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**Before first light, words to a publisher.
Modern cartography.
re: moundridge.
Bough.**

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Before First Light, Words to a Publisher

JESSE NATHAN

Traffic and a crosswalk. Honks and wheels.
A cold letter in my pocket: an ounce of paper

and a pound of rejection. Ghosts crawl
past the morning moon. I exhale. I'm above it all.

Pigeons perch ossified in their pigeonic regalia,
guarding the telephone wire and facing east.

They are organizing, I think, to oppose the rising sun.
I cough up questions for them. I wonder

how they balance and who informed them
the sun would rise today and why the space

so uniform between each one. I clap my hands
and they go flapping, gone, a fleet of squawks.

White and gray and black now sleet the air.
The sun rises. The telephone line quivers

in the memory of its former squatters. I scoff.
And then a roaring and a muddy truck: I dive

for the sidewalk,
yelping in my own cloud of feathers.

Modern Cartography

JESSE NATHAN

Job, at his day job,
drafts maps of tourist traps,
of national parks,
of monument grounds,
counts on the sunset's lessons
and later, television's blessings
to preoccupy. No woman
waits for him at home. He shoos
black-feathered Eliphaz
from the window-ledge.
His eyes are blinking cursors.
His computer freezes, he curses.
He hears a boy with shears
shearing the shrubs outside
down to size. Job's Kansas
hands pick, first at one, then
another, of his shoulder's
clusters of pus-filled pockets,
each one brought on by lists
of unsatisfying myths, by routes
found out to go nowhere,
by glossy stacks of packets piled
on his desk, by the white-haired
earth, its iron gone weak, they say,
as straw, its bronze rotted impossibly
like wood. Job sniffs. Hears the click
of shears. The cough and gurgle
of a coffee maker. Job, for his maker,
once stood in the rain. These days
it is emails that nibble his brain.

re: moundridge

JESSE NATHAN

j—my fault no front
porch, no beer each,
no

watching the silver streaks
of jets disappearing—
i'm holding, tho barely.

like the taped-up
edge of a letter.
it's the opening that cuts.

harvest just slammed us.
june five it came up.
by july, fields here to hays

on fire. ash haze. no late
summer burn this time.
but sun to brand yr eyes

glancing west. dust-ridden
sunsets, alibis, goodbyes.
such blind spots:

when the green corner
of the john deere
met the metal frame

of the ford door
it made a call
like a hawk diving.

in a golden horn
the grain burst out.
crop lost, but i found a coin

under the pile a day later.
on the turkey creek
forty—that's the forty

they want—
the half-dollar's date shone
but the faces were tarnished.

that afternoon dad
kicked in the door,
his hands shook funny.

straightaway up the stairs.
mud clumps
made a trail. heard him

maybe throw something,
flop down for soaps
until chow time.

get this: my muzzle
drips, in dreams i'm one
in a pack of raccoons, purple

diamonds for eyes, we stagger
those paved roads
at the end of the driveway—

this is how bareback i ride
on a nightmare. it's
unfair, uncouth, anyway

we coons each get nailed
by tractor-trailers or hail.
but this is boring, sentimental.

when i wake up,
it's away to law school.
storms have been through

all of 'em gone off
as majestic as bombs,
just the evidence left.

no anvil clouds now. no wind.
just bent stems and dead crows.
if death mothers beauty

we're some morbid audience.
i watched as dad drowned
a litter of kittens he found

wriggling in the straw.
mother's made casserole.
a going away thing. eggplant, i think.

cat's-claw and beard-tongue
and blue-wild indigo. milkweed.
i'll miss even the whiff

of anhydrous ammonia. all this
for socrates, certiorari.
habeas corpus. contortion

by torts. it's the sound
of an arm
caught in an auger.

yrs truly,
e. stucky
(the kid)

Bough

JESSE NATHAN

Shame bends the branch into a bough.
In June, he hid her from her husband, hid her in the woods,

hid her in the basement. Wasted, shoes untied, she arrived
murmuring what her sons had seen, what

their hands might someday do. Her eyes racooned.
At noon, laundering a bloodied blouse. All its own load.

Drying in silence on the clothesline. He wears this memory
like a gray hair: the weeping, audible through two inches

of sheetrock, through wires, spun-glass insulation, a sensation
of spiders in his stomach, her skin scabbed, flaking, old blood

stacked like sediment. Time, he'd say, salves and saves
and numbs. Those puffy eyes, those trembles and mumbles

over poached eggs and toast, she locks his gaze, looks
down, swallows, shivers. But he is not her lover.

In a dream she goes
gardening, hanging laundry, seeding

groves of oaks, gnarled lifting limbs, stretching up,
lush and untouched, what unbowed forests—

but forests like this do not exist.