Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherefrom fall all architectures I am
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved
whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.

She it is Queen Under The Hill
whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words
that is a field folded.

It is only a dream of the grass blowing
east against the source of the sun
in an hour before the sun’s going down

whose secret we see in a children’s game
or ring a round of roses told.

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is.

–Robert Duncan

p. 3: “The real world goes like this: The Neversummer Mountains like a jumble of broken glass. Snowfields weep slowly down. Chambers Lake, ringed by trees, gratefully catches the drip in its tin cup, and gives the mountains their own reflection in return. This is the real world, indifferent, unburdened.”
p. 4: “Only one of them succeeded in making a life here, for almost fifty years. He weathered. Before a backdrop of natural beauty, he lived a life from which everything was taken but a place. He lived so close to the real world it almost let him in.”

p. 11: “He never quit from last star to first, proving that the price of independence is slavery.”

p. 13: “Lyle admires coyotes for more or less the same reasons others hate them. To begin with, the average coyote is smarter than the average human. That is why it’s so difficult to trap them, and why they haven’t gone the way of wolves. Then there’s their toughness and uncompromising independence: if by some lapse in attention one is caught in a trap, off comes the offending limb and he’s on his way.

“As the price of defiance they have to work harder than most animals just to stay alive. They live mostly on mice and insects. When they are lucky or clever enough to come up with something bigger they are overcome with joy and love for one another. They rhapsodize. They harmonize their loneliness and sorrow and they don’t care who likes it.”

p. 15: “Ray says, ‘You can admire a coyote – he’s an outlaw, but it’s damned hard to admire a sheep.’”

p. 18: “Somehow that coyote had figured out how to make a living in his diminished condition. Both wounds were old. His coat was healthy, not starved-looking or mangy. Apparently he was perfectly happy to go on suffering if that’s what life was for, though he probably didn’t mind being shot by Oscar that much either.”

p. 19: “Lyle was born in a house made of dirt. Kind of like a grave with a roof on it.”

“... the first Europeans who saw it called a desert. It was the kind of place where you’d think only the poorest and most desperate sonofabitch with an overactive imagination and a zealous trust in benevolent powers of a higher nature would even sit down to rest, let alone live, back then, before irrigation turned it green. You’d have to be adaptable as an Eskimo or dumb as a snake to want to call it home.”

p. 22: “This is a horse that wouldn’t break into a trot if you dipped his tail in coal oil and lit it.”

p. 24: “When we think of our lives as what we have done, memory becomes a museum with one long shelf on which we arrange a bric-a-brac of deeds, each to his own liking. Lyle doesn’t think of his life as what he has done, or what was done to him. He has no use for blame.”

p. 27: “The illusion of land ownership creates a cheap workforce in the fields: people who often pay more than they are paid to work, as we say, like slaves. But, oh, they are rich in illusions of independence, and they are also very proud, which is not an illusion.”
p. 34: “... the blizzard’s white is traded for equal depth of blackness. Night without the sky. App is no longer sure where they are, but figures they have to keep going. At a certain point you keep going to see what happens next.”

p. 39: “...Ray loved his father with a distillate of admiration and trust so pure it would shrivel the Devil if you sprinkled it on him.”

p. 62: “... Shirley, Frank’s wife, started gathering her strength as if it were a crop of hay she needed to see her through a winter that was going to last the rest of her life. Frank had a kind of cancer that no one gets over ...”

p. 75: “Lyle stubs his smoke and says [to a coyote], ‘Better keep moving’, you little bastard. It’s cold and your ass is soaked. You fell through the ice and got drenched just to catch some goddamn disgusting muskrat that you are going to eat raw while you shiver yourself dry, and you think that’s something to be proud of. Well here’s to you, you puffed up little bastard. You can have it. You’re a fool to survive if that’s all your life is for. But I’ll say one thing for you. You’re tougher than a pine knot, by God. There’s no denying you are on tough little hombre.”

p. 77: “Soon the trout began to trail back, lazily toying with the currents the way hawks and ravens play with updrafts and breezes.”

p. 80: “... and plaid winter caps called Scotch caps of every description and hue, some of them blinding, as though somebody killed a mess of ugly couches and made hats out of them.”

