

THRESHOLDS

Thresholds

I can see my friends, the adamant
ex-catholics, showing up on the steps
of our town's mission, egged on
by one or another of them now
that I'm sick. Drooping up the hard
front steps, each one believing
they're there for another, they enter.
My friend with the big, boy's heart
fractures the shut door and walks
to the still, holy water then
straight for the front on his
way to a time for the quiet
of candles. The rest are out
standing, hands in pockets, at
that heavy front door, closed now and
awaiting more hands. She comes next--
my friend for whom catholicism is without
story but more the food she was
forced to eat, everything that made
her sit alone at a table after
dinner, parents waiting for her to swallow.
Her feet move from love for me --
and for John, who she does not
want to be inside the cold caverns'
damp worship space alone. She doesn't
touch the water, just goes looking
for him. And he is there, fumbling
with long lights for the candles,
many lit and flickering. She
stands and crosses her real-living
hands in the front of her, watches
while he lights a candle.
My friend with the happy
father's heart has come in
through a side door
and manages to smirk in a way
that doesn't take away from the

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true heat of those minutes where
they love me and have no other
ideas between them of what
to do in the face of my suffering.
One says "for Ginger," they
stand for a second, and then
walk toward the yellow
sunshine the exit is promising
and meet there, my friend whose
heart would not let him
enter. He has found a tree and
a bench to wait, this man with
a heart for love that swallowed him
straight to atheism -- how could there be
something bigger than the love
he knows here, outside the
heavy archways and performed
airs of a church full of
more promises than feeling?
He steps to them, now a
little band who choose to
love me in any way they can.
And I am not there to greet
them, to make jokes about church
or to hug them or to tell them
again all my 25 years of
thank yous. I am in bed, tired,
so tired, imagining them walking
across a threshold, even
their worst one, for me.

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Scrub

He left her for the way she mopped the floor.

This comes to me with the rag still in my hand,
knees burning against the yellow linoleum.

She refused the mop. Felt strongly
that you couldn't send away dirt you couldn't see
with your own eyes, and so preferred to
scrub with an old rag from one corner to another,
beneath the edge of the stove, up the baseboard,
in side-to-side swishing motions
that cleaned her right into a dirty corner
where she'd flip around and stand on dry rags
to finish the job, then skate away and buff as she went.

This was too much for him.

He preferred the Mop, that handy pole with the
metal scrincher for letting the dirty water out,
though of course he never used one.

Just wanted her to. Couldn't wrap his mind
around a woman who would avoid such a thing.

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Couldn't see the point.

And while it wasn't as bad

as what the neighbor had endured—

the sight of her husband standing

on the floor she'd just cleaned,

telling her of his lover

while her hands still burned of Pinesol—

the leaving was no more pretty

and tried to smell as clean.

My father left my mother

for the way she

mopped the floor—

on her hands and knees.

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Any One of Them

[Written along the margins of a church bulletin]

One of the guys from *Canned Heat* baptized his baby daughter today. Louise Tucker took the mic during Joys & Concerns and told a story that happened just yesterday at Rite Aid. Then Harvey praised Caroline, his second wife of 25 years. Some lady's Verizon cell phone went off with the company jingle during the *Our Father* and she couldn't find it. We sang "Surely the Presence of the Lord Is In This Place." The guy from *Canned Heat*'s older son, a four-year old, came looking for his mama, the tamborine player in the band. Jack, in suspenders, rolled an old lady shopping basket full of the dropped-off canned goods that pile up in the narthex up to the front behind the lady usher with the offering plates, so it could all get blessed. The Choir Director gave an accidental solo during all that, her voice in the mic and some of the rest of us hum-singing along. And Jane played every hymn like she was backing up a silent movie. Later, I walked back from chewing the dipped host, and touched Hilary's arm as I passed. She gave a slight flinch at my hand, like someone covered in cuts, never looked at us— my daughter, the one on my hip, or me. And I saw her watering eyes. Beth was wearing a hat, as she does, and stood during the closing song, so we all did, and nodded around the room to the lot of us as she sang. And when the song was over and the preacher left down the middle, I walked along up four rows to Hilary. She didn't want to be hugged. I was afraid to hug her. But I was more afraid of seeing her go without that tell of my body that her tears are real and her longing acute, and that I too am covered in cuts, that we are all here to wait between the coming and going to see if any of them will heal. Any one of them.

