

FIVE POEMS

Leaver, Stayer

We become one or the other
as if they were demographic facts:
gender, color, leaver, stayer.

No one knows at first
which one will cut and run,
or which is prone to soldier on.
They circle as boxers in a ring,
gazes locked, until – perhaps – the cleaving comes:
one searches for a means of slipping out,
the other for the wherewithal within.

I was in the thick of middle-age
by the time I diagnosed myself:
some airborne seed in me
had turned into a tree,
and I was a planted man.

I was a stayer as much as
the old Norway maple in my back yard,
that gentle giant with a sweet sap
and a canopy to retreat beneath;
a living pillar you could lean against.

But once I saw it trying to escape.
In a summer squall as the rainfall rose,
a limb took on the shape of an arm
flailing over a boat, snatching at air
as if desperate for rescue
and straining to shake itself loose.
It kept stretching out until the wind died down.

Something Borrowed

It weighs me down, this debt coming due
– this lease that one day won't be renewed.
All sorts of signs remind me
that these elements aren't mine for keeps,
that there's more of those in them than these,
more scatter and drift,
more of moment than of ownership.

*

This morning I was up at five,
flushing out sleep with news and music
and coffee in my rocking chair.
The radio played Bach, and the moon
was a cork of light that plugged the summer sky.
I slipped the science section from the paper's fold
and read about myself: how I am mostly
a hydrogen stew, heavily seasoned
with dashes of potassium, iodine, zinc,
down to a lone cobalt molecule –
like a single teardrop adding flavor
in a huge cast-iron pot.

*

That moon-plug was slowly pulled out
and light began leaking in
while I sifted through the paper's other parts.
A global conference had commenced in Bonn;
a bomb had killed four people on a bus;
and the Sox had won it in the ninth.
I got up and stretched, distracted now
by this peculiar matter of mine.
Science says I am a short-term deposit
in the billennial bank.
Science says I am an atomic baggage check.
Science says I am a snapshot of Union Station
at eight a.m., every moving object

on its way to somewhere else.
I am a table with a dusting of self
and the housekeeper is knocking at the door.

The daily broadsheet lay at my feet
(the Sox had scored on a wild pitch)
like slabs of discarded slate.

*

All people are taught from an early age
that borrowed goods must be returned,
an axiom that includes those items only on loan
from the void, formed when the earth was without form.
Sunlight poured into my living room.
It warmed that little global forum
in human shape (it means the world to me)
which time and the wind will disperse
about the planet and beyond.
It illuminated those past and future
bits of atmosphere and rock
which have assembled for an instant
in between, convening just long enough
for my tiny allotment of oxygen
to be put into the service of song.

Fragment found in the ruins of the (future) ancient city of Chicago

Here am I, a man alive, emph
An inhabitant of now
I ride a bicycle and have red hair.
Come summer I grow plum
Yesterday you said, "Tomorrow
ever, and so remember
!", and today, I testify,
art is fragile and unique.

Flight Paths

i

The sky began to give birth at dusk
as I stood beneath a willow tree,
watching it deliver a litter of infant lights
high above Lake Michigan – a clockwork issue
of distant flash that turned into machines;
into airplanes advancing single-file from the east
like a column of relentless troops.

ii

The house we bought came with an extra trait:
a flight path stretched above our heads.
In our backyard patch of pepper plants, I spread
out compost while volcanoes in the clouds
keep up a constant churn, on the verge,
it always seems, of erupting
before strewing our garden with ash.

iii

The air grew thick with snow, and three deer
grazed a hard ground in the woodland strip
that coats O'Hare like a layer of fur.
At river's edge, we gazed at aircraft roaring by,
looming sky-leviathans hurtling down
as if about to swallow creatures whole.
Whatever could the turtles think?

Transition

The door of our frame bungalow
intervened between the welcome mat
and a basket of slippers
you insisted we put on inside.

It was the door unhinged
soon after we moved in, a plane
of scratched lumber sanded
and stained and returned to its jambs,

a load of old oak enlightened
by panels of glass. I could see you
through that door approach with groceries
you handed over on the porch.

However, when you pulled the brass knob close
for the last time, I chose not to look.
Did you pause at the door before stepping
forever out of the family frame?

Two years went by. One evening it rained.
Coming home in wet sneakers,
I shut my front door and proceeded
past the slippers-basket,

tramping to the kitchen and back
in street soles that dampened hardwood floors,
breaking an ancient rule and wondering
at the silence that surrounded me.