

The Caretaker

Mary Cross

for Chuck

Flying above the clouds is like observing
the Arctic Circle. Or the doughy blue of an iceberg

capable of reflecting all visible wavelengths.

Or it is to notice the eyes of the caretaker opening wooden shutters

of a 19th-century carriage house, if only for an hour at dusk.

Confronted with the potential of a rusting saw, an open drawer, a scythe
tied to a hook, he rests in unruffled proximity to the velocity

of two white-tailed deer making their way into a clearing.

When does the past become the past in a landscape
with such evidence?

Is it the period *before* the caretaker's ten-mile drive home when he is
picking raspberries on the river trail?

Or the moment *after* when he looks out to the open space
where the deer were, only a blister of seconds ago?

Each day he proceeds by instinct, marking a new path with a swatch of blue
nailed to the bark of a tree, turning back

if need be.

Other Than Us

Mary Cross

*Our own absence, the only certain thing before we came into this world, or after our death.
Hence the pleasure of recognizing the infinite variety of what is other than us . . .*

—Italo Calvino

40,000 years ago glaciers shaped the river,
and bass, shad, sturgeon occupied it.
At the water's edge, snapping turtles, ospreys, muskrats
fed on cattails. Green frogs tossed themselves into nearby ponds

inhabited by black snakes. But that wasn't all

that came to the valley. Raccoons, river otters, bobcats sauntered in.
White oaks, yellow birch, sugar maple,
spruce, hickory, ash trees took root in red clay soil.
Without witness, they grew.

When the white-tailed deer showed up,

no one heard them come. The bullfrogs' husky
croaks rallied the turkeys down to shore.
When the crickets ceased buzzing, bats closed
their mouths and fell to the ground;

skunks secreted; jack-in-the-pulpits drooped.

A red-tailed hawk dropped a rodent from the sky. Warblers and swamp
sparrows flitted on the skin of a thorny twig. There in plain sight
a train screeched to a stop, and a hatless man jumped down.
Curious at the deficiency of local sounds, he cried out—

a revolutionary echo ensued.