

vagaries of memory at mid-winter

At mid-winter, in our parking lot,
a pink plastic comb lies
across a boot-print gripped by ice.
In the fading light, boot-print
and comb fumble to become a single
wholly new thing, uniting
to help bind the segments of this year
together as it crawls, cold and creaking,
toward the improbable puddles of spring.

It is then I remember, with the strained insignificance
of a second dropped comb, another
mid-winter, nearly fifty years ago.

At the end of a numbed war, at the far
end of a Cornish beach that was bandaged
with half-frozen spray, what I had thought
was yet another tar-blackened pig,
washed up beside a salt-chewed
sail, began to merge into the exact

shapelessness of a single well-drowned
sailor. The boy I was had begged then,
rather than prayed, that even a god would not step
closer to create and know the truth,
sweating suddenly from his gum-booted knees.

Now, at the close of this darkening year,
will reshaping shadows of the longest night
bring back familiar beaches
for the returning light, peopled with pigs
eagerly unbuttoning themselves from their swollen
dinner-jackets, and children to play around them?
Or sea-flayed sailors, too
tired to close their missing eyes?
Will I be bold enough to look and see,
on the unlit side of the morning newspaper,
propped against its convenient cereal packet?

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