

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 slightest 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