Peacemaking

We long ago made a peace —a treaty—
between enemy neighbors
like this
striped blankets     sashes worked with colored beads     animal-shaped pipes
of red stone     iron hatchets inlaid with lead designs     flutes carved to look
like a duck or goose     belts woven with colored threads     brass bells
copper water vessels     red wool     rich gifts to seal the peace

Sometimes the deal did not go down

Some wanted more     to be upheld as great men     (yes—only men)

*We take your names with us to speak in honor of your greatness always
and when we ever hear your name, we will say “That is a great man you speak of”
and we will tell the stories of all the deeds you’ve done and how fine a figure you
made, how arrayed in fine clothes, and how many horses and how large your voice…*

You get the idea

Except we had to mean it     *irreversibly*
Even though those men might have stolen     broken families     murdered
or maybe it was their thieving sons we killed     even then we had to forget
and mean what we said

Imagine how hard it would be to humble ourselves to humanity
Tell their stories as if they were our brothers-fathers-kin folk—with pride
As if just making peace with them made them relatives whose shine
shined on us

We seek your peace now
for futures we cannot gift amends
unless like this
sleep—under blankets     beads of bright creatures pollinating flowers     animals
red stone     iron     flute song     duck and goose     earth full of microbes
and minerals     sun stored to serve you     wind making light and nights cool enough
water and vessels to drink     —all once a given then a gift     future riches

You get the idea
We came in peace but left the aftermath of war like mud tracked in
messed up your carpets and ate all your bread
left milk jugs empty in the fridge and worse much worse

Let our peace be one you can reverse
No gift can be enough—if we left you and
even gone we keep stealing your summers leaving just the storms
if we left you winters brutal beyond history birds gone and bugs in tornadoes
all the fish gutted water run off

It would be OK then to reverse the peace we made when you were born
You do not need to hold up our names irreversibly
only do not curse as you say them or
please leave us off as relatives—
make us ancestors only as worthy as names on paper signs

Uphold the great ones
and if we can’t be them
don’t speak our names at all

—Heid Erdrich