New Poetry by D.W. McLachlan: "Tanana River" and "The Heaviness of Age"

THE RIPARIAN ZONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Tanana River

We followed your Hilux along the riparian zone,
a green snake blooming through the desert brown,
when you met in secret like lovers, and the way you
hugged each other in greeting showed an intimacy
I didn't particularly want to consider at that moment.

The second before the Hellfire splashed down, you
looked into the sky, and I still wonder if you thought
it was a sign from god, but when your world went
black I think it must have confirmed your suspicions.

My first full memory was standing on a grassy shore
watching my father catch a salmon in the Tanana river.

And I can still see the coil of the fly line snapping silent
and how it unfolded and laid out onto the silty sheet.

There was something above elegance in those motions
as the salmon breached, and I saw the slick of its back
as it stretched the surface, the rippling kick of its tail,
and then it shot back down, the line gave, my father's
back bent, the line went in, went out again.

As a modest crowd grew slowly along the muddy banks
watching my father race up and down the shallows,
it seemed to me that he was going to pull up a demon
straight from hell, and I remember the shouts and jeers
when my father finally dragged the salmon on shore.

And I remember my commanding officer's laugh when
half of you was dragged gently under a shade tree.
I remember the grip on my shoulder as he told me
that it was a damn good job, a fuckin' good job.
I remember the way his boots rested on the desk,
and how he donned his number twenty-four hat,
and how he drank his coke, turning his attention
to the NASCAR race circling on the other screen.
I remember the way the other man laid you back,
how he talked to your body under that shade tree.
I still to this day wonder what he was telling you.

I was scared when I stepped close to that salmon,
dancing and darkening the dirt with wet slapping flops,
its mouth opening and closing, sucking in nothing.
The great gibbous black mirror of its pupil asking
for something, something that I knew I couldn't give.
I felt small and shameful in that goggle-eyed stare,
so I picked up a long stick and gouged out its eye.

The Heaviness of Age

Sometimes in my dreams the world is covered in sand
and I wonder why no one cares.

I can feel it in my sheets as I sleep, in my mouth
and crusted in my eyes. I kick and brush it away,
but it's never gone, and the sand always returns.
But no one cares and they act like they don't see it.
Why is it then that I'm treated so funny?

The custodian on my floor looks like a man
we tracked down and killed in Helmand province.
The custodian on my floor thinks I'm racist
because I avoid him and never look him in the eyes.
I have to sit in my chair to get over the nausea sometimes.
He once told me I'm not gonna bite you and laughed
and I laughed and I asked him about football
and then he walked away, and I took my fifteen minute
break to step into the utility closet and cry.

I don't even remember why we killed the man.
I don't remember anything but the face
That's mostly all I remember now.
His mouth blood black and tongue lolled in a dog pant.
And I don't know why we had to take pictures of them all.
It'd be much easier if they hadn't taken the trouble
to fly out there and take their god damn pictures.

A child still visits me at night.
I see him sitting at the edge of my bed
He's always looking away, out the window
and when my wife wakes up
and asks: what's wrong?
I tell her nothing, it's just a bad dream.

But he's not a bad dream,
he doesn't deserve that epithet.
I sometimes want to hold him like I hold my son
when he feels betrayed by the world.
I like giving that feeling of love and security.
I'd give it to him if I could.

I see paintings of heaven
and I never see any children in the paintings.
Where are the children?
Homer has no children in his underworld.
Just indifferent or spiteful adults.
Sometimes I think it must be the heaviness of age
that allows us to sink down and rest.