

Upstairs, Downstairs, In-Between

The song my neighbor plays
when he comes home: unlocking
the door, turning the knob,
the stairs squeaking each the same,
the door clicking shut behind him,
is not the song that ends
with lovers reconciled, hand
in hand, or new love unfurling
like a quilt stitched from the glances
of other lovers, half-whispered
vows, and every kind of petal.
It's not his fault. Our age
cannot bear such songs,
not because we've heard them all
before, but because we never
heard them in the first place,
we only learned them third hand
as they fell from the lips of clowns
and tyrants, the better to forget
there is no difference between the two.

Through the floor I hear his oven
or microwave offer its siren call,
hear his footsteps across the ceiling,
imagine I can hear him sinking
into the couch. I try to love him
up through the floor, massage
his jaw gently as he chews
too fast, swallows too hard, wishing
it would just go down so he could,
for a moment, before sleep comes,

stop working. I try to tell him:
it will stop, someday, your wish
is not a wish if it is inevitable.

I would climb the stairs and make
them squeak each the same,
knock on his door, ask if he wanted
a cup of tea, but we are neighbors,
and our floors and walls and ceilings
are precious, they allow us
to sing whatever song we want,
just not so loud as to bother the others
and let them know what fools we are,
full of the same dreams we had
when first we learned we could do
such a singular, majestic thing.

The Way it Goes

Through smoke rising white in the gray sky
a tug drags an empty garbage barge up a black river.

The captain burns his tongue on his coffee,
curses at the hovering gulls,
 remembers his father in the doorway
 smelling of the foundry
 arms full of Christmas presents.

He blasts the horn going under the bridge,
feels the echo in his teeth
as rain starts to tick against the windshield.

The wipers jerk and squeak.

He peels the plastic from a ham sandwich,
the same sandwich he ate yesterday,
the same he will eat tomorrow. It wiggles
 in his hand, suddenly strange
 like a snake or ticking bomb,
or a sandwich.

 It's only a sandwich.

His wife made it standing at the kitchen counter,
in her scrubs, worrying they had no one
to look after them when they were old.

Mustard. Brown bread.

 The sun crashes through the windshield.

He tosses the crust to the gulls,

kisses his fingertips,
presses them to his wife's photo.

They drop the barge, start a drag
on a full load. The wind is blowing down river.

Blessings for the New World

May the highway grab you by the face
and hoist you over the embankment
until God hangs a spoon from her nose.

May your ten thousand children each
sprout ten thousand fingers
that they might return all the library books
well before their due dates.

And may every tongue that is spoken
have a word for you, and only you,
more than just name, more than just
another signifier—the sound of every voice
singing: they were here, they were here,
they were, they were.