

Becoming a Redwood

By Dana Gioia

Stand in a field long enough, and the sounds
start up again. The crickets, the invisible
toad who claims that change is possible,

And all the other life too small to name.
First one, then another, until innumerable
they merge into the single voice of a summer hill.

Yes, it's hard to stand still, hour after hour,
fixed as a fencepost, hearing the steers
snort in the dark pasture, smelling the manure.

And paralyzed by the mystery of how a stone
can bear to be a stone, the pain
the grass endures breaking through the earth's crust.

Unimaginable the redwoods on the far hill,
rooted for centuries, the living wood grown tall
and thickened with a hundred thousand days of light.

The old windmill creaks in perfect time
to the wind shaking the miles of pasture grass,
and the last farmhouse light goes off.

Something moves nearby. Coyotes hunt
these hills and packs of feral dogs.
But standing here at night accepts all that.

You are your own pale shadow in the quarter moon,
moving more slowly than the crippled stars,
part of the moonlight as the moonlight falls,

Part of the grass that answers the wind,
part of the midnight's watchfulness that knows
there is no silence but when danger comes.

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It seems almost a requirement for a poet to have an unconventional résumé, but Dana Gioia's is perhaps notable for being so conventionally unpoetic. A graduate of Stanford Business School, Gioia claims to be "the only person, in history, who went to business school to be a poet." He later rose to become a vice president at General Foods. He served as chairperson of the National Endowment for the Arts from 2003 to 2008 and is the Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture at the University of Southern California. In 2015, Gioia was named Poet Laureate of California. Although Gioia writes in free verse, he is known primarily for his formal work, and has been included in the school of New Formalism, a movement in the 1990s by American poets to bring traditional verse forms back to the fore.

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