

Keith Ratzlaff

The Hammock Knot

I went at it first with my teeth
the way a squirrel would,
the second time with two sets of pliers
the way a mechanic would, and now
I'm thinking about the knife
as a samurai or chef would—
or Alexander the Great—
the way a field hand would
walking beans, or a man
with a machete in a canebrake,
or a surgeon, a hunter
gutting a deer, a farmer with twine
gone haywire in the baler.

But it's November, and the air itself
is dangerous enough, full
of maple samaras twirling
like axes, like the blades
of the mower I'll use next spring
to level them. I'll miss a few
on purpose—under the pines,
behind the garage—because
everything deserves a chance
to come almost to nothing.

I'd kept the hammock hanging
out of hope for a warm October,
which I got, and the slow,

suspended joy of poems read
with my back just off the ground,
and a blue sky whenever my eyes
slipped off the page—
which was most of the time.
All that while the knot held me up
with the kind of joy only knots have,
which is friction stopped and clenched
and wound around itself, so later,
in middle November, I would stoop
and finally grab it in my teeth.

I'm kidding about the knife.
I'm no hero. How could I be
with the apple gone bare,
with the lilac buds fooled
by the last autumn warmth,
with the buckthorn's yellow
blown down the alley,
across the school parking lot,
out into the cornfields where
the leaves are obliterated?

Who could do anything
but gnaw at the ropes—
what from the kitchen window
must have looked like a kiss,
a hard one with the passion
of ropes coming together,
my lips mashed against my teeth?
Who could deny it was a kiss
when the knot was the last thing,
the only thing I own, holding on?