

The Toymaker Elegies

Toymaker

The toymaker pinches a needle
to pull wire through
a lifeless limb articulated by joints
into segments of dumb wood
trying to be human.
He has been putting
things in boxes
so he can ignore them
for so many years
he has finally retrieved this random
body for reanimation,
and as he holds it in his hand
its motions resemble
those of the real boy he used to be.
At times his own body
is composed simply of hope,
but also button,
straw, pebble, and dust.
As he tugs the cord
taut then loosens it just enough
to free the limb,
his fingers stiffen and a map
darkens into veins
of oak, the needle falls
from the sticks
at the end of his hand
as the thread
tugs from a hollow place
running through
him only now too tight,
and he seizes
into an arc of knots
binding
beyond play.

Hoard House

The house on Cliffdale is full of miniature houses
the way a basket may be full of eggs or a box

full of kitchen utensils after a move. The houses
inside the house are composed of cut-away rooms

just like the rooms in the house that holds these houses,
and just like those larger rooms the tiny rooms

are full of tiny things like doll houses with rooms
full of other tinier things. In the larger house

the broken debris of the smaller houses inhabit
all available surfaces: sills, shelves, tables, mantel,

hearth, couches, chairs, refrigerator and stove,
and down the stairs in the basement of the larger

house, the space is occupied by the same debris
occupying the basements and attics of the smaller houses.

Mostly it's miniature furniture and fragments
of miniature bodies of ceramic and fabric

and plastic and wood and glass trying to come alive
beyond Geppetto's powers to make them so, and now

there is no room for the fragments in the tiny houses
trying to be human houses because the rooms trying

to be human rooms are full of the furniture and boxes
and figurines piled floor to ceiling like in the real house

where the boxes and debris are trying to be merely
imaginary. It's all figuration and facsimile, metaphor

a tissue of self-reference multiplying and amplifying
in the echoless dust of broken toys flaking off

from the mind they depict so wholly, the mind
surrounding itself with symbols of its lost

world where everything was provided, where
everything was innocent of the figuration of itself,

the irony of control incubating disorder, storms
of rage fashioning endless duplication of calm

in rooms that configure a human striving for the quiet
of things themselves, the pots and pans, the small

domestic flotsam pulled from cupboards and drawers
just to show there's nothing up their sleeve, that they are

what they are without agenda or desire unless maybe
it's the subtle, anthropomorphic urge to become

real through use. In the houses nested in the houses
nested in the house, dishes and fireplace and toaster

are only paintings of themselves down where vision
diminishes into illusion before the molecules

swallow appearance altogether in its final play
for sympathy. Behind everything there's an invisible

architecture holding it down, a constructed artifice
the heart has fed with blood for so many years.

Sometimes it takes the shape of memory,
sometimes the motion of hands busy collecting

to articulate the needs. Is that a voice rising from down
that hallway, its tones veering toward the explosion

that dismantled the childhood home he's forever re-
assembling, that ruptured the toys he's forever mending?

No. If he listens carefully enough there's only quiet
brooding within a house inside a house inside a house

or maybe a mouse gnawing the raveling sleeve of plenty
where that thing his life depended on got lost among the details.

Providence River Bridge, Rhode Island, July 28

Two hours before we call the ambulance
traffic stops on the bridge between my car
and my brother's house as sirens wail
past with a shiver of premonition. It seems
as if these are things that are happening
to me when he's the one in the breathless
room whose hands of wrung clay turn wine
into water at a simple touch. Since I left
in May he's shed two pounds a week
effortlessly as if the house were a machine
designed to absorb everything human
into furniture's broken shapes of inertia.
Is it paralysis of will or desire, or the disabling
of thought that flares up in hallucination?
From the hospital bed he raises his arms
moving from third to fourth position
in a silent ballet just as down the hall in the ER
someone from the crash on the bridge
is still driving on that interrupted highway.
Later, I sit on the bench beside the river
downtown waiting for it to perform
some meaning or connection that it won't.
A sign on a building reads: *The better you dress
the worse you can behave*, and that sounds
about right even though it's meant
as a selling point and not a description
of what's gone wrong with the world.
Traffic stalls here too, texting drivers
having forgotten they're on a road.
Merciful clouds brew up over the bay
to slide the bridge and the hospital
under shadow. The cells of our bodies
come from other bodies and they from others
and so on and on in one of those infinite
regresses that has us dressing and undressing,
dressing and undressing the hollow places inside.
Or is it that there's a flame lighting the curved
image in the mirror until it loops back,

like water in the river, cars on the road,
like brother losing brother losing brother?

