

## The Survivalist

for A.

*“Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies  
out of the air and breathe upon them.”*

*-Cormac McCarthy, The Road*

He, a potter, believes  
that we as a culture yearn  
for the apocalypse. *Because,*  
he says, *we can't conceive*  
*of a possible way to get out*  
*of all the shit we're in.*  
He tells her this before lunch.  
He's placing colorless slices  
of homegrown scallop squash into  
a stoneware dish he made himself.  
Between his fingertips, the vegetable  
flesh refracts the cabin light  
like oiled wax—*So lovely,*  
she thinks, *that it will hardly*  
*matter how it tastes.*

During lunch, the pocket of her windbreaker whirrs against her hip. She smacks at it and a yellowjacket limps out, a half-crushed contraption of striped carapace and vellum. *Its body is failing*, she says. *Best to set its little wasp-soul free.* With the corner of her clay tumbler, she smashes until its thorax collapses into a streak of black blood and fragments. Then she can't finish her drink. She rinses the cup and leaves it in the sink.

In the fridge, next to the milk:  
net-caught fish, minutely scaled.  
Next to the wine: a forest mushroom  
bigger than a cabbage.

When you expect the apocalypse  
(she's come to understand),  
you cultivate the practices  
of making your own cookware  
and foraging for food.  
*What about art?* she asks. As if in answer,  
a butterfly stills on the windowsill  
for less than a second, exhibiting  
voluptuous translucent rust  
and lead-paned wings. She knows  
a Monarch when she sees one—  
she even knows its chrysalis:

pendant, stout, tapering,  
with small metallic spots  
like the oxidation slicks on thickly  
iron-glazed pots.

*The individual foods matter less  
than the order we eat them in,  
he says. We should progress  
from subtle tastes  
to bold—that way,  
nothing will be lost.*

Shelved:  
sassafras root,  
nodes of pine gum,  
seedy berries.

She thinks form always matters more  
than content. *So do I*, he says. *I'm a potter.*  
*I make vessels*  
*with nothing at all inside.*

Much later they will enter the woods in search of a certain tree he knows—a tree so stunted that she will be surprised, at first glance, that it can bear. He'll hand her an ugly knot of fruit smaller than an egg. It will be coated in russet, the color of a paper bag, and when she puts it to her mouth she will feel the sandy spots of fireblight against her tongue. Then the apple's taste will eclipse its shape, its flesh white as a starched café napkin, delicate as fine silverware, bolted through with red veins thinner than human hair.



Washing up, it occurs to her  
that the butterfly could have been a Viceroy—  
one of the most striking cases, in fauna,  
the field guide says, of imitation:  
the shape of the wing is different,  
but the color, the field guide says,  
is exactly the same. One soapy

bowl slips to the floor.  
Bomblike, it explodes.  
Hurrying over with a broom,  
the potter says, *Don't worry,*  
*I can make another like it, this*  
*is not the end of the world—*

The woods will be packed with wind  
which will batter them  
with scraps and fill her eyes  
like cataracts, like grief,

until she can't tell  
if what just flashed and fell  
past her was a Cloudless Sulpher  
or a poplar leaf.

Full,  
she looks at him,

sees the faith in form, pendulous  
in the air between them,

sees his longing for everything to end,

sees her longing for another look  
at the shape and pattern of the butterfly  
she didn't have enough time  
to properly identify,

sees this minute perched  
on the crest of what came before it:

the caterpillar shedding part  
of its own skin and girdling  
its own mouth's silk to transform,  
the man's hands forming  
the bowl she broke,  
the wasp going headlong into her dark  
rustling pocket—

she doesn't want the apocalypse,  
but she can't conceive  
of a possible way to say it.

Even after the apples,  
the dank spoor of the wild mushroom  
inhabits the cave of her mouth  
like an age-old darkness,  
undisturbed.