“I hear the drone of the cows and calves moaning for each other, and the low chiaroscuro tones of Frank and Clay talking in the next room.”

p. 84: “It had been a summery October and the first snow had fainted away so fast it was like the perfume of a passing girl.”

p. 85: “Things seemed to have a way of going haywire, as if there were some other kind of gravity in the world that pulled things in the wrong direction ...”

p. 88: Ray: “When I get down to hell I’ve got a few questions for that Devil, real sticklers, like how come they let people into this world when it would have been perfect without them. I mean if you imagine the natural world without the human race, you are thinking of something perfect, perfectly balanced, that just keeps going. Only thing as messes it up is the people. Especially when they try to manage things.”

p. 90: “Those jackasses actually believe it when the realtors tell them they’ll be able to get in here all winter and the creeks run high all summer and that the price of land will rise forever. They are going to build ugly things down there where we’ve been looking at nothing so long we’re addicted to it. We won’t be able to see the mountains for the junk they are going to strew down there.”
p. 95: “the business slowly died ... because Ray couldn’t bring himself to charge any more than slightly less than what would have been fair, especially to anyone he know, and he knew everyone in town.”

p. 101: Watching Bert land an airplane: “I could see his jaw muscles bunching, and his knuckles were white as sugar cubes when he clattered past me at eye level.”

p. 102: Ray, turning down a chance to fly over the countryside: “Bert, I’ve spent my whole life on this mountain, and I just don’t think I can stand to see it look small.”

p. 103: “One of the things modern medicine has managed to do besides turning hospitals into churches and doctors into priests, is to infect the culture with the foreknowledge of distantly imminent death, something human beings don’t really have it in them to cope with. What I mean is, we are supposed to live knowing we are going to die; we are not supposed to live knowing when.”

p. 105: “Frank said, ‘Boys, to me, seafood is a cow standing in the stock pond.’”

p. 106: “‘I thought Ray didn’t want a funeral service.’ Bert said, ‘He didn’t, but Ray’s dead.’ I said, ‘How can Margie do this?’ Bert said, ‘She ain’t dead.’”

p. 128: “He never quite prospered but he made it to comfortable.”

p. 129: “You can tell a lot about someone by how they make things, but you can’t tell everything by it.”

“Pat lived where I live now. He made this house. He preferred the company of stars. I try to imagine his solitude. I try to imagine his loneliness, his endurance. I finger the leather binding on an old pair of snowshoes.”

p. 131: “In defense of whatever happens next, the navy of flat-bottomed popcorn clouds steams over like they are floating down a river we’re under.”

p. 148: “Virga is when rain falls and fails to reach the earth, beautiful and useless as the vista it elaborates. Most angels aren’t allowed to touch the ground.”

p. 149: “No, you have to do it that way because that’s how the old-timers done it. The biggest log goes on last.”
p. 159: “Except in the rare instance of an App Worster, who preferred the absence of people to the people themselves, whenever you see someone living that far from human society, human scrutiny, chances are they are not so much hiding as hiding out. Chances are they are temporary. The best thing for App to do was to save his money, since he’d have to buy the place now, if not from the homesteaders then from the bank. That was number one. Number two was to find a wife, since a man who likes solitude doesn’t necessarily like loneliness, and the help would be a plus.”

