

ICON

Thou still unravished—but we would
cut the cedar clear through
bride and brede, and so with a chain saw's rude
disquiet we notched in a wedge and made to lay the tree
down where we wanted it,
watching a damson spew of dust
spun from the heartwood's slowly exposed,
unlikely burgundy.

How cleanly then the sixty years
of cedar cracked and fell
away—and gave us the wider view of the pond
we'd wanted. A heron hunched its neck and labored
from the reeds. And then there was quiet.
My job was to limb its long antlered branches,
unruly evergreen, for kindling—too preoccupied to think
to bless it.

As is his custom, my husband
worked without swerving
from the task at hand, whistling, I swear it,
in full-throated ease. Listening, I was already serving
a distant master,
drawn into dream by the wedge of heartwood
we'd propped by the stone wall, its potent core
of muscadine a magnet.

That quiet well, that purple flare
set me summoning
birdsong buried deep in trees, all the unheard
stir and flutter inherent there in the early color
of sunrise
claret mornings before the rain comes on—
a blaze of song, a murmurous haunt of song, then
the ache of it. Pent there.

That's the thing of it, the pivot.
A wedge of wood, the quiet
eye's configuring, unacknowledged pain—
and I turned abruptly inward, having just glimpsed
an icon of you, John Keats,
a sketch Rublev might have made one sultry afternoon
in Rome as you lay wasted and spent
on your deathbed,

its pillow and shadow a chrismal nest
about your fevered head,
the diffuse gist of you gathered in what must be
sensed as presence—Oh, but not unravished—
yours such a fervent, fraught
ambition I think of the young man I saw
before Orain's altar on Iona. He was already kneeling
when I happened in,

mute before the altar's wide board
and plain brass cross,
all his ardent plans unscrolled, placed boldly
there, given into the burden of the mystery
we hope to illumine.
He touched his forehead to the board,
still kneeling, and for all I know blushed crimson,
caught at such fervor.

I tried to ignore him, I looked
away into the cul de sac
and mudra my hands were making of emptiness.
Theophane the Recluse was right—most of us
are like shavings of wood
curled round the rudely opened core
we pretend not to notice, catching at musky
shadows instead.

But I couldn't ignore him—no,
we endured

each other's presence as one turns up a collar
against an intruding wind off the Sound and keeps on
keeping on; we were kneeling
but not impossibly. The wine of unease
and dissonance also a communion—
or it could be.

In the argent revelry and dark
harmonies of your poems
you seized at that truth, you bruised your way
into leafy passages, into the ordinary
understory, searching
what only can be known by touch and blunder,
or sensed in blurred discernings, in presage,
solitude and wonder.

In orchard joy, in the tease of sorrow
you compelled
response. Like you, but not yet betrayed
by the unimagined, the youth in Orain's chapel stood,
scrolled up his papers
from the altar's wood, straightened his watch cap
and—nodding off to the side, where I wasn't quite—
he strode away.

And then I stood where he'd stood
full of blood and promise.
And where you'd stood, coughing in the raw wind
perhaps, bareheaded, a pilgrim. Stood there in the ringing
quiet without
the comfort of word or gesture or vow,
sensing, within the silence, a harvest—for that
is our labor, *touch wood*.