road,
then another and into the damaged fields, walked
until she came to a forest she'd never seen. Tidy
black rows of trees arranged there by someone's
need for order. A second growth. Then an opening
in the dark like two waves lit from within.

Three Bridges

When the rains came I was, for my own purposes,
on the far side of the river. Who could've known
the drizzle would ratchet to torrent, or the river
unbuckle, swallow its banks, ring the scattered trees

like so many necks trying to stay afloat, strip boats
from their moorings and batter them out of the river's throat
into the mouths of other rivers? Or that it would wash out

the town's three bridges: the one too narrow to walk
two abreast, the one beyond the last houses, already ruined,
abandoned by all but reckless boys and swallows,

even the one, story goes, someone made a pact
with the devil to build, the one I crossed in the morning
as it arched in the uneasy air like a wing.

And by the time I had to leave what I'd come to do
half-done, the rain made it hard to see, coming down
and never done with falling. Everything bleared,

went pale and indistinct. My clothes weighed
as much as a child. I fell, and the rain struck me
clean. I lost my way and found a river I didn't recognize

in its frenzy, whitecaps shearing its surface like teeth.
Even when the rains died, the flood kept on, worrying
the absent bridges, the water thick with silt, its current
full of animals coiled in the rush. I couldn't dare it.

Where's the devil when his deal falls through
its own reflection? Now the bridge is half of what it was,
reversed in the river bottom leading nowhere

I want to go. At least from here I can see my house,
my daughter when she walks into the yard with a pail.
She looks up by chance, and though she must wonder

what's become of me, she doesn't see my waving arm,
an unrecognizable motion in a landscape she knows
(no break)

she should know but doesn't anymore. Or she sees me
in too many places to keep track; I'm the one missing

thing missing everywhere. But then her eyes catch
on the swallows sweeping the bloated river—no way
back to their roosts now, they lift away to take an eyeful
of everything that isn't what it was. And move on . . .

This must be what death is like: those left behind
look up sometimes where they think you should be,
but if they see you at all it's from too far to make sense

of what you've become—a color bled briefly
into sight through a whirl of silt. And then—who can
blame them, there's so much to do to reclaim the house,
to live in it again—they look away, and you're left

waiting for the river to settle back between the banks
that held it in place all your life and become itself again.

The Black Bear at Closing

The bear presses her shoulder to the glass
of her enclosure in the bluing light
and looks into her habitat, the rutted path,

the cement-bowl pond rimmed with muck,
the red ball lolled against a log—
a creature done with being gawked.

You knock the glass. A primal indifference
twitches her matted back. Elsewhere,
the exhibits clear, children trail the trauma

of their voices through the turnstiles
as evening wallows in their wake.
Some garish bird clocks out the day.

The bear slouches in shadow, ridiculous
and vaguely human, and you lean closer,
nothing more than attention's ghost.

One paw fidgets idly at her knee.
The bears you came to see as a child
must be dead. Not the ones in books

you read, though, that were never alive—
they'd come back if you wanted them. The dead
stay dead. You peer at your own hands,

how they fold and pucker into mouths. *Kiss off*,
the little lips tell each other, toothless
and cruel. Above, loudspeakers announce

what they always announce at this hour.
It hasn't occurred to the guard that you'll be here,
pressed to your own side of the glass,

inches from the bear drawn into herself
as though you're not here, her black fur splayed
against the same transparency resisting your touch.

Wait long enough and curiosity becomes trespass,
like watching a woman in a restaurant
nudge the blunt nub of her nipple

into an infant's mouth to quell an inconsolable
anger. See how the black bear stares
into her paw upturned now in the sprawl of her lap

with the preoccupation of a reader.
Your mother used to read with that intensity—
it bristled a thicket around her. *Mother*,

Mother! Some other voice had her ear,
calling her another direction, into wilderness.
No trail you knew led there. She held

her grief the same way, paged through
as though the loss was a story
she wandered into child-like and alone.

The empty bowl was for her, the broken chair—
remnants to be claimed, sorted, dog-eared.
You left her there. The door closed

like an opening book when you went outside
to skirt the edge of a woods, and thrash
the understory with a broken stick.