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James Doyle

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JAMES DOYLE

At Chartres

If we bunched together cathedrals,
bow-legged horses, all the oxen
left in the world, parsley, sweet
corn, mead, the crawl
of late afternoon and its blood
paralyzed in old ballads,
light laboring uphill each day
to close the day, would we have
a bouquet to hand the Middle
Ages? Or would we still need
faith to get through the nights?

A monk wanders the broken edges
of estates as the millennium comes
and goes, 1000, 1100, 1200, 1300,
treaties, councils, papal letters
rounded off to the nearest century.
He is circling the banquet halls
that radiate these waves of land.
Indulgences pour through his fingers.
A farmer has to stop his plow,
peel back roots, scatter the rocks,
before he can go on, complete
the spring seeding, mark his name
in the lower right-hand corner
of the finished field, sleep on it.

We will be waiting for the plague
when it comes. We will carry bramble
in our arms to burn the corpses. We
will clear the streets of ash,
maybe even wear it on our clothes

and foreheads. Death is different
when you can sign patterns
in it, heighten cheekbones with it.
We will draw hoods over our shorn
heads and go to the monasteries.
We will learn to scroll radiant
insignia in the margins of Bibles.
We will be inaugurated in museums.

Every person in the tour group
knelt down before leaving the cathedral.
Yes, I counted. We could say
it was the height of the ceiling
pressing all that seamless air
down on us. Or the sun's tides
through the stained glass, waves
coming right up to us before receding
as if we weren't there. I only know
that when I knelt I could feel
each of my veins, one by one,
bending with me, my body nothing
more than binding for a sheaf
of dowsing rods intent a thousand
years later on once more scouring
the currents beneath the earth.