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The Coroner's Reprieve

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Bob Hicok

THE CORONER'S REPRIEVE

"We report two cases of asphyxiation during autoerotic activity employing hydraulic shovels on tractors."

—Harpers

For the third time in a week he dreams
he wears the scarf, black silk,
excretion of worms.

He blushed when he saw the body,
stood behind the barn
until soothed by the sea-sway of wheat in wind.

The scarf, knotted to the end
of a rope tied to the front-loader's bucket,
had to be cut from the dead man's
neck, severing
the painted white moon from the snare
of mountains.

He'd read of this, heard two men at a convention
in Memphis debate the spin
it would give an orgasm, fear
and the loss of oxygen
compounding ecstasy.

Tonight
for a breath after waking he doesn't recall
his wife has died,
begins to form her name
but remembers, says it
anyway.

In the dream a man cuts his body down
from a tree, touches him
with hands made of water, turns his eyes around
in his head and buries him,
commenting he's no longer a danger to anyone.

The dead man wore nylons,
a garter, his neck was scarred, his hand and penis
calloused, details the coroner
typed on paper and slipped into a blue file.

He's clothed in his dream, hangs without choking,
dies calmly,
as if pouring tea.

Tonight, wrapped in a quilt,
he stares at the houses, imagines them dogs
sleeping, curled
around the oracles of their hearts.

There was a sky in the dead man's face, November
grey, his feet were balloons
of blood.

Shame was all the coroner felt then,
ridiculous even touching him,
though now he thinks of him as brave, valuing
a moment beyond logic
or pride, ingenious with his lust, determined
enough to die.

When he cut the body down it first filled,
then erased its shadow.