

The Questions

by Partridge Boswell

—after Rilke and Maggie Smith

What does ‘reconcile’ mean? he asks me on our drive to school the way he’s bounced his ball off my default wall since he was two, and before I can thank him for asking me and not simply googling on his phone, before my mind can mesh the cheery tyke on a trike with the moody man-boy riding beside me, and explain what’s a zero-sum game—call it karma or physics or homeostasis—my knee-jerk heart is reckoning his life now with the one that might have been had his mother lived.

I tell him life is short—not to be an ass the way Patrick Kavanagh’s da told him: *Look around you boy, everything here is broken except this crowbar, and that’s bent*—as if he doesn’t already know how to rodeo the rubble, just as I’ve come to accept I can’t ever balance the ledger and make her up to him, no one’s prestidigitation but his own can conjure a sense of home, no overalled clown can scrape him off the ground, keep him from getting trampled.

And how do we repay the sun for all it’s given us?

We burn and shine even through doubt’s darkest clouds...

...and the rain we drink and drink, bottomless well of heaven?

We cry tears of joy and sorrow to measure what it means to be human...

...and wind, cool informant dabbing our beaded brow, incessant herald who whispers

Heads up! Change is nigh?

We fill our sails and sing, let it carry our harbinger benison of praise
to others we’ve not met, yet cherish half a world away...

...and Earth—our mother who loves us most—how can we ever reimburse her?

That's easy: we return to her when we're done, never forgetting everyone is someone's child...

...and the stars, blooming like a naked magnolia overnight, what about them? What can we possibly offer to requite their inspiration?

That's a good one. I'm afraid knowledge is a two-edged knife. Once we've climbed the holy mountain and botched the sacrifice, you'll have to walk that question alone for a time—lie at night in a summer field and search beyond beyond, until your open eyes can close and dream again. You'll know when and what's truer than right.

*Life is so f—ing long...*my favorite professor told me at a back porch kegger after graduation. Tap in hand, I nodded and refilled his cup. I didn't have the heart then to tell him what I don't have to tell you now. He was wrong.