

ROBERT SHETTERLY

Torture

Any atrocity can be carved into a face,
skin flayed, bones splintered, nose knocked sideways,
teeth swallowed, but if the eyes remain intact,
even one eye, deep, soulful, you won't look away.
The eyes will pull you in, as though eyes
invented gravity, insist on the wordless
transmission of history. You see in this dim
light the edge of the collarbone illuminated
like a thin gold necklace, Egyptian or Assyrian,
funereal. And it occurs to you that this necklace
is a halo that has slipped down, and the
history you must learn is its progress,
how, maybe, the man grabbed it himself
with both hands and worried it down over
his head like a woman shimmying into a tight dress.
But the eye blinks and tells you, no, it was
done for him, to him—someone deriving a pleasure
equal to his pain.

On his forehead is a black discoloration in the shape
of a medieval castle with turrets where,
you think, some ancient scrolls are hidden
and the last survivors of a decimated tribe
are peering out, weaponless, witnessing,
writing it all down. You begin to speak your name,
think better of it. You cannot hold the gaze.
Instead you study the shadow you took for
blood under the crooked nose, and then the seam
of the mouth, lipless, whose last utterance, a scream,
exhausted the need to ever speak again.

The face is stronger than you are. Without
irony or intellect, its colossal memory
is full of indictment, the escapeless gravity of
the unspeakable. And you are bent in its orbit,
its dense consciousness outside of time, a gravity
that resembles fate, resembles original sin,
but is darker, more unknowable, and begs you
to name it at the same time it tells you
not to try.