



THE CAN PICKER, 1ST & COWLS

—JOE WILKINS

I will tell you what it means to have been miles
& be back now in the early afternoon
to the Baptist Church,
my nest of gingko leaves & rags—
it means the early fog rode my right shoulder,
the last stars my left. Means an arrow
of crying geese
when I close my eyes. Means back of the Valu-Mart
a coyote snouting through the night's grease.

Means bootslap, early blister, bootslap.
Means oil slick, diesel stink, tire whine, piston-shriek
machining my all-day ear. Means wait
at the light, hole in the heart, piss & rain & puddle—
means, & thank Christ, coffee
at the diner on the highway,
where the waitresses are motherdreams
& mean as angels. You know the bones, the aches
& vapors, the creaks & cracks, the one cold rib
you split all those years ago
slipping on a riverrock that time
fishing with your father. Means your gone father
walks with you. Every gone & going
lover walks with you. The world is whiled away
with the dead & alive & who-knows host
of those you love—



& can you say the same? Can you,
when you come upon me
in my raggy corner beneath the church's gabled roof
picking through my fifty gallon sack of cans—
can you when you come upon me, & I see you
seeing me, & I call hello to you—
can you call hello back to me? Can you see
we have this day on the earth each done
what is ours to do? Can you see
that by grace or happenstance or whatever
you give breath or fire, we are here,
at 1st & Cows, adored each
by the green hands of gingko leaves?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Wilkins is the author of a memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers* (Counterpoint 2012), winner of the 2014 GLCA New Writers Award and a finalist for the 2013 Orion Book Award, and two collections of poems, *Notes from the Journey Westward* (White Pine 2012) and *Killing the Murnion Dogs* (BlackLawrence 2011). His work has appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Ecotone*, *The Sun*, *Orion*, and *Slate*. A Pushcart Prize winner and National Magazine Award finalist, he lives with his family in western Oregon, where he teaches writing at Linfield College.