

Anchorage, 1989

And now, that look on your face:
the same residue you found on
the murre eggs upriver, as if
the damp earth left its fingerprint on your
eyelids as we sat across from each other
in the café. And now, the length

of your legs just short of touching
my legs underneath the table, the memory
of the way we wrapped our limbs together,
eclipsed, like the old village on
that island where we met. And we
would relocate ourselves, or what we

thought it meant to be ourselves.
In Anchorage, when the snow cracked
beneath your feet, and the mountains
seemed a little larger than usual, you
offered your hands, opened. I remember,
not because I thought about taking them,

but because when my hands lay cupped
in yours—both browned of sun—it reminded
me of hunting caribou upriver, squinting
against sunlight, in that rock canyon.
I did take your hands, because it was polite
and you didn't mean to hold them

for more than a moment; it was the only thing
you could offer then. Now, I straighten
my silverware set on the table, as if
you might tell me what I really want to hear
which was not that we were wrong,
but that our weakness really means

that we are linked somehow with history,
the same history that has brought us
together miles from the old village
on that island where we met.
Those mornings you'd wake up first
to make coffee and listen to water fall from

the edge of the roof in the spring,
are as faint now as the smell of damp earth

beneath concrete. And I cannot look you
in the eye, because sometimes,
eye contact is more intimate than breath
in whispers, like that trip we took upriver,

when our daughter balanced on the edge
of the boat, leaning out, dragging her fingers
in the water, as meaningless now as this
meeting today in the café, listening to
our waitress swear under her breath
as she takes our order, two mugs of coffee

braided in her fingers. A gust of wind
rips through the front door of the café
when a short man in red Chuck Taylors
smiles at me as he brushes the snow from
his shoulders—the kind of man you were
before I found you resting under the

overpass of New Seward Highway this afternoon.
It was an accident finding you
there. I wanted that man standing
next to the flashing jukebox to come over, sit in
your seat and work the Sunday crossword
puzzle with me, but he didn't. And now, I

leave you, like the old village on that island
where we met, on the corner of Ingra
and 5th Avenue after you asked me
for twenty dollars, but I see now it is the same—
the aluminum boat, the murre eggs,
the coffee dripping over the lip of the mug,

the dark of your eyelids—each held
in drowned memory, the same way our mouths
know the taste of salt, or not salt itself,
but the memory of salt. It is a narrow passage
between breath and memory, leaning inward.
And according to you it wasn't our

reflexes that failed us, that day on the river
in that second she fell from the boat,
but that we were inexperienced. And now,
in the cottoned quiet of my car, a snowplow
scrapes against hard-packed snow, and
I don't know how to tell you that I need

the story to take a breath. As we told it
to strangers, suffering the quiet of
silt and current unmoving, doubting,
in the same way, if she too, lay unmoving.
I drove and I refused our directional relation,
where the only word for backward

meant stern and forward meant bow.
And I heard your voice stretching over the
curved tundra, telling me stories of swans
who took flight and fell to the earth
to become humans. It was simple then,
like the old village on that island where

we met. But, when I found you
crossing the street, you were frozen,
drunk, clutching your thermos, your clothes
stitch-marked and thinned and you looked
as though you might stand up to argue with me
about life jackets and the way the shallows

in the river had shifted those ten years before
and I would have yelled back at you to slow down,
but all that is left is the hum of my Buick
as I wait for you to cross the street,
your breath creating its own cloud formation.
And now, every time I listen to Cat

Stevens, I think of her, so I have set out
all the albums and even the record player
on the street and listen in the morning
to that snow plow that keeps me awake,
thinking of caribou hunting and winding
switchbacks under the 3 a.m. sun. It was

the way each song would sing to the next
song and would sing to lungs filled with
river water. And our voices, alone,
were not enough on the island in the old village
where we met. So I lit a cigarette,
in the early grey light of morning and kept watch.

—Cathy Tagnak Rexford