

Moored, he would sink thick chunks of red meat,
like bait for world-record catfish,
and watch the bloodlines spiral down to where
a boy waited in his fathomable yard
for the gospel of aluminum cans, messages
stamped on the bellies of lost lures.

Under clouds scattered on the calm lake, the town
would reassemble itself as in a film
time-lapsed backwards. Streets would shrug off
decades of mud, houses settle on their washed foundations,
and as townspeople scuttled into habits,
trucks would ease out of store lots and service stations,
backing toward Bristol, Johnson City and Elizabethton,
returning their undelivered loads of newspapers
and salt, hymnals and dried beans, work shoes,
fine sugar and loaf after white loaf of Rainbo Bread.

CALLING

for Bill Levin

It had been a lark, after dinner
and too much wine, to shepherd
my puzzled guests beyond
the porchlight's ragged arc
to the woodlot's edge
where I would whistle softly
for the owls. Tennessee's own
good ole boy of Winander,
I would listen, then warble
the uvular trill they always
answered when the whistle
failed.

With each pause
between calls, they would close in
then suddenly flutter out
against a sky the heavy dark
beneath our trees made luminous.

Or they would light invisibly
in wet branches, showering
us with rain as they did
the night you were here.

After the others had gone,
we stood beneath the poplars
while the houselights went out.
You told me you had finally
connected, found the woman
you could talk with all night,
that you played guitar
and sang together in bed
after making love.

But tonight you call me
from Boston saying she can't
be reached. She's hung up twice
and taken her phone off the hook.

What can I do, living half my life
long distance, but tell you to try again
in the morning?

It isn't enough.
Disconnected, I wander outside
and call to the owls: whistle
and pause, warble and wait
again and again. But the woods'
only response is the chirr
of dry leaves the wind moves,

backed by the fading hiss
of tires two miles off
along the four-lane. After

I darken the house, lock up
and lie down beside the woman
you tell me I should love more,
the owl's call comes, like a foal's
faint whinny through blowing snow —

an answer.

I'm not sure
what it means, but something
out there is listening, coming back
in its own dark need in its own
time. Is it that simple?
I'll call you tomorrow and we'll talk.