

The Other Side of Timber and Dust

When I returned to the vacant house
something in the ruins struck me that I had never noticed,
something that did not exist
until I raised a sledgehammer above my head
and slammed it against the wall
again and again, with fury and angst and promise,
until all that remained was timber and dust and open space—
a blank canvas.

I heard faint voices of those who had yet to arrive;
and inhaled the scent of strong coffee and sizzling bacon on a distant Sunday morning;
an unborn baby cooed in what I imagined a back bedroom,
and in what might be the cellar were the giggles of children.

I descended the stairs to echoed cheers at an imaginary oak bar,
when young Jason screamed “Goal!” after scoring
in overtime of the make-believe Stanly Cup Finals,
while I wrestled on the floor with three little girls who beat me into submission,
and turned "No" into "Yes" to their request
for a backyard wedding where Jesse might walk my love and I up the aisle
to a Japanese pergola I carved from cherry wood
like a seventeenth century woodworker
soaked in perspiration, a sledgehammer at my side
staring at the blank canvas.

Wildflowers On The Shoulder Of The Road In A Traffic Jam

You brag that you are grateful for your four children and five grandchildren like you should win the Nobel Peace Prize for loving your loved ones, as if the Prophet never said love your enemies, and those who persecute you, or something like that.

Rather, be grateful for the glorious obscurities in life,
Those latent mysteries that catch you off guard and lighten your burden,
bring a smile you can't suppress in spite of the traffic jam at rush hour,
like the café cashier who can't tell the difference between a latte and an espresso,
while you wait impatiently in line all judgmental
convinced that the dark lenses in the barista's glasses are for show,
just like the Gaelic knots tattooed on her wrists,
until you notice the white stick leaning against the counter to her left,
which draws your attention to her determined expression
as she walks to the counter confidently and places your espresso down
with such care you feel as though the café is empty except for the two of you,
and her smile strips you of your inhibitions
as you reach out and lightly touch the back of her hand with three fingers,
and when she lowers her head you see behind her glasses
glossy eyes peering blankly into the back of those dark lenses,
a sight that scorches you like a hot poker when you realize
that you are watching the gaze of the sightless with your own two eyes,
and you say to her, "Thank goodness for each good last breath,"
to which she replies,

"Or something like that."

Eating Salad While You Sleep

The opening line is lifted from "Thomas Hardy," by Norman Dubie

The first morning after anyone's death, is it important
to draw your deepest breath, maybe from inside a garden filled with
dill and basil, accented with the mint of spearmint,
or perhaps an uprooted garlic clove.

Inhale deeper while bees busy themselves pollinating ten-foot tall sunflowers
and snow pea blossoms that rabbits invade when you're not looking,
and deer ravage in the middle of the night while you dream
of a perfectly garnished salad, crisp and wet, and sprinkled with those herbs
that guests eat while standing in the other room, pausing only to peek in
and compliment the splendid job the mortician did with your body
as you lay there in your wooden box, rosary clasped in hands of stone,
green, orange and white flowers from cold head to cold toe;
the only way they know how to pay their respects.

After all, mourners are always hungry.

Scenes From A Basement Saloon

Tunneling into the belly of the whale
soot and grime sweat through masonry walls
the sweet scent of stale beer drowns the senses
and covers cement floors that stick to soleless shoes.

Slog through the womb where Yuk pulls a pint,
holy water from a fresh barrel—the bread of life

Holy of Holies,

where saints are sinners, and sinners are what we become
hunched at the altar muttering vespers
that begin with “mother” and end in “fucker,”
followed by giggles, like children hiding in a closet
with father’s vintage Playboys found in the bottom drawer
under the underwear and next to condoms
they mistake for balloons they fill with water
and drop out the bedroom window onto your little sister,
standing there in her uniform, clarinet case in hand,
so angry she forgets the solo she just played at the school recital
that her father never heard from his seat at the altar.

Watching Dirt

On a dusty mountain ridge trail seventeen miles from Duncannon,
a Monarch wraps her willowy body around a twig,
like a pole dancer at the Velvet Lounge;
yellow, black and white rings on silk skin,
eight pair of legs more magnificent than a Greek goddess,
a wanderer chomping an oak leaf in the midday sun,

Life numbered in weeks (larva in 14 days,) cocoon seclusion.
Orange wings etched in black, darker than boiling tar,
probe into a new life and extend toward the sun—they flutter;
she dances weightless above wildflowers,
feeds on nectar, pollenates prairies.

Hiking boots emerge from under a canopy of oak and ash,
lean muscular legs, smiling eyes join mine
rising toward the sky, watching.