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,
worried what to make of my own backyard.
Maybe They’re Brothers

text continues...
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.