New Year’s Eve

By Philip Ellefson

when my dad gets home from work he asks me
to grab a beer with him. we drive to the bar
in the gray Toyota pickup and as we drink
i realize my father is trying
to give me something – an understanding,
a pillar to uphold me. he tells me
he approves of my career choice though it may
be unreliable. he tells me also
that my plan may not be God’s plan, and although
i admit a distance has grown between God
and me, i cherish what he’s trying to tell me.
but here’s the thing: what he’s really trying
to tell me is unsaid, for we are not only
American men but Scandinavian
Americans by way of Minnesota
and Seattle; we do not speak openly
about the hard things, so what he’s really
trying to tell me gets buried. what he’s
really trying to tell me is that life
is hard aloneness but he honestly loves me.
for this i am grateful. we step outside
into the searing crystal winter air
and the sun has dipped between the horizon’s mounds
where a glow the color of embers yields
slowly to a vast blue-black dome dotted
with pricks of white. in the pickup truck
with my dad i nearly cry at the beauty
of a sunset.

around eight my parents’ friends
show up for the party, people who used to talk
to me as a child and now initiate me
into the strange, stale conversations
of working adults. most of the partygoers grow
drowsy with mulled wine and leave before
two-thousand-fourteen disappears. the countdown
starts and ends and feels, as always, un-
ceremonious despite the fireworks
and cheap champagne.

i wait until my parents
go to bed to finish off the sweet warm wine
and make my way past piles of dishes (heaped
with scraps of the smorgasbord) to what’s left
of the light framed in the mantel – searing wood
glowing the color of a cloudless winter
sunset in the darkened room and i’m drawn
to it, i get so close it starts to hurt.
this luscious drunk gravity would not be
so strong if someone else were here – my dad,
perhaps, the ember-glow glinting off his glasses
and his hairless head, throwing the right half
of his face into blackness. if he were here,
we could cast off our heritage and say it:
that togetherness can be only fleeting
and forgetful, a holiday party
interrupting the string of working days;
that the only permanence we can hope for
is the honest acknowledgment of shared
aloneness, which is a rich swell of gold-orange
fading into the ever-blackness – fathers
and sons, mothers and daughters, friends and lovers
glowing honest and alone with you
at some odd beginning.