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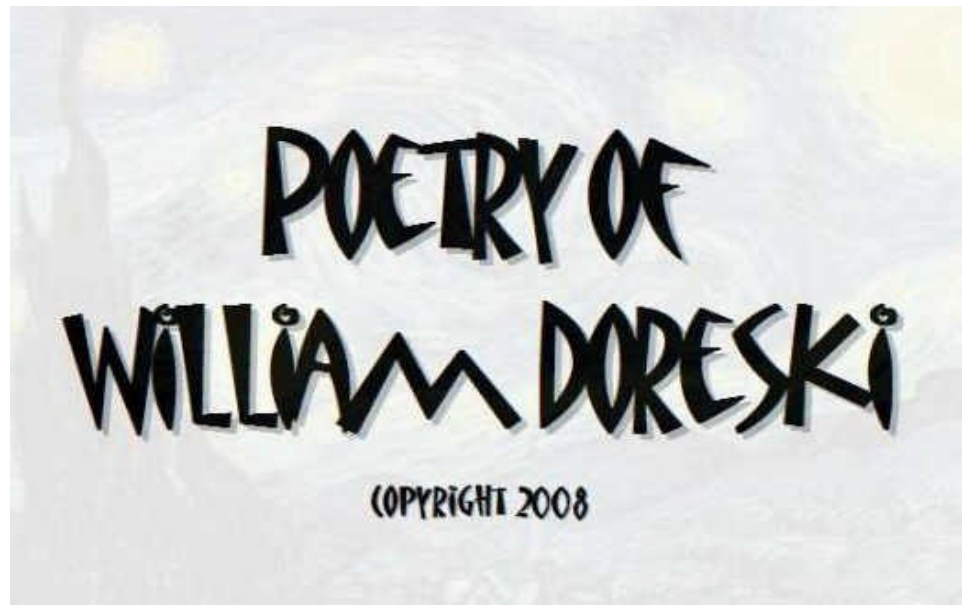
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The Seasons Know Me by Name

In the diner I slump and fade
for an hour while customers
come and go and the waitress
ignores my plea for coffee.

A snow squall blanks the plate glass
windows. The grill fizzes with fat.
The cook, shaped like a tulip,
flips a burger onto the floor,

wipes it on the seat of his pants,
replaces it on the grill.
Neglect has soured me, so I rise
in a huff and totter outside,

letting the steel door slam like
a bank vault. A day ago
I walked away from an Artist
in Residence slot because

the institution failed to provide
the contractual private room.
Last week I refused to read aloud
a poem by a nineteenth century

newspaper poet when the host
of a radio show politely
requested I do so. The diner
closes like a clamshell. The waitress

sneers through a window at me.
Installed in my car and desperate
for coffee, I gnash my molars.
The world and I are rejecting

each other, the winter sky
dappled with warty snow-clouds,
parking lot murky with grease stains
frosted with fatal black ice.

Struck Deer on Granite Street

On Granite Street a broken deer
sprawls by the curb. Two cops
survey the carcass, their faces

blank as snowdrifts. Driving past,
I note blood-smut on the grill
of a black Ford truck, a woman

screaming into a cell phone.
To hit the creature in daylight
in a thirty-mile-per-hour zone

she probably was quacking
stupidly into that phone
while her three-ton vehicle

plowed forward madly on its own.
Classical anger makes me rhyme
with the dead deer, the cold light,

the snow-ruts of the highway.
Johnson's Tow arrives to haul
the carcass to whatever poor

and hungry family's on the list
for roadkill venison. Around
the bend and out of sight I calm

a little and observe the black
wound of river rimmed with ice.
The deer descend from the hills

to drink, but in the village
streets hem their route so the deer
sometimes ramble downtown and dash

through the diner parking lot,
their white rumps flashing like pages
from sketchbooks. This one small death

seems criminal as creation
itself. I drive as slowly
as I dare, watching for the next

deer, the next one and the next,
so ashamed that unlike them
I won't be edible in death.

Becoming Bear Again

Dragging the snow off the roof
with long aluminum roof rake
strains me into visions as wry
and animate as a shaman's.
Although this isn't Siberia
I suffer a massive brown bear
shuffling from the woods to wrap
me in its pelt and convey me
to ancestral silence brimming
along the Arctic coast where seals
grunt and splash in terror and birds

drift on the gray edge of mist.

The pelt warms me so terribly
I accept its sticky blood flavor
and become the bear who vacated
himself in favor of me. The mind
of bear bristles with a hunger
I can't sate by clawing fish
from the icy shallows or feasting
on the carcass of a rotting seal.
Whatever's still human raking
snow from a roof in New Hampshire
agrees that it's partly a bear
so I revel in the reek of oil,
the lanolin warming me against
the polar landscape arching
eight hundred miles to its apex.

As I swagger about enjoying
the pale air a man approaches
and drops to his knees. He offers
a puny weapon, which I swat
into the sea. He wants to pray
to me, but I can't accept
human sincerity, so bat him
with the tips of my claws. He runs
so clumsily I laugh myself
alert atop the flimsy ladder;
and as I drop the rake and topple
still laughing into a snowdrift
the long Arctic curve of the earth
flashes a razor at my throat.

Sex and Music Will Never Solve Us

A flamenco guitar rains notes
on thirty café tables.
We're crouched, fondling, to absorb
the music. The guitarist chews
a cigar as crude as a twig.
His thick face looks constructed
from obsolete anti-tank mines.
His hands resemble manhole covers.
The melody he's knitting
fits us like a chain-mail sweater.

As it agonizes over us
you flinch purple with orgasm
more aesthetic than sexual;
and as the hushed waiter refills
our wine glasses, you blossom
into whatever adolescents
mistake for love. Not directed
at me but adrift somewhere
between Capricorn and Leo,
a swath of night impossible
for astronomers to measure
or astrologers to fully parse.

The eager guitarist has noted
your ecstasy and therefore assumes
one more baroque expression
will lure you upstairs to a room
where you and he will explode
in the drollest primary colors.

He doesn't realize how fragile
our mutual fondling has been,
how neatly concealed by the table.

In the middle of a song he learned
from a gypsy great-uncle we laugh
without sound, our bodies forming
a single entity; and dousing
our humor with cheap house wine
we agree without speaking that sex
and music will never solve us,
even though sometimes they rhyme.

A Likely Story

After midnight, gunfire startled
the dark. I've lain awake for hours.
At dawn I creep to the vacant
flat at the rear of the building.
It overlooks the parking lot
where drug murders often occur.

The flat's unlocked. From the bedroom
I peer at the lot where tenant cars
swim through the first streaks of light.
Nothing. But behind me a snore
rends the shadows and I turn
and discover a shape in bed,
a squatter. The head looks deformed,
the body awkward as a question.

A man with a bullet hole square
in his forehead. But he's alive
and breathing as dynamically
as the bellows of a blacksmith.
I should call an ambulance
but his comfortable posture suggests
I let him sleep away the morning.

Down the hall I reconsider
and phone the cops. Two hulking bulls
arrive and I show them the room;
but although the three of us hear
snoring there's no one in the bed,
no one under it or anywhere
else in the room. The cops think
I'm gulling them, and stalk away mad.

In my own flat I lock the door
against further incursions of ghost;
but when I look in the mirror
to comb my restless hair I note
an old, long-healed gunshot wound
square in my forehead and wonder
in which forgotten life I suffered
such derision of the brain.

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