

Houses/Skara Brae

(Skara Brae is a Stone Age settlement in the Orkneys.)

1.

In the end houses always let you go.

The sawing continues

in the clear blue air of morning: insects
 in grass like tinder or neighbors adding rooms.
 The mulberry tree's shadow is engraved
 on pavement, in the light flies gather,
 paths wind down the mountain among terraced
 olive groves. Looking back you'd see the roofs—
 tiles weighted with limestone boulders against
 ferocious winds—and then a swathe of sky,
 white-bannered, criss-crossed with trails of vapor
 from the dawn manoeuvres of the bombers
 at the base nearby.

2.

We had a house built by the moving sea.
 We poked fingers into salt pools, mirrors
 in granite outcrops, where the hermit crabs
 hurried to shelter under the slow fronds
 of brown weeds,

where the sand was firm

on the beach. Mother watched us, sitting
 in the sun writing letters, a notepad
 propped on her knees, her back against a log
 of red cedar lost from the upcountry booms.
 When we walked, our feet scarcely left tracks.

*Stay on the beach, she said, and don't try
 to explore the paths, where the saw ripped
 like torn silk into the silence of woodlots.*

3.

There the houses stand in the sea's flood
swelling above the rim of grassland:
mounds, midden heaps and whale bone rafters
abandoned to the encroaching dunes.
Roofs are gone, hearths are scattered, beds broken.
The paths are clotted with bracken.
Sand seeps into the cracks between the stones
and fills up crevices like mouths.

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