

# MERIDIAN

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## JOHN T. CASTEEN IV

*Chording*

## I. The Lone Swimmer

There is a density in the air that smells like nothing,  
my body stiffening after coffee like a wire,  
the only promise the lick of color in the speaking trees—

from the fire tower I watched the wind push the lake  
like spread fingers reaching into themselves,  
then by the shore walking, and the sodium traces drought leaves  
on stones in the sun. Ashes over fossils.  
Tall pines hung over the water.

Finally, immersion, a laying-on of hands, fingertips on the face  
and early fall, far north, the light changing again,  
my compass shifting. All the fall things—acorns falling,  
agate sound of lapped rocks,  
the finally-flowering weeds—carry away uphill

to the houseful of people making themselves hard to love,  
not hearing the wind touch the pines, then untouch them.  
The trees preen. Clothes on a line are stragglers  
waving from behind, voices clamped in wind, hoping  
to sway the eye of the lone swimmer.

The reach to the island is a small life  
of its own; it leaves the electric tinge of the drying air  
to finger the late flowers, then leave them.  
The bees are gone, the heat is gone, the house is up the hill  
and it may be my house. The island looms,  
and I must be there.

## II. Certainty

I don't like empty houses,  
 no one in the kitchen and at worst leaves  
     blowing through an open door—  
 I don't like the idea of old people being alone,  
     or remembering things I said. I once knew a woman  
     grown so tired of people  
 she drove a fence post deep into the ground  
     and told all she had to tell to it instead.

Fall here is the flaming trees singing,  
     *keep warm, settle in, the lake's turning over,*  
     *your shoes are on your feet, and go on*

## III. For Doc Watson

Song, not ideas about the thing, but the thing itself,  
     four chords and fingerpicks and probably more  
 miles than I'll drive today in my father's Cadillac, god-fearing  
     G-run strung across the sound hole I carry  
 in my head and can't not hear in the small hours,  
     then tired in the car, rolling—

Dulcimers and woodsmoke breeze across the place  
     Tidewater has become—an array, a pattern  
 of boulevards with the names of victory. The tides breathe  
     up, then secede. My grand-dad knows the price he paid  
 for which year's Studie, first by far with a post-war car,  
     even here in Chesapeake, Virginia, home  
 of his tools: a wrench for a valve on a mothballed sub,  
     drift punches holed up in racks,  
     the grinder that snatched his hand away.

Doc, today I drove east from the mountains to the sea,  
your sweet drawl pure Carolina and clean  
as the pinch-pick's rasp on a flat spruce top—it sings  
as gears move, dust sinks  
over the city sprawled along the floodplain, tomatoes

hang on the vine and my ears ring  
as though someone had spoken  
of me someplace else, without the hum of the power lines,  
without all that rose-colored singing.

#### IV. Homage to Merwin

It's the seldom-sensed, the rarefied flat light rising  
from the loins of the animals of fables, telling us what it is  
the carrier of ladders knows, *nachtraglichkeit*, that we can know  
a thing and also not know it  
in the same moment—

that song rises like fumes within us,  
that the air whistles not litanies  
of what we've heard other people say,  
but of small birds

in whose birth we take no part—the ring of hammers falling  
and falling, men speaking to ships with light  
from towers by the sea.