The Owl

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"How difficult is faith when Christ died
so long ago, and never has returned,"
remarked my friend. "It may be," I replied,
"and yet he does come back, I have just learned."

In that intense cold of the coldest day,
between sunset and dark when the west is a rose shade
and quiet, lies on the palm of the air,
the infinite rounded hills swing out, yet near,
I climbed toward home, fighting snow to my knees,
with each step praising God, with each step praying
for the hunted creatures in their tunnelled dark.
I sang, jubilant because no dog
had left a trace of killing where I'd walked.

And blessing God for each lungful of hard
terrible cold because it made life alert,
I struggled toward my ridge and homecoming warmth,
yet eager to stay on the piercing meadows of search.

And suddenly, heavy and tragic, yet burdenless
as love's pain, a bird winged slowly over my path —
an owl, whose thoughtful flight contains the grace
we cannot reach perhaps, yet strive to, with faith
too cumbersome, too bound by evil's flesh.

He flew ahead. I yearned to see his face.
How easily yet remorsefully against
that burning pang of twilight blue he leaned —
level and bowed, as though his thoughts were blessed
by knowledge I could never truly reach.

And over, directly over my lonely house
he sailed, and settled on the single pole
that holds our wires for lights and telephone;
and there, in deepening night, over naked fields
where the mice burrow that I love and long to shield
from hawk and dog, he perched, utterly lone,
utterly still. I watched to catch some thrill
of wakened movement, some serene lift
of head. Nothing. The dark shape cold
and muffled, like the pole's top, hooded and stiff,
clung against western glow; darkened, blurred
into the dimming, ethereal blue of icy night,
till my straining eyes confused pole and bird.

He seemed to move a little only because my sight
wavered from fixedness. No sound. No turn
of head. No plunge to snatch pipit or mouse.

With shock, I knew Christ was that bird,
visiting me in the warm and hooded head
to watch over my dwelling while I slept
under the flame-cold blue arcing the world's prayer.
He broods perceptive, forming my later words;
he thinks the acts that out of sleep I'll dare;
his patience to conclude will break my fear,
teach me when to be still, and when to curve
down from dark height in necessity's calm rush,
with gentle softness as downy as God's wish.