

Giving in to What If

after Steve Scafidi

If I only wrote about what I knew, as once
Plath wrote of moons, mannequins,
and grievous words spoken by yew and elm —
I would tell of the last call my brother made,
when he said he wouldn't come for Christmas
and I tried to change his mind, and he insisted,
and I had the flu and didn't, maybe, hear
the tone of his voice. Or I'd only write
of diapers, cakes baked, and failed tomatoes,
or of fees simple, encumbered and joint.

But I prefer to imagine life
in the animal kingdom, where,
as I understand it,
they get by without what ifs.
Here I can drift, a sea turtle
on ocean currents, weightless
from Thailand to the Golden Isles,
and not once consider
the half-ton of gravity
I bore across the sand
at nesting time, and will again,
when the moon draws me ashore.
As a crane I'm blessed with a mate
who chose me for life and is happy,
who doesn't brood about the crane
one creek over, the one with plumper knobs
on her knees, knobs he'd like
the other males to envy
during annual migration.
I am a crow, immersed
in the collective mind of the murder,
and when the phone rings
someone, at least one of us,
has heard that tone of voice before,
remembers the up-shot, and tells me,
your brother needs help.
Go now.

**Waiting for the Good Humor Man
Houston, 1962**

Prone beneath mimosas,
the picture-book God
of rules and hellfire
deferred to the grace
of the natural world.
Pompons rained on me,
already dazed
by the scent of heat
rising off asphalt,
the smell visible
as a mirage
in a foreign legion film.

And though I don't believe
my catechism, as I did then,
I've kept my eyes open to visions,
mild thunderbolts which saints
might call the voice of God:
After a storm, starfish
littered the beach at Sanibel,
hundreds of six-armed bodies
expelled from the deep.
And fifty years ago, I saw
lilies of the valley emerge,
pristine, from the charnel
of rotten leaves.

Prescription

When you hike wear heavy socks and brogues
so your eyes may rise above the narrow path,
ignore the common gait, trust one foot
to find its place before the other.

Toes safe, scan the landscape for love.
Stride through fields of waist-high grass,
fodder before it's scythed to bale, and borrow
a few stalks to carry. The world's in hand —

food for winter, seeds of next year's crop.
Kick a pinecone straight down a gravel road,
on parade for crowds of spiderwort
and sumac cheering from the ditch. Notice

that suitors vie for your attention:
the eager moon, risen early into sheer sky
and the sun boasting in scarlet and plum.
Write your name on the bones

of the old smokehouse, to tie you
to the past, and keep a fragment
in the pocket of your winter coat, a gift
to find each year. At night, in the warmth

of your fireside, pick burrs from your socks
and burn them. Listen to your problems pop
and sizzle. Savor their resinous smell.
Watch them curl to cashmere smoke.

Birds of Suburbia: Blue-Gray Heron

Misplaced here by the interstate,
you soar above Baskin-Robbins,
sapling legs sailing behind,
neck folded into blades
of Da Vinci wings,
his dream of flight.
From here you wear no blue,
your silhouette of shade glued flat
to an ochre sky.

In this landscape of Starbucks,
your exotic form drags behind
a rusty tin can of foreboding.
Where are your moss-draped oaks?

Each spring and fall you eat at our pond,
gawky Giacometti, knob-kneed
and statue-still. Then I can see
your slate spectrum flash.

Perched on the brick ledge,
or one leg submerged,
you eye the buffet: former denizens
of our fishbowl and offspring
of bream pulled from the creek
by children on summer vacation.

You're welcome here, eat up.
The goldfish translate sun too,
but are more prolific, their design
less esoteric, less like a secret
whispered in Genesis.

Losing My Drift

In line for coffee, waiting my turn,
a song transports me back.
Joni Mitchell just released *Hejira*, and I race
down *the fine white lines of the free, free way*.

I'm vaguely aware that what other patrons see
is a middle-aged woman, spaced out in Starbucks,
her hair in disarray, atypical of the neighborhood.
She seems to think it's her duty to explain the draft
and women's lib to young people who missed the Sixties,
these young people who seem to be running everything
(when did they take over?)

I don't know this woman, but she's always around. Easily distracted,
she has binges of attention, interrupts everything she does
to start something else, keeps piles in every room,
monuments to projects she means to finish.
One pile on her desk is for vanishing wetlands,
one for stupid real estate projects
she will deplore in letters to editors
(Joni was right about that *tree museum*)
and one of unfiled items for her garden notebook,
data about plants that died years ago.

One pile is for an essay on hypocrisy.
The same politicians against stem cell research
say *bombs away* at the drop of a hat, unbothered by thousands
of dead civilians. Frankly, she just wants to slap
her friends who vote to keep them in office and say, *WISE UP!*

At this point it's obvious the disgruntled boomer
has taken control of this poem that was supposed to be
about the grad student who stood atop Balsam Mountain
decades ago and thought society was progressing.

I was going to write about the self, or selves,
about how what seems lost, isn't.
But the self that soars over the valley like a Red Tail
is also the slippery fish, still shining,
but scarred from flopping in the bottom
of an old canoe, which is the body, I guess,
and it's drifting down stream, heading for the falls.