

Ode to an Encyclopedia

O hefty hardcover on the built-in shelf in my parents' living
room,

O authority stamped on linen paper, molted from your dust
jacket ,

Questing Beast of blue and gold, you were my companion

on beige afternoons that came slanting through the curtains
behind the rough upholstered chair. You knew how to trim a
sail

and how the hornet builds a hive. You had a topographical map

of the mountain ranges on the far side of the moon
and could name the man who shot down the man
who murdered Jesse James. At forty, I tell myself

that boyhood was all enchantment: hanging around the railway,
getting plastered on cartoons; I see my best friend's father
marinating in a lawn chair, smiling benignly at his son and me

from above a gin and tonic, or sitting astride his roof
with carpentry nails and hammer, going at some problem
that kept resisting all his mending. O my tome, my paper
brother,

my narrative without an ending, you had a diagram of a cow
broken down into the major cuts of beef, and an image
of the Trevi Fountain. The boarding house,

the church on the corner: all that stuff is gone.

In winter in Toronto, people say, a man goes outside
and shovels snow mostly so that his neighbors know

just how much snow he is displacing. I'm writing this
in Baltimore. For such a long time, the boy wants
to grow up and be at large, but posture becomes bearing;

bearing becomes shape. A man can make a choice
between two countries, believing all the while
that he will never have to choose.

Credit:

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About this Poem:

“It’s now almost unimaginable to me that for the first half of my life, I had no access to the Internet. What I did have is my parents’ hardbound, single-volume encyclopedia: a book that seemed to contain a scrap of information on almost every subject. For me ‘Ode to an Encyclopedia’ is about the openness of the open field; when we’re children, we can still believe that we’ll have time to go everywhere, see everything, and do it all.”

—James Arthur

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