

JEFF WHITNEY

Terra Firma

*Beat, heart . . . Not everything
Has been swallowed by the earth.*
—Antonio Machado, “Hope says . . .”

1

Today I won't think about dying
alone in a house with no windows,
won't remember my grandmother
remembering us less each time,
won't imagine what happened
in Lebanon, won't remember
that bloated tongue of the river
licking town gone, won't paint quiet
fields of dead horses in Hungary,
so many I didn't think there was
a name for it, but there is, *dead horses*,
I can't not say it, can't not
imagine a version of Saturn
eating his only son, holding him
by the ankles like a chicken
and dipping him into his mouth
head first like some kind of horror
one thinks can only exist in paint
or in dream, and I know grief
is a two-dollar word, I know
spent bullets like bodies of insects
after the feverish swarm, after
the frantic air emptied and went
quiet, and birds like gods picked up
the mess, starving mouths blessing
the silence. This is me starting a war
with every shadow. This is me lying
down like any animal in a field of snow.

2

A field is old fires as a building is a future toppling.
A woman goes to bed as what she wants to be.
There is the question of what to do with hours
when hours are the only thing one has. You know this
is wheat, but you don't call it so. That stone in your hand

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is not a bird. That light is only reflection. Pick a bullet up
and it will tell you what it wants: to go fast into the other side
of a thing. I want something to say about red barns
and needles kissing forearms. It's too easy to make a tragedy
of a body, to reach without prompting the word
holy, oh *holy*. Ruin, you are my brother. Don't die.

3

Some days all you can do is whisper mountains
into existence, walk through town where no one talks
about the silver of stars or the haunting flight
of bats. There is nothing you can do
about some bullets or the people they find.
Heaven is a person knocking on our ears.
Let children run naked through the house.
Let chickens hang spilling their red galaxies on the floor,
pretty things who have learned the secret to flight
is not hollow bones or wings.

4

I'll be goddamned if the birds ever stop
being a wonder, the scatter and coming back
of them, the sudden space of what's left.

A flag can be dead at the top of a pole,
but this has nothing to do with the flag.

A bomb can light a face unfamiliar.
What has your friend lost that you won't?

What is the purpose of world's slow bleed
if everything goes? Yes, pumpernickel, yes
house. Hush now. There, there.