Study in Absence, July 29

In 355A we watch television as if you aren't dying.
You snap at the nurse about the pain medication
as if the only way to heal is to be mean to the people
who are trying to help you. We won't learn for
another week that the flood tide of cells has soaked
your bones and the kidney stones you keep mentioning
are a fiction. I will tell the nurse when I leave that
the few grains of rice that found your mouth aren't
enough to keep you from starving and urge her
to *tell* rather than *ask* you what to do. Maybe that's
wrong, but it's all I've got in the short hours before
my flight in Boston will take me away from you.
On television they're traveling to Rome to see
the perfect rooms of the Borghese and I realize this
is what you have wanted all along, objects
describing the shape existence takes when
it shifts beyond the insistence of time and place,
like Bernini's Diana eternally leafing out into alien
form where she will grow in the mind forever,
soft and gleaming in the water of polished marble.
Your house too is a sculpture, a three-dimensional
work, a pointillism of artifacts that when seen from
some now obscure distance must describe the shape
of hope or love, or some abstraction so uncertain
we often mistake it for smoke or confusion or pain.
When I get back to Margaret and Tom's I will find
that my flight leaves in the morning, not tomorrow night.
I don't know it yet, but I will be back here in a few hours
to say goodbye. The wallet, checkbook, and keys
we placed in your bag will vanish, and soon we will
form a study in absence composed with the watercolor
washes of bay and sky over Providence. When the show
ends, the rooms of the palace breathe the same quiet air
we breathe in the hospital room now that you are asleep.
And then time performs its sleight of hand: the credits
roll, the sound goes away, the screen darkens, the hallway
calms, and as I stand to leave, your face grows peaceful
before I catch your glittering eyes, their smoldering light.

Thrive

We were wrong about the house digesting you,
about its miraculous transfiguration of desire
into a prison of museum silences and inertia.
Now in the story we tell ourselves failure to thrive
has given way to the thriving of disease we otherwise
name the return of the cancer. Your house is less
predator and more a grown child's box of toys
swollen into the extravagant gesture
of an eccentric brother or uncle or son
rebuilding a life one broken toy at a time,
each object the rescue of an idea or act
you had not allowed yourself to perform until
that moment you added it to the collection.
Artifacts too thrive where they wait for their
curator's assurance that beauty is enough
even where impulse twists into need
and compulsion, for you don't have
to want them anymore now they're crammed
in the shelves and dilapidated corners of your tiny
houses. Where we saw hoard, you saw treasure,
sumptuous overflow, proof positive no one
could tell you what you can't have or what you
have to do to be you. Isn't it odd that the obscure
hurt is worn ragged by neglect and attention both?
When we found you crippled in your house we fed
the chaos of cells thinking we were feeding you,
and when you covered your face before
the paramedics came we found you unraveling
on the distaff side of anguish as more sirens neared.
Today reports emerge from the medical wilderness
as if a prophet were sweeping from village to village:
Lazarus walks, the prophet is welded to a machine,
the dark bird hovers, alights, weighs its options,
slouches off to deeper precincts of the forest.
And though in this time of epidemic and war
your mausoleum of toys assumes the softer lines
of a refuge, you say putting things into boxes

so you can ignore them has become exhausting
and you've had enough. So now you drift
through one of those rooms where worn limbs
gather to store up new kinds of damage in futile,
sterile sleep. And as your strength gathers so too
does the urge to get the house back into shape,
to sort things out, to finally organize a world
so reluctant to come clean, so resistant to things
finding their places. And in this new clarity you
blaze so brightly through your thin flesh to show
us we're finally on to something here, putting
broken phrases back together one word at a time,
even as chaos fills a room with endless possibility
and the voice of death leans close to whisper:
Dream. You still may yet find the one more thing
needed to complete your last, perfect house.

Note to Jeff: November 16

The salmon in Issaquah Creek were dark
with yearning across the street where the mountains
begin to ravel all the way up into the blue deeps
memory sets in the distance for our gazing.
Light spilling from the windows of the building
we made into a home for these two hours tried to fix
a feeling in amber shapes. Words too tried to catch
it, but they wavered like fish in the current,
quick in passing, shadowy wooden husks hinting
at a river's ending even as lost you were present
on pages of pen and ink, in photographs, in the sound
of doors opening onto corners of Ghirardelli Square,
the grace of your arms rising from the hospital bed
in a dance only your imagination could stage.
Some of us couldn't talk and some of us could.
(O my brother) As we left we emptied out
into the silver cruet of another night, sky awash
with fistfuls of glittering seed, starlight raining
down and down. Remember when we'd knot
a string through tin cans to make a telephone
so we could hear our tiny voices in the sea-roar
of those little metal chambers right at our ears
even though we could easily have spoken to each
other without them? That's what this is like,
one end spooling out from a nest of ribs,
the other end connected to you, even though
we don't understand what that means. Just so
you know, under the voices in the room, the rush
of the creek and highway traffic and tangled notes
of our lives, we're still listening. We're still right here
trying to radio in the meanings, pulling the string
tight, rubbing our rust from the fragile tin.