

The Sweet Hereafter

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It seems I am no monk.
It turns out I cannot sit with suffering
without saddling it with an ill-fitting God.

Who knows what tipped me over,
another Christmas and its neon grin,
the living dead at Wal-Mart
pushing their loaded carts through the aisles,
the class I taught on child soldiers in Uganda,
the way the Lord's Resistance Army kidnaps boys
and forces them to beat another child to death. Each day
a new boy in the camp is chosen. I sat there, after the lecture,
wondering what happens to the body:
is it pounded like steak until it is limp and soft,
and how do they kill a child with such small fists and feet?
As the boy looks up through the pummeling does he
see a kind of God waiting for him, smiling?
Does he know instinctively, like the bee
and the hummingbird, how to find nectar?

I need to know —
one day, will it happen; will I swallow a God who can handle
all of this,
my eyes watering as I hold Him down?
Will the bitter potion
turn to wine
and I feel warm and giddy,
sitting in the front pew of the Church of the Holy Light,
the sun's giant paw resting on my back?

In spring,
my mother will die.
I will smell another impossibly thick
fist of cherry blossom.
When I take her body into the woods,
when I think I can't bear the loss, the light fading,
and I sink to my knees, will there be a God
that I move toward like nectar,
or will a God surface from within?

What I want is this:
after they lower her body into the earth,
I won't believe my good fortune
when a God shows up
and lets down His rain of reassurance,
and I sit in awe,
like the first time my milk came in,
and I lay there
in the moss,
my whole blouse sopping.