

John Grey

Their Tracks in the Snow

In this marriage,
only she says,
“I love you.”

His feelings are unspoken
but roughly the same.

He takes it for granted
that she takes it for granted.

In fresh snow,
both sets of boot-prints
are easily visible
in front yard and back.

But imagine if only one was.
Would the other still be there?

Dead Dog, Dead Heart

A car struck a dog.
Happens all the time in the city.
But one passerby took it seriously to heart.
Another walked by
as if canine death equated with the swatting of a fly.

But the image of that hard-faced old man crying
stayed with me for the rest of the day,
clawed tenaciously at me for a long time after.

I was twenty-one
and ashamed of tears.
But he let his splash
on the sidewalk,

in full view of strangers.

Damn car.

Damn dog.

Damn old man.

I became this carnival game.

My conscience took potshots
at my character.

The prize was to choke up
when appropriate.

The creature was no less dead
for his red-faced breakdown,
my callous exterior.

But it occurred to me later
where its living had been.

A Blizzard of Memory...Then Sleep

A cry to do chores,
fearful imaginings of
what a stranger might do to me,
threats
and please...prayers
before the next one dies.
before TV,
no arguments, just rules,
and a thought for everyone –
filthy rich or just plain filthy,
dosed with better the devil you know
and Botticelli's girls and boys,
an Uncle who was the first convicted
felon and the family,
a loud whisper that
he was not really one of us,
wary of adult voices
but suckers for cartoons,
immune to insulation,
and a deference for feeding pigeons
that commuted between the park and high towers
so much happening in days unchanging,

we practitioners of the lowly art of childhood,
every tree and gutter gleaming,
every dog sniffing at my legs,
“Fra Lippo Lippi’s imps”
the pastor said,
terrified of his touch
for all it could do to me
in his house of the Lord
dimmed as dark as a funeral home,
dead now,
same as the nasty ditty I wrote about him in secret,
so many showed up for the funeral,
they said the wings of his guardian angel
would shine gold,
overreach in bucket loads
even for someone with a collar around his throat –
it’s late,
I have to finish this
like it something I needed to do
so long ago –
I know I don’t –
I prefer sleep
to memory most times anyhow,
but there’s so many dead
yet desirous of hearing their name called,
who won’t be hushed
as long as there’s someone alive
with the same blood in their veins,
I am the man,
the guardian of their ladder to heaven
or trapdoor down to hell...
in Rogers and Sons funeral parlor,
in callow years,
feeling but unable to quantify emotion,
and making me wish I hadn’t said
some of the things I did say
to those who deserved better from my tongue,
but I forgave myself a thousand times over
in those days,
growing straight as a pine
so did it really matter
when my lies showed up in the light?
anyway, back then
I was already learning to love words

and it didn't occur to me that truth was a requirement,
so sorry, Mr. McKenzie, proprietor of the local candy store,
I stole those two black jellybeans.
and my English teacher, Mrs. Rose
who admonished me many a time
for talking in class
and accidentally drowned
while swimming in the ocean,
and my dog, that tiny guardian,
he of me, me of him,
who ran into the road on my watch,
and Mr. Glueface, Mrs. Slip-showing,
I should have been locked up,
instead I slipped down under bed sheets,
amid all the things I never understood,
paintings, vacuum cleaners,
World War II, sunsets
and, worst of all,
what was going on downstairs
and talk of who's sleeping with who
and, on occasion,
which marriages were breaking up,
and who was on the verge of bankruptcy –
it's even later now,
this poem is breaking up,
dozing off,
refusing to qualify anything,
confusing hardware stores with movie houses,
dreams with wings,
pastels with paint,
water with blood,
perspective with perspiration -
the poem droops,
the eye rests on the couch of the cheek,
when it comes to long ago,
I recommend tomorrow morning every time.

About the Poet

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in Midwest Quarterly, Poetry East and North Dakota Quarterly with work upcoming in South Florida Poetry Journal, Hawaii Review and the Dunes Review.