

RALPH BLACK

21st Century Lecture

Listen. You know what a torn shirt
the world's become. You know how thin
its fabric. You know what seams are,
and how your life, as though by accident,
settles in and trembles them apart.
And everyone knows you don't mean it.
So you say to yourself, don't be stupid.
You say, don't sham and swindle your way
through these stark desecrations,
don't stand around as your body's
warming waters rise, as they lift
and pool around the trunks
of three-hundred-year-old trees—
the ones that snatched away your breath
and all your words when you were a kid.
Your tea is getting cold. The shirts
you bought on a whim have to go back
to the Singapore sweatshop.
You're a smart enough guy, keening
over the paper each morning,
tuned in to just the right litany of fear—
Bagdad, Darfur, the Bronx—
the outstretched or instantly severed hand.
You could turn the page from the steady
unraveling of the planet's bright threads.
But your throat rasps and freezes at the sight
of the sea lion sow chewing the face
off her newborn pup; at the coho hatchlings
spilling out of the hatchery flume,
carrying their constellations of DNA
up and against the river's age-old equations;
at the polar bears starving at the edge
of their ice. You know the word *starving*,
you know the meaning of CO_2 , you know

how apple seeds and smart bombs bloom,
how simple it is to flay a range of hills,
eviscerate a mountain with a spark.
You know how the stones can keep you warm.
You're not an idiot. You're not a fool.
You won't let your heart—that tiny,
glacial island—fracture and calve.
You think your love for your children
and your children's love for everything
but homework and spinach should be plenty.
The name of the wind is changing.
The wind, which you know is your breath,
and spills over flooded deltas, which churns
through the gleaming thickets of oil refineries,
fission factories, wind farms, water mills,
think tanks, smelters, grinders, brothels,
landfills, gun shops, billboards declaring
the newest-brightest-best—You know
how it fills you, how it lifts away from you
the words you use to talk back to yourself
late into the night. It's a very old wind, and you
utter it over and over, a mantra, a koan,
a playing out of words like an old uncle spiraling
ten-pound test over his favorite run of rapids
thirty miles up the East Fork of that river
that spills now green and empty as an eye.
You know all this, No one's telling you anything
you haven't known for a hundred years.
But your tongue says *say it*, just the same.
Your mouth makes the shape of a call, a cry,
an uneven song. You reach for a pen,
tired as you are. You write it down, because
stories and maps are the same. You think
of the photograph you saw at the museum:
a ten year old boy born blind who lost
both his arms in his country's war.
He's at a desk, reading a book with his mouth.
He's leaning in and kissing the words,
in love with his own hunger.
He's doing with his whole body
everything he knows how to do.