Without the Darkness Opening

ROGER REEVES

for Martin Luther King

Maybe he wouldn’t want or need it
In the Afterlife—the deer and cabin
I’ve prepared for him, the grass
Carrying the wet scent of the sun, his hand
Lingering, lost in the curve of a deer’s neck,
The valley’s fog lifted, the page turned
To reveal a stampede of pines
Harboring the nut-brown squeak, warble, and drum
Of the tufted titmouse, cardinal, robin,
Sparrow, God’s one good eye closed in sleep
Because the dead live beyond the eye of God,
Or, at the very least, live beyond God’s
Forgetfulness and his sometimes-care, the dead
Walking the pine-needled paths of the Valley
Of Death without the darkness opening
Around them as it once did when they were
Living. The darkness does, cannot
Provide the grace and shield it once offered
So the dead become nothing more than time
& materials burning in a dark closet and no one
There to stop the burning or drip water
Onto their parched tongues or hear them call
For someone to end this misery, this misery
Of being dead, depredated by the living
God for no other reason than “it was written....”
So I am writing, giving you a deer, some fog
Lifted, some black power, some peace which I have
Yet to slow down in its passing me by.
Here, some anchor to grace, some touch
Unlike the balcony that slabbed and lifted you
& your eye up to walk on the gray heaven
Above your death without angel, arch-
Or otherwise; and there you are, rung-out,
Bullet throbbing in your lapel and not
A nary goat or bell of mercy ringing
So let me now, beneath the earth and worm
& above the heaven of your death, give
A deer, his black mouth in the grass
Then your hand, wild and un-wild, running.

About the author

Roger Reeves is the author of King Me, Best Barbarian, winner of the Griffin International Prize and the Kingsley Tufts Award, and Dark Days: Fugitive Essays, his first nonfiction book. He is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a Radcliffe Fellowship from Harvard University, and a 2015 Whiting Award. Best Barbarian was also a finalist in poetry for the 2022 National Book Award. His poems and essays have appeared in The New Yorker, the Paris Review, Granta, the New York Times, Yale Review, and elsewhere. He lives and teaches in Austin, Texas.