

Railroads

Downtown railroad juncture holds me up in traffic
waiting watching swiftly moving waters cut through
leaning white birches who drop yellow leaves to race
under the bridge, under me, and astride the mills

River ran the thread mill, railroad made it profit
still the rails run for pay-offs at the end of the line
And keep me from getting across town on time

My grandpap drove locomotives hauling coal out of
West Virginia's mountains when he was young
He'd bring my grandma his paycheck and his love and
he would disappear in a cloud of smoke

She called theirs a fatherless family -
too busy following rails
through the Shenandoahs
but kept the kids coming
while he kept going

Last car rumbles by, no caboose, just a red light
fades into leaning birches as the gate goes up
Traffic jostles across the tracks and I see
the sunset on the rusty oiled steel shimmers
like gold, like promises to keep, paychecks to deliver

Our Neighbor's House

When their Christmas lights never went on last year
that's when we first thought they weren't there

By January the dailies littered their driveway
sodden bags of sales fliers coupons news
blurred swollen grotesque pushed up against
the small garden they had built with rocks and ferns -
a dais for Blessed Mary her arms flung wide
waiting to greet them when they returned

It was the late March thaw
when the neighborhood first talked
nobody knew where the family had gone
if they had gone
nobody had seen them
since the death of their child

None of us knew them all that well
neighbors should respect privacy but
the screen door hung ajar
as if welcoming friends or fleeing in fear

Days grew longer hotter
vines lashed a front shutter
pale grass fell through the leaning fence
in the silent yard once littered with toys

A bright summer morning and
someone knows where they're living
trying to live
heard they'll be returning soon, so
we help our neighbors
throw out litter
force the screen door shut
mow the front lawn at least
take a collection, everyone gives

hoping we provide a balm
for their pain for our fear

Mid-July at dusk
a van backs up to the door
we never saw them
we were told
they had said thank you
but little else
as if they wanted to disappear

Their vacant house
is now squeezed tight by insidious vines
lining shutters gutters door frame
leaves turning crimson brown
broken-hinged door tries to leave
tears its twisted self from the house
seeks the tall grasses weeds debris for solace
Mary's lost in ferns: her pale blue gown
overtaken by moss in the house's shadow

The neighbors mutter: something should be done
it's an eyesore, brings down values
To see the wrath of grief conquer
take possession of home property existence
makes us feel death's proximity:
our neighbor we don't want to know

We drive by
avert our eyes
wave and smile to neighbors
on the other side of the street

Still

I'm nodding off
on the futon
cat on my lap

When I see us
here side by side
with cats on our laps

You turn to me
tenderly say,
"Maybe you should
head off to bed
if you can't keep
your eyes open."

Your weather-worn hands
write a prescription
on a floating note.
Then, tearing it off,
sparkle in your eyes,
slap it on my chest.

I awaken again
relearn that you're not here

Your words echoing
across the still room

Oblivion

I once saw the sky as
a familiar blanket
holding us close to earth
united - such solace
to think we saw the same stars

now each dawning shows me
that the sky doesn't care

after the storm's darkness,
it brightens like a clown
pulling stringed balloon clouds
across the bright blue sky
mocking our sodden souls
collecting our remains

we've honored it too long
stared at its depths to know
our own, hitched our wagon
to a promise that was false

tell the poets to stop
spelling scenes across their page
no bleeding gold staining
a pink rose petaled sky

warn the lovers to stop
pledging ever afters
candles out, believing
starry night's their witness

find inspiration
from more than steel gray clouds
parting for rays to shine

because the stratosphere
won't be bothered with us

horizon's not hugging
sky's not listening

shout into the abyss
and you will find just you
are the only one there

after each day's trial
walk below its crystal
blue ceiling and you'll learn
the sky is oblivious

we can only depend on
those who live below it
in oblivion or not

Morning Refrain

December fog waits with barren trees:
ethereal silhouettes layered into an oblivion of white

Thick ebony trunks succumb to mere mist
arborescence erased as boughs go missing
vapor clinging to their desolate canopy

Just when all seems lost, a reluctant sun sees through the thickness
The mist dissipates, reveals specks of limbs fragmenting, rejoining again:
precious sparrows float into boughs
suddenly multitudinous
mesmerizing in this first light

A crimson cardinal darts through shadows:
black turning red then black again
A bold drop of blood on a limb, he calls to his lover:
What cheer! What cheer cheer cheer!
vanishes as a new heartening ray, rising itself,
lifts the lingering ground clouds wafting like ghosts
while another echoes the winter's morning refrain: *What cheer!*