

We Didn't Tell Him We Were Neighbors

Knight's land ran to the middle of the river.
Knight said so, had the deed from 1867
and by God meant to keep anyone
from trespassing on the rights
his grandfather had claimed.
It was good land, too, loam and leaves
laid down over thousands of years.
We had anchored where the north
and south forks come together
with other boats below a wide riffle.
Midmorning we discovered
we'd left the pee can at home.
So, with some trepidation,
we threw out the anchor rope float
and nudged the boat onto a spit of sand
just around the bend.
Quiet as we could, my brother and I
lined up to relieve ourselves.
Halfway through a voice came over the bank,
"You don't see me driving to town to piss on your lawn
do you? You haven't noticed me pissing on your porch
have you?"
We didn't answer, just finished fast as we could.
"I've a mind to blow those little peckers off."
He loomed above us, double-barreled shotgun
protruding from his hip.
We shoved off, started the motor and headed around the bend.
"Next time I will, by God. You can count on it."
Then the BOOM! of the shotgun.
We both ducked involuntarily.
We reattached the anchor rope,
fished another hour and left before the next call.

Daphne

Daphne arrived at her grandmother's
down the road from us the summer I was seventeen.
I heard that it was to get her away from bad influences
somewhere in the source of all bad influences (California).
She found me within a month.
She talked about Ray Charles and the Beach Boys.
The first time I kissed her I knew that some of those influences
had come along with her.
There was no push on my part when she pulled me on top of her
on the bench seat of my father's pickup. What rang in one ear,
thank goodness, was the voice of our health teacher,
who taught us precious little else, saying,
"Some of you boys are going to be daddies before you graduate."
And, "You older boys remember 15 will get you 20."

Half a Mile

The tips of Michael's fingers
are bright pink under the cold water.
His hands disappearing and reappearing
between his mama's at the rest stop faucet
off the interstate, half a mile from Coe Road
where they get baloney and bread and milk
and cookies on a good day.
She keeps him close where they sit
with the cardboard sign, "Anything Helps."
She's got this sad look and the kid.
He runs around in his bib overalls,
arms scratched up from the blackberries
back where they sleep.
A dollar, a five, a couple of quarters.
He laughs and chases a squirrel.
A salesman offers her twenty
and they go past the fence.
It doesn't take long.
He zips up. "You're a real pro, huh?"
She mutters.
Michael mimics mama spitting in the weeds.

Nowhere to Hide

Music comes down Seventh Street
close and fierce
blowing names off signs,
jumping into people's blood.
It is like fire,
the closer it gets
the more uncomfortable you feel.
There is no sweet harmony
in these juicy notes, no.
There are no jive gimmicks,
no marching, waltzing, sashaying,
two-stepping, chanting, Lindy Hopping.
No syncopated invitation, no.
It is born of clanging metal and gunfire,
trashcans banging down alleys,
cries of desperation in back rooms,
bedrooms and board rooms.
It is pain singing.

A Walk to the River

Sooner or later
you have to save your life:
no matter the decisions
you have to abandon,
the people you walk away from,
the guilt driving looks
and pointing fingers.
It may be raining
when you walk to the river
and throw the ring
into the swiftest current.
The rain will not care
that it is the ring
or you.

Fort Lewis, 1967

The enlisted men's bar,
a quarter in the jukebox
and the chorus raises,
"We all live in a Yellow submarine..."
absurd beyond absurd
in the beery air.

National Guard, Reserve, drafted
and enlisted voice the crazy trap
we find ourselves in.

The wheel spins, the needle clicks,
whose number will be called this time?
"and we lived beneath the waves..."

What century are we in?
Have we invaded Persia?
Will we massacre Cheyenne tomorrow?
"every one of us has all we need..."

There is a brief still moment,
then someone drops in another quarter
"We all live in a Yellow submarine..."
and we hold on for the dive.

My Brother Was a Mouse

My brother was a mouse
in a garden of mice.

His pistol was polished and clean.

The number he chanted
had three digits
and rang among the catalpa leaves.

When they came for him
he put on the uniform
and marched away.

As fleas on a beagle
were their numbers.

It was a long time
before he came home
impaled on a curtain rod.

Much Improved

Hardly anyone dies of typhoid fever
anymore. We can send our sons to war
without complaint. Lice are quickly dispatched
and no one freezes to death.
We have piles of antibiotics.
The broadsword wounded aren't left
in the field to die with others rotting around them.
Of course there are more bombs and bullets
but morphine is readily available.
We can usually save a soldier whose limb
is blown off.
Yes, things are much improved.
We can send more daughters up to the front.
They have the right.
Soldiering is still a good option for the poor.
We're working on pills for madness,
more medications to calm the nerves
and we'll get a handle on this suicide business,
yes we will.

Down Stream

There were moments when I was fearless
moving down an unseen channel,
at home in the nameless water
that carried me.

Forgive me for not being able to say
where I was going. I didn't know.
The stars reflected in dark pools
and I had to wade among them.

Ordinary Gravity

Some say they see angels at the event horizon;
others, that anything we see is a projection,
a hologram somehow created by us
to step into and believe.

The old scenarios of judgment, heaven and hellfire
taught us about symbols, that we get wisdom aslant.
We look for soul in the great karmic tides,
in the river that never ceases to run,
in the dust left by elephant gods.

For those who have touched the cold clay
of their mother or killed and slaughtered a calf
there is a darkness no lens can pierce.

Some are satisfied knowing that our molecules
will go on to enrich the thin life of this planet
held in the vast sky that tells us everything
in a language we are just beginning to learn.