“There was a girl in Laramie who gave App that same tuning fork feeling in his chest whenever he saw her ...”

p. 167: “... and were greeted warmly and without prejudice by the old ‘hermit’ who lived in the emerald valley and whose eyes were the color of the farthest peaks you could see from the ridge top.”

p. 168: “The Watchtower started coming in the mail and the Witnesses sent him a rescue team of three pretty women; the oldest forty and the youngest fourteen. They brought him sweet rolls and they giggled a lot and they sure hoped he’d drive down country one day before it was too late and have his soul saved by Revered So and So. When they left, Lyle said, ‘What a waste of perfectly all right womanflesh.’”

p. 169: “He smiled wide, showing them the gold linings in his teeth. He said, ‘That water is so cold, Preachers, it’d make your old balls draw up to where you’d never find ’em again.’ And he just kept smiling as they swept up their pamphlets, bobbed a hurried thanks for coffee, and fled.”

p. 181: “Lyle came out of his seat as if he’d been catapulted. He said, ‘That sure puts rabbits in your feet, don’t it?’ and he took my sister by the hand and they clogged around the room a couple of times together. When the song was over she gave him a big hug and he sat down in his chair with an expression like he’d been shot between the eyes.”

p. 193: “The first of June came and the fence just lay there like a strafed parade.”

“Lyle lit into Bill with volume and purpose, chewed him up one side and down the other, calling him a lazy, good-for-nothing stump not worth the powder to blow it to hell sitting there in his goddammed string tie and town duds, letting another man do his work for him.”

p. 202: “Scraps of cloth, tongues of worn-out work boots, bits of wire, buttons, bent nails, recipes, magazine articles, gunnysacks – Lyle never threw out anything that might someday have a use. He didn’t have it in him. It was partly the result of being raised in poverty (‘You never outgrow the way you grew up,’ he said), but I know Lyle thought of his own being the same way (like one of those boot tongues or scraps of wire). He thought, someday, probably after he died, his own purpose might finally be revealed to him.”

p. 203: Lyle: “Did you know that the first line in Hamlet is the same, outside of not being in Spanish, as Billy the Kid’s last words? Well, it is.”
In 1949 Lyle’s brother, Bob, had a hard time with horses. Mowing hay they spooked at a jackrabbit and took out about a hundred feet of fence. Bob was pretty thoroughly sanded down, not hurt bad anyplace, but hurt not bad everyplace. That same fall he and Lyle were skidding out sawlogs when the horses bolted and dragged Bob by the reins on a whirlwind tour of the forest floor. He broke a rib. That’s why Lyle went to tractors, though anytime you are around turning gears and sickle bars you have to count your fingers pretty regularly. You have to Pay Attention. I don’t have enough fingers to count the fellows I know who have lost some of theirs, mostly either from farm machinery or roping. Almost anything Lyle did was hazardous, and after his brothers were gone he mostly worked alone: felling trees with chainsaws; balancing on the top log of a barn; hewing with an axe so sharp that a couple of fingers or toes wouldn’t even slow it down; or just out fencing – old wire can snap under the stretcher and come at you like a snake, or lay open the side of your face like a stiletto.”

Lyle learned to pay attention, to think things through and not get ahead of himself, not to lapse into inattention ever. After a while he couldn’t not pay attention, shaking a stranger’s hand, tasting Mrs. So and So’s pickles, setting fenceposts. It endowed all his actions with precision. It gave him total recall. It obliterated time.”

If Lyle’s mood was good, Ed’d sit and visit. If not, he’s just leave. No sense in getting chewed on by some pissed hermit. Those of us who’d known Lyle longer knew he didn’t have moods, he had weather. Not some inner weather that could have been a mood – Lyle had the weather. Inside him he had going on exactly what was going on in the sky, or some combination of recent weather and what was likely to develop.”

“That high in the mountains a man lives less on the land than in the sky. After forty years the weather had all the bearing. It’s like the drive train in a car, going through the differential and turning the wheels. Oh, I know everyone’s moods are affected by weather, but with no one around to put him in a mood, and his own actions honed down to rightness, Lyle just had straight weather inside and out.”

“We say the meadow is in the clouds when really clouds are in the meadow. We say steam rises out of the creek like it’s turning its soul loose turning inside out and it is.”

From The Meadow, by James Galvin: Page 6 of 6