

The Ante

Here at the table with whiskey and cards
and it all seems so far away:

I'm walking you home
so you won't be harassed
and then we are. One of the drunks
tells you to fuck me more. The other asks me
if I want to see a bad thing and then A
hops down into a squat, clutching his empty bottle
like something consumed because it was holy.
I don't move – watching that bottle,
just watching. As though it were worming itself
out of a basket to a strange music. He laughs,
spits, your bus comes, and the whole scene's over.
Curtain. Just like that.

While we play the washer rumbles and groans
and juggles its load as though the socks were
all the ways I want to tell you I'm sorry.
One of these days, something's going to have to land.
I'm up a couple pounds, bluffed you out of it
a while ago, and now I'm thinking of quitting.
Sam keeps bitching: no one's playing for real,
he says, then deals us a game we've never heard of.
Ante up or shut up, he growls, draining his glass
as though afraid of it, somehow. I light a smoke
and take my chips and that's it: curtain
once more, velvet falling like fog.

What I haven't told you about
is my own walk home, when the real drunks –
not the ones downtown, sprawling but harmless –
prowl through the streets in packs, rummaging
for something to break, something whose end
will keep them from toppling into the puddles
of their own shit and hate. Try as one might
to imagine it, here there's no curtain,
no stack for the cards you tried but couldn't get rid of,
only a splay of legs tossed into a doorway,
two kids, scarcely old enough to buy a pack of fags,
running up in the rain, kicking it.

It's been two days now
and still the scene is welded to my mind:
I don't know how, or why, but I keep walking,
right on by them, through them, even,

like water slipping into a crevice,
like a shadow threading its way between light poles
and the neon solace of late-night sadness and cheap meals,
my feet locked into step – and for what?
To make up in some perverse and inscrutable way
for not budging earlier at that bottle,
or because this time, you were no longer there,

and I wasn't as afraid of our terrible closeness,
and what it meant for them, for anyone, for us?
I want to fear men, not boys. But these are boys in a city,
this is their schooling, their form of glory
and coming to know what knowing means,
a marriage of blood and piss and pavement
all put there by a boot in the gut, a way of upping the ante,
to ourselves if no one else. What are they running from,
or towards? Rationalize – rationalize
if you don't want everything to fall apart.

I'm back in now and have fallen behind
in the drinking: cups litter the table
like spent cartridges, fired in a war in which
there are no winners, or losers,
only those with more or less belief,
simple unyielding faith in the body.
Sometimes I think it's what we're all after
in this gallery of human avoidance, easy certainty,
to know the hard flesh will smack beneath our fist.
Sam's down ten pounds now, blames beginner's luck.
Of course it's luck. What else is there?

It's what brought us down that street,
where before you gave the first drunk change
he had asked me first, and I'd not had any,
and told him so. He called me brilliant.
I took my keys from my pocket
and showed him: nights like this,
anything's proof of anything that needs proving.
At times this city feels like an archipelago
of mercies that will vanish beneath the waves
if we speak of them: I'll be expecting a postcard,
the kicking boy yelled as he sprinted off into the night,
as though shame were a country we visited,
and photographed, and left.

Benjamin Morris