

What is it in us that makes us want  
to preserve a dead marriage in this ice?

I move to the enameled sideboard. *Yes  
I've always been good at freshening drinks.  
Yes I may be the only man who keeps a  
pickle jar of margueritas in the fridge  
but I doubt it.* I answer with my back  
to her. I clasp her glass in a shiver-  
ing left hand, fight the urge  
to lift the rim to my lips. Ice is  
January in my right hand, in her glass.  
Tequila is February thaw, a slow week  
of temperatures in the forties, the steady  
melt of accumulated frost and ice  
in the joints, layer after layer of snow  
coming to face the sun again,  
each with its history of tracks of animals,  
the shapes of the wind's velocity and direction,  
until, standing in the mud, above  
a soggy autumn leaf, I recognize

in its brittle veins the origins of love.  
I turn and finally, for once, meet her eyes.

#### SOMETHING FOR THE TELLING

*"An old cowpoke went riding out . . ."*

In each telling the madness of it  
comes on me again—the sledgehammer  
pulse, the crystalline night vision.  
Even now in my old age my nostrils  
flare to the smell of tequila  
at the thought, my throat thickens  
in each telling, and the piebald hand  
that rests on my stick steadies again.

It was a Sunday the summer of the drought,  
after Earl died, meant for drinking a curse  
on the heat, the dry grass, the fireweed  
sprouting up in the hay meadows,  
on skinny cows going dry on their calves,  
a curse on dervish windmills pumping  
as much sand as water, on the wind  
and on Earl for leaving the place to me.  
That summer of the drought we woke  
to the wind, worked with wind around us,  
at our elbows, in our ears, the sand  
it carried in our teeth, under our skins,  
until, at night, it became the voices  
of our dreams, the voices of the ghosts  
of the Sioux saying our sins against  
the spirit of the wind. That's the way  
it was, that afternoon, drinking  
and picking the blistered and broken skin  
from under our mustaches, cursing  
and half-scared we'd been cursed,

when Lightfoot thought to drink a curse  
on Wesley and his no-good brother Billy,  
who lived four-five mile south down  
on the county line, who'd put in  
center-pivot irrigation that spring  
to suck up everybody's water  
at a thousand gallons a minute.  
The more we thought about it,  
those dead Indians, and listened  
to the wind, the surer we were  
that it was Wesley and his worthless  
brother, and just as the sun set  
Lightfoot thought of the dynamite.

Earl had had it around for years,  
and Lightfoot had seen him handle it  
once to blow up a stump, and he figured  
he'd seen enough to make it work again.  
We found it by match-light in the shed.  
The horses must have smelled our breath  
or read our minds and gave us some trouble,  
so, balancing on top the corral gate,  
I told them that what we were about to do  
had religious significance, which didn't help  
until I explained the concept in terms  
of sparse feed and bad winds, while Lightfoot  
sneaked in between them and got a tight hand  
on each ear just as I gave the sign of the cross  
and fell over backwards. We saddled up  
as clouds, blotting out the stars overhead,  
moved towards the rising moon  
and rode off with sticks, caps, tape,  
fuse and a bottle in our shirts.

The gods that govern madness gave us  
sure hands that night as we worked our way  
from tower to tower towards the center  
of the field, placing the caps where  
they seemed to want to go, taping bundles  
together, taping each where it looked  
like it'd do some damage, stringing  
the long fuse, while first a veil  
covered the moon, then a haze, then a fog,  
on skittish horses all bunched up  
beneath us, ready to fly at the littlest change  
in the wind. We were just putting the last  
bundle on the pump when we saw how the gods  
had tricked us: we sat our horses in the middle  
of the field; the lighting end of the fuse

was in our hands. We cyphered two ways out:  
across rows of tall corn or racing fire  
back down the lane we'd come up,  
a quarter-mile fuse running  
through eleven bundles of ten sticks each.  
Sheet lightning danced in the west.  
We listened to the wind for guidance.  
I was just sobering up enough to know better  
when I heard nothing: for the first time  
that summer the wind had paused. The match  
blazed and burned in stillness. We touched  
off the fuse and spurred our horses.

Oh, we were maybe thirty yards ahead  
of the first explosion, so loud it was like  
riding a lightning bolt through the middle  
of summer thunder. The concussion set off  
a thousand gallons of diesel fuel in the tank  
by the pump and lifted the horses into the air.  
They came down on all four just a few feet  
farther down the lane, and we didn't need  
spurs again. I saw the flash of the second  
reflected in the whites of the horses' eyes.  
I turned to look just once, and it was like  
someone had dropped a kid's erector set  
into a coal furnace. Someplace in that ride  
Lightfoot lost his hat, I lost a good bit  
of the hearing in one ear, and the horses'  
tails got singed pretty good. Near the end  
we were blown away from the gate into the corn,  
and we jumped four strands of barbed wire  
on the wind from the last bundle.

Even now I'm sitting a blowing horse  
on a rise two miles away, watching  
a diesel fire puddle and spread  
among flattened pipe, bent angle iron  
and green corn. Even now I see the squat  
column of water stand in the fire,  
and even now the wind brings Earl's laugh  
across decades into my deaf ear.

*—for Bob Carpenter*