

James Matthew Wilson

Elegy for a Tow Truck Driver

I'd watch you, neighbor, skulk behind the stands,
Forever called away from your son's game
By wrecks, locked doors, a million small demands
That faded when the speaker blared his name.
But every fresh at bat would end the same.
Then you would call him over, try to coach,
Though all could hear the thinly veiled reproach.

We did not really understand the love
Your son and daughter seemed to have for you,
But were relieved to see you take your glove
And play a game of catch, or tie a shoe,
Or other things that normal fathers do.
They eased our conscience, when we heard you curse
And judged, however bad, things could be worse.

So also, when we heard your wife had gone,
We sympathized with her unhappiness.
And yet had thought that she might carry on,
That, what we could not tolerate, she'd bless
And soften your rough hide with her caress.
But no. While you were curt and occupied,
She'd found another who would warm her side.

One Sunday, in the springtime, after Mass,
You staggered up to me, your face of frost
Speechless, as we stood in the greening grass.
The months went on, and our paths seldom crossed.
We heard by rumor what else you had lost,
But nothing of the solitude and ache
That brought the sleep from which you'll never wake.

O friend — if that's the word — I wish I knew
That how you bristled through your years on earth,
Now that their mix of rage and cold is through,
Was judged in someone's heart a thing of worth;
That someone looked with fondness on your birth;
That those you've left felt a judicious pain
And would, if licensed, call you back again.

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The Hidden Creek

The creek behind our house is lost in wood,
A smear of algae green amid dark green,
Present more as a sound than something seen,
As sunken bullfrogs croak their neighborhood.
Some days, the dried mud shows where trees once stood,
The splintered, graying barrels bared between
Orange touch-me-nots and arrowheads' floppy sheen,
Beneath the rough black willows' spangled hood.

This afternoon, I watched my daughter wade
Into that verdant darkness, her old shoes
Testing each step before it took her weight.
She brought with her our clotted garden spade,
Still useful but one she was free to lose,
In search of some rare plant, or frog, or fate.

Rejoice

You've known the roaring stadium
When, far downfield, receivers sprint
To catch the ball, without a hint
 They knew that it would come.

You've known the blushing on the face
Of children reading from the page
Who hustle swiftly from the stage,
 Embarrassed by their grace.

You've known, as well, the breaking voice
Of one who, dying on his bed
Can summon some old feat and shed
 His sorrows and rejoice.

You know, when darkness starts to fall,
Over the clashes in the street
As if a curtain of defeat,
 These things you must recall.

Planting the Perennials

Out in the autumn's muck and chill,
I've spent the morning planting bulbs in earth —
Deeper, I hope, than our squirrels' will
To dig them up and steal the next year's birth
Of flower and shoot
From hidden root
That lends the yard its blaze and mirth.

Knees blackened crawling in the soil
And knuckles stiffened with this final task
To end a season of hard toil,
I feel myself already want to ask
The clock to bring
New flowering,
To rush by winter's frozen mask.

This ache, unlike that of the young
Who lust for freedom and for fullness now
Thoughtless of duties, grows among
A sense of all I've wasted and of how.
The withered heart
Would make fresh start
As green retakes the ashen bough.

To govern mind and household well;
To know the mean that saves enough from more;
To find some worthy theme to tell
And write those verses I could not before;
Such things I want
Are those that haunt
Me as I stagger toward the door.

A Few Hours Apart

Some weeks ago, I heard a woman sigh
She'd missed a single day of daily Mass,
As if for such transgression she must die.
Her plaintive sorrow seemed to me pure gas.

Tonight, however, seated on a plane
That pierces through a darkness vast and blind,
And takes me from that place where you remain,
I wonder was my thought just or unkind.

Sentiments may be fragile like a glass
And shatter under others' scrutiny,
But shattered though they are, they do not pass:
On hearing reason's orders, mutiny.

So, streaming through such emptiness of air,
I feel the homing weight of loneliness,
Which draws me through reflection back to where
You try on for the mirror an old dress.