

Mark Cox

Sorrow Bread

The trees were backlit, like a Sunday school play,
and as the sun went down behind the quarry,
a spider made his way around and around
one leaf on a sapling next to them, playing out
the thread by which a spider keeps itself in the world,
drawing together that slick green leaf
into an inverted cone meant to shed the coming rain.
The man thought of the carefully folded wax paper
they'd eaten their sandwiches from. He thought of each
crumpled piece relaxing back into a square
in the dark of the knapsack beside them.

Below, rings appeared on the water in the quarry,
and even after she felt the rain she claimed it was
a host of fingerling bluegill and bass, free now
to come up and mouth the cooling surface. *No,*
that's rice, he said, *rice from heaven. Happy anniversary.*

This took place in Indiana, which is a state I know well.
I know the woods and the quarries, and how it feels
to be walking in the woods and have the forest give way.
It delighted me, staring down into quarries.

The man and woman sat at the edge for a very long time,
so that when they rose to go home, her legs had gone to sleep.
He put his arm around her, supporting her. She grinned
and said, *you must feel like this when you sit on the toilet*
reading for so long. He was a minister. She was a nurse.
For a while, they looked at the smiles on each other's faces.
Then she thought it was all right, that they'd just have to go
slowly.

And he let go of her, reached down for their knapsack.

I painted bridges for a living once, and once
I felt my rigging tremble, and looked up to see
my partner falling away from me. I know that work
and what it feels like to walk into work with somebody
day after day. My partner loved to drink beer for lunch, sit
right next to the juke box and sing. He wanted to be a rock star

but he hit the ground on his side, like a little boy
who'd just been tucked into bed. And at the height
I watched from, the sound his body made seemed
a childish moan of regret, as if it were summer,
and too early to be dark.

What do you do when there's nothing you can do, but
you can't just do nothing? When you've co-existed easily
with time, and then, suddenly, there's no time,
followed by the flood of too much? It took so long
to get to him, each thud of my boots echoing
in the bottomlessness of my head.

Another time, I was holding a rope that snapped; no one
got hurt, but I remember holding onto that useless end
long after it looked silly to be doing so. On deep nights,
at least some of them, I dream I'm still there: flat
on my ass with my feet braced against the guardrail,
trying to live up to obligations that aren't valid anymore.
What am I doing but saving myself? Maybe
that rope tied to nothing was actually holding me up
during the long fall my soul took
as friend's heads swung from sight.
Maybe the all or nothing of it all
was working its way into my hands like a cramp,
making certain I'd never forget how easy dying is.

The nurse opened her eyes once and saw him weeping,
searching her wrist for a pulse. Perhaps she thought,
Now I know what I looked like to the people I cared for.

I knew none of these people, really. I never asked

if my young partner wanted kids, or what he would do with a million dollars. The reverend and his wife led the church of some good friends in Indianapolis, who told me about the accident over the phone. But I was moved somehow, and as I sat on the porch watching our spiders arrange their nets in the shrubs, I began to see both incidents clearly. And I saw the husband, hoarse from begging a forest for help, have to choose between staying and going.

Rita came home then, after being in Connecticut for a day and a half — wanting to play, say hello, and hold each other — but I stayed where I was, circling the piece of paper and these random events, until she turned off the lights of the screened porch, trying to get a reaction. I said “please” twice, then screamed, “I’m writing out here!” so loudly that it echoed three times in the valley around us. I moaned Why is she doing this, a thread like this only happens once or twice a year. How puny my voice must have seemed to any neighbor; what a statement to have drift in while you’re washing dishes or reading the newspaper.

My partner survived and within two years was painting bridges again.

He lives in Missouri, which is, like Indiana, someplace I used to think I knew well. The nurses at the hospital liked him, because he was considerate, and never complained or was angry with them for doing their jobs.

I should stop this now, before the first few drops of rain begin darkening the sill, and climb the slick stairs toward bed where I know the woman I love is waiting for an explanation. “It’s me” I should say to the dog in the doorway, “I’ll take it from here.” Then again, I would say anything to make myself feel less helpless, to extract good from bad, I would say anything to go on and need to admit that outright.

I’ve tried hard, looking down at this rope, to love the knots I slide down to, to see other hands than mine there; but it is my rope and no one else’s. Everyone has their own rope, and each reaches the end in his own sweet time.