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David Wagoner

IN A COUNTRY CEMETERY

I had been reading tombstones and drinking in
 Their verses with my beer—the heavenly comforts
 In heavenly homes and the folly
Of earthly pleasures. I thought I had been
 Thoughtful while putting my feet down
 Among resting places, knee-high in timothy,
Going from plot to plot, avoiding
 The plastic flowers and daffodils
 Still in their jam jars. I had touched
The names and the odd numbers of men,
 Women, and infants who had been lying there
 So long, the who's and when's of what they'd been
Were flaking away to nothing. I was taking them
 And myself as seriously as my six-pack,
 Had memorized epitaphs
With every bottle, had counted on them,
 Had given them the attention we deserved,
 Had given them pride of place
In my mind and stomach, and felt well
 Under their influence. The final drafts,
 Now grown nearly as warm as I was,
Had rendered me fully capable
 Of understanding the positions of these companions
 Composed of earth, truly composed
At last, so I lay down among them
 To share their gray-blue afternoon, their words
 And mind intermingled. I had just begun
To know the stretches of heaven
 That appeared and reappeared and disappeared
 Between my eyelids and the even stiffer

Stretches of firmament
Under me, when a voice—as distinct from the wind
As lightning from dim daylight—called me
From the barely audible edge
Of silence. *Daaavid. Daaaaavid.* It spoke
To the back of my mind or the bottom
Or whatever part of it was still willing
And able to listen, and though I didn't think
This was the Voice That Breathed O'er Eden
Or the judgment call of Gabriel, that name
Came all the way from my dead mother and father
And my dream children, all the way
From the brim of the untranslatable, unknown
Tongue of love, and bewildered, I gathered
The little that seemed left
Of my spilled body and stood it up
And blundered it to the brow of a long slope
Downhill and heard again
In a woman's voice the name of that dead poet
From a farm on the lower field. She wanted someone
Far away, but not so far
He couldn't be called back. She needed him
And expected him to hear her.
She wanted him to come home now,
Please, maybe to do something
Important to her, because it was getting late,
Before it was too late.