

MICHAEL MEEHAN

Ice Bather Halfway, 2015
Oil on linen, 78 x 62 in



ROBERT HASS

Silence

—For Ursula Le Guin 1929–2018

They descended through a steep defile, she first,
delicately, breasting the thick air like a swan
in muddy water, he following. They had both
known the red spider story in which death
made its vow to silence, so they had not spoken
since leaving the valley of moths, and one Polyphemus
the color of shagbark, with large purplish spots
on its hind wings like a lemur's eyes, was still fixed
to her shoulder just at the neck and seemed
to be staring at him. The rope bridge swayed
when they traversed the chasm. He went swiftly,
leaping from strand to thick strand, and across
he pulled hard to make the handrails taut,
and though it still swung violently as she crossed,
she paused halfway to let the spray of the cataract
cool her and then finished in long strides
as if she were still climbing the almost vertical
jade stairs to the temple commons. They paused
to share a mango, the juices dribbling golden
from her chin to her breast, which made him smile,
and she, examining the moth whose proboscis
was probing the follicle of one of her neck hairs
as it folded and unfolded its wings in flickers
of what seemed sexual intentness, brushed it off
and the creature rose, circled her once, twice, and floated
down the canyon. From there the path was well marked,
soft with pine needles in the forest and a wide swatch
of road lined with the deep ruts of wagon wheels,
through the savannah. The wind blew east to west,
so their scent was behind them, and the large cats,
if they trailed them, kept their distance, and,
except for some few languid cries that night
when they lay under the huge glittering field
of the stars, they heard no trace of them, and,
still not speaking to one another, walking
with that same nearly identical rhythmic gait,
she first through the morning, he in the afternoon,
they came to the pavilion before sundown,
where they bathed, burnt an offering of herbs,
were given a light meal, and when the sun had set,
entered the hall for the first of the old woman's lectures
on the color of vowels. She entered the room
quite casually, though with her characteristic grace,
greeted some of the novices, knelt facing the audience,

shook out her white hair, and sat very still
for what seemed a long time before they could hear,
emanating from deep in her diaphragm,
the humming sound that signified the letter *a*.
The light in the room deepened to that shade
of mauve adduced from the story of the color
of the mourning garment that the old queen wore
for the boy who had had the bad luck to arouse
her attention; adduced also from the legend about the origin
of the color on the throat of the green-backed thrushes
that visited the islands in the spring whose songs
were said to be so inconsolable that they were imitated
only by the monks who tended the temple without images,
which was dedicated to the gods of faceless longing.

(They absorbed the sweetness and the terror of it,
but did not join in the humming, which they felt,
their vow aside, belonged to her and to her stillness.)

Robert Hass's most recent book of poems is *Summer Snow*
(Ecco, 2020). He teaches at the University of California,
Berkeley.

MICHAEL MEEHAN

Untitled, 2019
Oil on linen, 48 x 48 in

