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## Ceiling of Sticks

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# Ceiling of Sticks

Shane Book

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Set in Bulmer by Bob Reitz. Designed by Nathan Putens.



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## CEILING OF STICKS

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#### Litost: A Style Manual

I remember reading somewhere of a Czech word, *litost*,

that means too much

to be translated properly—
a wild mixture of sorrow, regret, empathy

an inexhaustible longing.

At one time I would have said it sounded like all the things

we might take from this life

distilled to the smallest salt crystal

on a blade of grass.

Or the worst possible sadness.

I wonder about that now

how something can be possible

yet infinite

and all I can think of are the countless cracks

in the pad of a dog's paw

raised in mid-stride,

body rigid with instinct.

Perhaps in this way instinct is a precursor to form

so that it is not darkness

but instinct that hems in

the tree's silhouette

on a ragged grass patch in Washington Square park

in the strange light of late afternoon . . .

And sadness?

Sometimes those old days seem so far away, with their despair and other stories.

One night a friend called said he'd just gotten back from an all night drive to try to save his marriage.

The previous evening

walking past the Budget Car Rental Office

on Douglas Street

he'd stopped in mid-stride,

wheeled and gone in.

Minutes later he came out driving what was left on the lot:

a bright red cargo van for the twelve hours north on mountain roads.

It didn't matter that when he showed up at his old door his wife would be leaving for work

a strange look on her face,

the question, What are you doing here? ringing out across the driveway

in the clean morning air.

All I could do was smile and point at the van,

he told me, voice cracking,

say, Look honey, it's red.

The past is a loan shark. It lends to anyone. And you can never pay it back.

That word *litost* can also mean too little to be translated correctly—
a thumbprint as singular as the shade of green on a grass blade

a meaning as precise as the tools used by carvers who make the delicate figurines I once saw in an African Art shop window:

slender, dark wood,

teardrop shaped heads,
bodies long to the ground
without legs.

Holes had been carved through the heads. An index card labeled them "Shadows," a name which—

perhaps because I associate shadows in some vital way with the soul and imagine the soul living somewhere above the shoulders

—made no sense to me.

In parts of the world

when a loved one dies
they eat the brain

to stop the soul from returning.

Or is it to keep it close?

Another friend had a different solution—he locked himself in his apartment,

cigarettes, a case of gin.

When finally he opened the door there was nothing left: mirror, arm chair, bicycle,

plates, stereo, potted plant,

sacred heart painting — all smashed in the alley below his window.

He'd shaved a strip of hair

down the middle of his chest

was sitting on a carpet of glass

talking on the phone.

A hand covered in cigarette burns shielded the receiver as he looked up at us.

It was four a.m.

Keep it down guys, he said, I'm talking with mother.

I don't know what to call those wooden figures, the name for what's left behind

after body, soul, after it all.

And I don't want to.

Something about the past makes me want to lathe it down to perfection,

to nothing,
the finest wood dust . . .