

Wilmer Mills

Light for the Laundromat

Mostly evenings now I bring
My kinks and wrinkles of the week
To wash, then wait in front of rows
Of glass-door dryers curling waves
Of laundered clothing, some damp,
Some near their quarter's stopping place.
The hot machines are best to watch.
Light garments tumble dry and loose
And play their cyclical charades
With empty sleeves and cuffs, winning
Hands down, since who could guess the scenes
And shapes they feign to motion for.
It's possible my mother could.
She used to point at clouds and name
The elephants and bears of air
Piled up above our river home,
The river in Brazil where half-
Dressed women lined the banks to wash.
I must confess I found them bronze
And beautiful, and when their clothes
Were hung to dry I thought the sun
Had made them clean and not the soap.

This was the mission field of shine
For which my father had forsaken
Heritage and farm. He preached
About the light of the world that made
A body beautiful within
And purified its inner raiment.
I, too, believed and took his faith
When chills and fever made me freeze

And sweat through every sheet and blanket.
But looking out to where my own
Malarial bed sheets were hung,
I knew that sunlight made them clean
Because it happened several times
That fever brought a river girl
To wipe my legs with alcohol.
Each time I pointed, "Look she's by
The window," all they saw was glass,
White paint, and then my chills came back,
And she dissolved through cane-seat chairs
Below the sill and lit the floor
With little octagons of light.

Here tonight, in the laundromat,
The faces turn and turn. The lights
Are all florescent so they buzz
Above a wall of casement windows
Trying to hold the darkness out.
I didn't want to come this late
But had to since my button-downs
Resembled poorly folded maps
Of land where all the trees are gone.

The dryers one by one have stopped.
Their free-association game
Of animated arms is over.
I saw only shirts bowed low
In rows, becoming lighter, sleeves
Spread out so anyone could guess
The posture in their pantomime,
A pose of praise for laundering light
In that subcontinent of sun.

Monorhyme for my Wife at Forty

*O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told.
--Shakespeare, Sonnet 138*

She tells me how she needs her beauty sleep,
A lie, but I've seen her sleeping late and deep
When everyone is up and has to creep
In sock feet all around the house to keep
From waking her.

But what is "beauty sleep?"
Was being young expendable and cheap
To make the price of middle age so steep?

She swears, "No, really, I just *need* my sleep,
So I believe her if she lies to keep
The cost of aging down. Do I not reap
The benefit by sight, as when I sweep
Her covers back and feel my innards leap?

Though beauty *needs* no rest to stay this deep,
I lie along with her and let her sleep.

Ice Cream Angel

We took our children to the carousel,
A place in town where abandoned factories
Have long-since
been replaced with little shops
And restaurants, and now a
coffee house. We rode them round and round until they
tired
And clamored for an ice cream cone. "OK," I said, "just
one, and then we have to go." Inside the ice cream shop we
found our seats
And saw a woman several tables down
Who
leaned her chair against the wall and licked
Her cone. At
sixty-five, with plastic shoes,
Print dress, a ratty purse, and
wiry hair,

She wasn't like the other customers. She coughed, and some-
thing in the sound of it
Had nearly made me vomit. Then she
said:

"Y'all's got nice children. Must'a trained 'em right." I looked
around and really shouldn't have;
She had her index finger up
her nose
And pulled it out all bloody to the knuckle,
Saying
again, "Y'all's got some purdy children." Then she told us
how she'd never married; "Never had no children;" came
from Huntsville
Back in the sixties; worked in factories,
And
also "here," this very ice cream shop
That used to be a hard-
ware/mercantile. She still comes back because she loves the
place. "I gots a ton of memories," she said,
And didn't tell us,
though I half-way guessed
How she was not so ugly then. I
wondered:

*Is she an aging prostitute? Did she
Not screw the man who used to own the place Because he let
her live upstairs rent-free? Was there a time back in the
stockroom dark
When he had hiked her dress, when she had thought
For just a second that she loved the man? My dirty mind
imagined how she did,*

Why she comes back, for love, the way she felt
Alive inside the body he desired. I had her number.

But just before we left,
We heard, "Y'all must be doing something right. Yer kids are
gonna be just fine...don't worry."

The hair rose up on the back of my neck. *We had*
Been worried, hadn't we? The children. The ache
Of them, carved as they were like pretty horses
That circled us and waited for the chance
To gallop off.

Did someone say, "Fear not?"
Not quite, but almost that. I whipped around, But she was
gone as if she'd disappeared.
And isn't that what angels do, the extra-
Ordinary in the ordinary,
The supernatural made natural?
I won't forget her cough and bloody finger,
The glisten on her snaggle tooth,
Eyes closed, the smile gone bodiless
To spoon our palms, our necks,
The arches of our feet.

Buying Your Perfume

*The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.*
--W.B. Yeats

It can't be something obvious to most--
More subtle like the revenant or ghost
Of a flower, lingering after the air and dew
Of dawns that are no more.

The wine of yearning...
The memory of apples...

And so with this I'll look for you
In all the little gardens of the morning.