

GRAIN

-SUDESH MISHRA

An idle clasp, a relaxed swing, his arms
Snatch and heft the axe over his shoulder
Till, meeting the eye of itself, it turns
Ounceless as a wraith. Then it's a boulder
Outsprinting eye, mind, his very muscles
In a downward run that smashes through sky
And estranging hill, and glazed apostles
Canonised for wresting brutes from the sty.
"What lacks root?" says the rippled sycamore
As the fanged axe splits it down the middle,
Splays it out like a moth. In the uproar
Of sparrows and chips, he cracks the riddle:
"A stranger estranged by his own strangeness."
Yet writ on your palm my wood's graininess.

II

Ancient wood: cumbrous, hewable, cured hock.
Massive arboreal tome, how I love you—
Your alligator's bark, your wrestler's torque,
Your bailiff's *gravitas* and breath of zoo.
Let them love the hot in you, the *telos*,
And hoard their bones against your bones, let them
Appraise a house, a hull, a Trojan Horse
In praise of you, but let my love affirm
What's always forever to no purpose—
Like zephyrs vetching through a mortuary,
Like Greek myths related to Odysseus,
Like bonesmith's art in a boneless country.
My love's of your ancient venerable stock:
It goes right through the head to ring the block.

III

Woodflakes are flaking off like tuna flakes.
Axe droppings. Hot leftovers and leavings.
Chipped sunlight, terracotta. Exhumings.
You crouch amid ruins, remains. Your hand rakes
Up an art that shirks endings for random
Gleanings. Now here's an ivory toothpick,
Late Ashanti. There, sheeny as garlic,

Some Renaissance tidbit, a severed thumb
By Cellini. Further, writ in magma,
Polynesian petroglyphs. To your left
Flotsam from a wreck. To your right tuna
Flakes flaking.

But all at once you're bereft.

Leonidas is berthing. The light's in gold.
Sixteen dead spartans in the tuna hold.

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