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Five poems

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Five poems
Split-Level

When my parents built us a faux-colonial
they demanded the central stairwell be
shifted right so visitors couldn’t look
straight up at someone in the bathroom.

Dad said those rubes carving allotments
out of cornfields a “day’s wagon ride”
west of Chicago that first year into
Kennedy’s presidency had to be told
to use round-nosed white oak trim
on the stair treads, tongue-in-groove
hardwood up as well as down, and to
angle the single overheads out the side
so the garage’s twin windows hung
with Mom’s tie-back curtains would
simulate a ‘wing’ from the street.
Everyone else moving in for the boom
was building split-levels, whose two sets
of stubby half-stairs eliminated basements,
one floor only half underground, the other
half again above the lawn. The locals
had settled in their tiny ’20’s bungalows
around the quaint downtown—their names
labeling diner, dry cleaner, five-and-dime—
or out on dwindling farms, so long entrenched
they had to double-check not to date
their cousins. Coming in from Cleveland,
I didn’t know I’d never fit. Not from town,
not from the country, not in line with the
subdivided life. I didn’t know I’d wander
to someplace inside, somewhere below grade.
In bed summer nights, screened windows
propped wide, I’d listen to the new Japanese

(stanza break)
motorcycles whining the humid half-miles  
stop sign to stop sign, immense mosquitoes  
 flying right by, flying away along the asphalt  
corridors gridding corn and soy beans as I lay  

stuck to my sheets in the daylight-saving dusk,  
wondering what to make of my own backyard.
Maybe They’re Brothers

dis two, slow-riding
a clown-tiny bicycle
up my gradual hill, one,

slightly larger, pedaling,
swaying over the seat,
the other, lock-kneed

astride the rear tire, feet
fixed to steel axle pegs,
his two hands holding

the bigger boy’s hips above
the pistons of his thighs.
Meanwhile, their happy

chatter, which I can hear
but not quite make out,
goes on nonstop even when

the pedaler’s left slip-on
slips off and the smaller,
touching down on the run,

retrieves and positions it
to slip back on. Seamless,
like a two-man bob-sled

crew, except to resume
an ascent, they regroup
and push off, wobbly

then steady as before, and
vanish around the corner
toward the convenience store.

Or maybe they’re best friends,
like Jimmy and me, in’63, him
pedaling, me hanging on.
Hornets

—for Peter

You were coveting
the other side of the creek
and the sun-streaked dune and the trees
sand-propped up the slope
but missed the hornets
in their late-summer nest, holed-up
at log’s end as you crossed,
your toy grappling gear shoulder-slung.
When you looked back
I was grateful again
that such weekends camouflaged the failures
of divorce. We were family—
one dad, two youngest sons, this chance
to play together and
we could choose, your brother, you, and I, how
much to make of it,
bare-footed and lazy
the length of those daylight-saving days.
What languid resistance!
But above the combs your foot broke through
and chuted your pant leg
into that awful upward swarm
toward which your split-second expression, empty-eyed,
and panicked, I regret,
refocused me, penitent dreamer,
intermittent vigilant,
who hears his son’s agony echoing
and sees his son’s terror replayed
second by second through the blue afternoon.

—after James McKeen
What We Say

Late autumn. The sun’s troubled: warm, dazzle,
or warn? I’ve yet to get ready. All night

indifferent preparation
of frost. Elsewhere,

armies hard at work,
like the moon as we sleep,

suddenly on the move
if we looked, like it’s always

had to be. At least,
that’s what we say.

And in the morning,
the same—armies at work,

like the moon, like us,
unlocking our office doors,

tunneling through to afternoon,
with nothing else to say.
Ash Wednesday

*This life of separateness may be compared to a dream, a phantasm, a bubble, a shadow, a drop of dew, a flash of lightning.* —The Buddha

The heat kicking in at precisely five a.m. stirs the shirred glass chimes dangling over the open vent, their fragile song reminding me I am alone. Outside, where I know too-early browns loom in the dark where constant white should lighten this time of year—here, far north of the end of Mardi Gras—one car purrs by per hour. A semi ascending the hill, up-shifting its dissonance across the cushion of the dumb neighborhood, will turn left at the next intersection, head east to open road, and merge with the world. This separateness is indeed a dream, though priests today will call the many to mourn whatever separates them from God and from each other, then swipe soaked ash across their foreheads in remembrance that we’re all just dust. Which is true, but in this blue mood I prefer the Buddha’s drop of dew and picture its sole self temporarily resting upon a palm leaf before a breeze shivers it earthward or the desert sun draws it skyward—in either case to mingle it by absorption or by evaporation into the eternal system of one. Which is really only a better way of getting it wrong. Poor sentient drop, alive in the thought it has ever left its sisters and brothers, who in their own dreams manufacture fantastic bubbles but imagine wry shadow, or lightning.