

Elijah, after Mt. Carmel

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I.

I believed the Holy One
would come blazing down
to vindicate me. Maybe
your god is dozing, I said, or on a beach somewhere
eating dates and sipping wine.
Perhaps he has suddenly gone
deaf and dumb. Performance anxiety?
Or is it constipation? Meanwhile, the priests
flayed themselves bloody, cried themselves
hoarse, tried not to think
too far into the future.

When the fire came, it came also
in my veins, and afterward, on my sword,
I found the dark stain of imposters.
So many fools.

For an instant, I believed
I could call the Almighty
down from Heaven. And I did.

I was capable of anything.

II.

When the fire has gone,
the world goes gray,
and the smell of violence
is sickening. It's enough
to send you into the desert
to bleach yourself clean,
to empty yourself
of everything.

I am a husk of a man.
I cannot carry
it. I cannot hold any—
I want only the darkness of sleep
to cover me. Let it cover me.

III.

I wanted the darkness to be enough.
But hands brought the cake to my mouth
and then the water. Twice the stranger came,
and my body let itself be fed,
until it was strong enough
to get its story straight.

I was the only righteous one left
in all the world.

Like Noah. Or Lot.
No, more like Moses...
with Pharoah's army fast closing in,
only it's the Israelites at my heels. It's like a dream—
everything is so familiar but later
it will seem so very strange. And now
I am approaching Mt. Horeb, and there
we will have another showdown.

IV.

I want nothing more to do with fire.
I know You could blow through here,
lay waste to everything. And where
would that leave us? Shake
this very ground I stand on. Bring me
to my knees. I am already there.

V.

For silence, I am unprepared.

Is it punishment?

Is it absence?

Is this what death is like?

No sound—

Or maybe a low hum...
Is possibility a sound?

Or is this some giant echo chamber,
empty, save me?

How long should I stand here
waiting?

VI.

The Word, it comes and it goes.
The world, it remains. Prophets
are, it turns out, replaceable, like kings.
And the violence, it too goes on,
its dark stain spreading through the centuries.
And there are more who are
faithful than I thought.

Meanwhile, there is work to be done.
The hand must be lifted to the mouth.
The foot, it must be placed
on the ground
in front of the other one.
And again. Out
of the cave. Back
into the desert.