

The Captain

His hometown, he told us, was Weston, New York,
and his wife was a third-grade teacher who kept
horses and had won some ribbons in shows,
and they had two young daughters who played soccer.

We had been in Helmand for six months
and although we knew his name was Richards,
we never used it, and always called him Captain.

The smell of powder and gasoline woke us,
then the high-pitched clatter of gunfire,
the shrillness of angry voices in Arabic,
and suddenly all of it was on top of us, right in our faces.

I had one count to get off a round or two
but he was already out in front, going for
the first one and yelling to all of us to get down.

After my tour I visited the family in Weston
and I gave his wife a photo from his locker
and some scraps of his uniform,
just a few shreds of khaki.

She served cake and coffee,
and when I left, the younger daughter
followed me out of the house to say good-bye.

Birthday Party

On my birthday I walked
through invisible fields of grass,
and yellow flowers as tall
as my shoulders, the voices pleading
from a high window, come in now,
come in, we're all waiting.

I had friends there and we ate
ice cream and played games,
not like Grandma used to tell us,
Pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, but pretend ones
out in the street, and later,
when it got dark, in his bedroom.

He had told me not to,
but I knew it was there, under the mattress,
smooth and cold and heavy,
so heavy I had to use two hands,
and my finger could hardly reach
the trigger, but when it did the sound
was loud, as loud as a car crash,
as loud as someone screaming.

Next year I'll be eight
and maybe my friends will come
and we'll have ice cream again
but my little brother won't be there because
he's with the angels now in heaven,
which my mother says is a beautiful place
where flowers are always blooming and Jesus
is smiling and no one is ever unhappy or afraid.

I asked my mother and she said yes,
maybe someday I could go there.

Sunday Morning

Another long absence, a reluctant return,
now just a few blocks from my mother's house,
I'm stopped at a light, where I have the chance
to study them as they cross the street, slow and stately,
brushed and polished in their straight winter coats,
they seem dignified but abstracted,
as if unable to recall a song title,
or the sound of their own laughter.

The surroundings are squalid, the neighborhood
shabbier than I remember,
the windows of the laudromat boarded
with grand flourishes of graffiti,
a lawless, dusty scent in the air,
and no one else in sight, even the shadow
of my grandfather erased,
with his smoky music of tweed and whiskey.

They seem familiar to me, Mr. and Mrs. Quinn,
or O'Leary, something like that, back when the streets
were mostly Irish, and wasn't it their daughter
who kissed Kevin in the backyard, or so he said,
the day before they both went off to college,
her brother lost in Vietnam early that summer,
and Catherine, found up at the lake on Christmas Eve,
so it was just the two of them.

The light changes and I catch one last glimpse
in the mirror as they head toward the corner,
her arm slipped through his, not speaking,
as far as I can tell, but remembering
their long-ago Sunday gatherings, tiny parades
that blended with murmuring clusters from other Sunday houses,
converging from all directions on St. Stephen's,
all the bright young families, still whole, on their way to church.

Prague

Fumbling with the map
in the jangle of streets
near the Jewish cemetery
we are, by chance, overheard,

an opportunity to practice his English,
recently sharpened, he tells us,
by the completion of *A Christmas Carol*,

and so we learn the story of a stranger,
an unknowing schoolboy who returns home
one afternoon to find his mother
seated at a table in the kitchen,

weeping that the Russians have taken over
the city, just as thirty years earlier,
they had wept when the Germans came in.

He raises delicate hands to his face
gently tapping his fingertips,
drawing them down across his cheeks,
a demonstration of a mother's despair,

and we remember that our own mothers
and fathers, at kitchen tables across America,
once shed the same tears,

beneath the broad Texas sun,
on a bright, blue day in November,
but it's not quite the same, we suspect,
since there were no invading armies

to outlast, and no hateful outsiders
to blame, with our iron loathing,
only ourselves.

Art Thieves

The first time, we broke a basement window
and crawled through the dirt, like marmots,
inspired less by greed than by a nostalgic breath
of despair that would soon dissolve into rapture
one flight up, in the brown, hushed study,
where Renoirs glittered, unprotected in the dark.

We ignored the crass principles of economics
in our pursuit of aesthetic expression,
masquerading as guards or plumbers,
crouching behind the grand museums
of Antwerp and Brussels, and attaining
what we thought we had wanted, an audience,
transfixed by our elegance and boldness, as Tintoretto
and Raphaels vanished without even a footprint,
and crowded white walls were suddenly bare.

After Geneva they called us reckless
as we ran through the park and had to dump
a Mondrian in the bushes, then finally the spectacular
mistake in Stockholm, where we began our detention,
with time to remember the smell of linseed oil,
the exuberance of titanium white,
and the ominous pronouncement
that I had passion but no talent,
just a decent eye for landscape,
like El Greco's Toledo, glimpsed through wires,
but without the lovely grayness of anticipation,
and without the steeple.