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We Do

I cannot square dance with you, walk out
the story of long love, the pulling together,
the pushing apart with two hands clasped. The
side steps and front steps and twirls,
the sasse, the swing your partner, the fling
of you to another and back again. All
to the bright music of sunshine and happy
calamity, in the sea of all those others
doing the same. There is no walk
your partner or leave your partner
to stroll up a long line and meet again.
There is only for me the slow front to front
swaying of our todays and the pull in hunger
of them rolling out into tomorrows
and the pulsing bass of notes that move us to
pull in beyond our already in and the light
notes of steady unwaning softness and the dark
room of only us and the one warm
flickering light where we step so slow
some might not call it dancing, more like slow
staying, more like waiting to meld, more like
tender moving to the ache of our coming blend.

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Come for Dinner

All my old sadnesses are visiting tonight
like out-of-town friends who haven't written
or called for too long, sheepish and hoping
to stay over. Tonight I'm sautéing finely diced
winter vegetables for them, caramelizing
onions for a stable, all-season sauce that will melt,
easy to eat for any who are too old to chew.
There will be home-toasted croutons for the salad,
and enough wine for me to drink to the lot of us,
and some to offer the sauce. I've left
the bitter garlic out, too finicky
for the heat, and given it a spot
in our salad, blended into a palatable
coating.

I don't know

that I will set the table tonight,
what with the way they like to stand
while they're eating—bumping arms
as they reach for the table—otherwise shy
and rare to mingle, preferring only
accidental touch. If I do, it will be

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with a sturdy cotton cloth
ready to take on the stains
of a bumped glass
or a forked splatter.

There is the question
of easy talk at the table and how it will go,
and the right placement of one sadness
next to another—who will grouse, who
will overtake all our chances for easy reminiscing
and turn the night into a brackish fight
over what happened when. I look them over,
there at the edge of the kitchen
where they've grouped themselves—
all trying to look easily at home
and so all the more nervous for it—and feel
a funny gladness to see them here, again,
a girlish complimentedness at their effort
to come all this way just to see me.
I set the sauce at a simmer while they
make conversation, looking toward them
only often enough so that none feel
out of place, asking the sorts of questions

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that make them tell stories and require
none of mine. Most seem glad enough
to have a steady spot to stand and wait
for a dinner that's been simmered, glad
to listen to another's story and wait for a turn
to tell their own.

And I see you,
there at the edge of them all, trying to fit in,
wanting—but not badly enough—
to meld in with the rest, be an agreeable guest,
line up in the swath of them for what I have
to offer, take it graciously with an eye toward
going when it's time to go. And I know
you don't want to go. And you know I know.
But I will feed you with the rest of them,
and I'll ask you to play nice and line up
for dinner somewhere in the middle, take
not more than your serving of warm noodles
and simmered sauce, crisp salad and soft bread,
keep your eyes from me, hold
those questions and assurances
close to your chest, sit tight with the answers

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I gave you so long ago.

Please do not touch me

when you go—leave me no notes, whisper
no special goodbyes. When dinner is over,
take your plate to the sink with the rest of them,
load up into cars they've parked somewhere. Wave
goodbye to me from the pack of them. Smile
when you go. Leave like they will—bellies
full, eased back into a readiness to stay
away, happy to know I live far off,
satisfied with my picture stuck
to the side of their refrigerators,
the girl in a story they tell about a place
they lived a long, long time ago.