Reliquaries

-- Twelve River Views,' Hsia Kuei

March, winter's bag end, stung by a wind like a rattlesnake in a mailbox,

haunted by a zodiac

of disappearing constellations, as Pyxis fades, then Canis Minor, the little dog, heads over the horizon with the frost in its teeth,

until the black roots of the frost hang over the evening sky then fall as a bitter rain, unforgiving, eave- & gutter-sluiced,

street salt & dog sweat

& the petals of too-early blooms.

What is this evening the dark sleeve of, edging a little farther from us,

& now swinging back

from where it was, a moment ago, out of bowshot, out of eyeshot, elegant & restrained as the ink of Hsia Kuei—

in his *Twelve River Views* what isn't there is as carefully attended as what is,

his ink's indigos a shade darker

than the emptiness they're brushed over.

The shade a ghost-life I once held as it slept, as the winds in the black gums carried the grey soughs of replies

from the next life,

as they do each night, though I've yet to ask a question, yet to begin beyond *what becomes of us,* trail off when I think of that life in my arms,

surprised to hear my voice

as the wind is startled by cattails,

by a scrap of crow atop a fencepost.

Do you know why we call them veins, the rivers that wheel beneath

the earth, returning—do they return,

people suddenly beyond arm's or prayer's length, who leave

sidereal handprints in the tide's blind haul,

who leave their looks of longing on our faces, their lives

like the white streaks of stars

on hourlong exposures.

The body of darkness begins its long walk across the water, its palms held out, as a snow owl disappears

into the full half of the moon.

How many wings between you & this moon,

how many seas

between you & the other side of your life?
No answers, only moonlight
& the words for alchemy we know as *prism, daffodil bulb, longing,*

only a night like a lost scroll

spread across the dark water

& lit by a pale lantern, a night where you're only the umbra of a letter

you've spent your life crossing out.

How often you've mistaken *want* for *need*. Gone out with a cup of coffee

& returned with a quarter cup of rainwater.

Tasted the orange your beloved handed you before dawn instead of her mouth,

rounded by longing,

a moment that weighs less than rain or prayer, but the world falls away beside it.

There's a stillness inside us that the rain breaks, a stillness broken not into noise,

but into thousands of stillnesses, as taillights azalea the street outside in long streaks.

Though none of us deserve it, grace says we'll each have our day,

finally redeemed when we give up

all that we have & a little more.

How else could St. Gaspare walk untouched

through the rain

(his body transfigured when it was laid down in its longing, lighter than the catalpa blossoms)?

We lay down our prayers as the dragonfly lays down the mile of sun

on its wings

when it alights on the water & joins the rest of the radiance on earth—our prayers for the missing,

who each speak the same tongue.

We lay them down as the rain passes through their bodies & freezes, falling as the year's last snow.

Look: something from the sky feathering down, in which to leave an earthly trace of us, footprint, handprint, wingspan.

The world is one of three petals thrown from heaven—we know the other two

by their brilliance, sun & moon, by their role in each creation story.

Nowhere near what the Buddhists call Big Mind, maybe, but a little mind of the last light:

look through the shoes hung by their laces on a telephone wire & see a V of wild geese crossing a river

on the other side of the world,

river birches silhouetted on its banks until the river's untied, like a translucent obi knot,

& hung down the door of a dam.

Maybe it'll be like stepping through this cataract at the end, when you walk away from your body,

when the wind empties your hands,

& you step through

to find a catalpa tree in bloom, each a white knot of water tied by grace.