

*James Harms*

## First Elegy, Pasadena

I never met her, though he must  
have loved her, and she, him.  
I hope so. But when she wouldn't  
marry him, when she said no,  
he went home and closed  
the door to the bathroom. I imagine  
he thought hard about how so much  
had slipped away over the years,  
how the usual rewards of good looks  
and smarts just hadn't come to pass:  
his own car, a nice house,  
morning sunlight on a kitchen table.  
Maybe he just wanted to get it right  
for a change, have children,  
a pretty daughter with eyes that crinkled  
when he tickled her behind the knees.  
Then again, I bet he didn't think  
of anything but that he'd made  
another mistake. When Kelly told me  
what Lynn had done we sat together  
in my mother's kitchen, windows  
filled with twilit oleander  
and the afterglow of an August evening;  
we drank Coors after Coors.  
Kelly lifted his can toward  
the ceiling and tried a few words  
that didn't work. So we  
toasted the quiet. I know now  
that being gifted and lovely  
opens doors to rooms full  
of lovely, gifted people, who stand  
around waiting for their numbers  
to be called. And if you go home

to somewhere just to wait until  
 you can leave again, it doesn't  
 matter where you go. Finally,  
 you just leave for good.  
 Lynn swallowed what you pour  
 down drains and that was it.

I remember standing at a bathroom  
 window in Louisville as a  
 Derby party shook loose  
 of purpose downstairs. I'd had vodka  
 and lime juice, a few lines  
 of cocaine, and the slate rooftops  
 seemed to burn with the noisy half-light  
 of spring in the near South.  
 A block away the Dixie Highway  
 ended or began, like a throat  
 leading down to Mississippi  
 or Alabama, places I'd only heard about.  
 I thought of how everyone I know  
 is capable of calling it quits.  
 How we hug each other hard  
 when we collide at bars  
 on Friday nights, at the corner  
 of "Hello" and "I'll Call,"  
 the whizzing taxis hurtling  
 uptown to hazy open doorways  
 and occasions of grace. I wished  
 someone were with me to point out  
 the truth from the shimmering,  
 the sweet significance of drugs  
 embracing daylight, how the boy  
 walking past on the sidewalk below,  
 attached to his collie and whistling,  
 was exactly me in another history,  
 a quieter one, clothed simply for once,  
 and forgiven.

Tonight I'm reading  
 a book of poems whose pages  
 are like curtains that don't work

and are, thus, much more beautiful  
and capable for their failure.  
So that through them the world  
or a couple's lovely argument  
is given the cast of an old snapshot,  
a vague moon in a fast river.

But the book is better than that.  
More like rounding a corner on  
a Wednesday afternoon and finding  
a child in front of a shop window  
dancing with her reflection.  
She moves quickly to quiet music  
while behind her, in the glass,  
the bank's doors open and shut,  
the time turns to temperature  
and a jet threads the sky above a steeple.  
If she reaches toward the window  
she'll find herself reaching back.  
And she'll know who to trust,  
whose cold imperfect face will change  
slowly enough to love.  
A car at the curb refuses to start.  
A woman drops her groceries, lemons  
wobbling down the sidewalk.  
What's left of the jet's trail  
of smoke begins to fatten and disperse.  
The errors are accumulating  
in a pane of glass, and as fast  
as the little girl dances,  
she can't get them to stop. Somewhere  
a man forgets his name staring  
into a medicine cabinet. Somewhere  
a child is asking of her mother  
permission to stay up an extra hour.  
The mother sits with coffee  
by the window and works  
the Sunday crossword. She is  
trying to remember her name,  
an ancient beauty queen who's

known some lasting fame. If she  
 gets this right they can both  
 stay up, warm milk for cocoa and watch  
 the late show. What was her name  
 she asks the window. She finds  
 herself waiting for an answer.

Human wishes: I have a list  
 of them. And I would say if I knew  
 what to make of this lovely,  
 lonely book, of how I feel  
 right now, reading and remembering  
 in the same second, but that isn't  
 the point. One summer, long ago,  
 I sat on a porch in Indiana  
 with a woman I'd lost the strength  
 to love, and we cried.  
 She said, "Why?" twelve times  
 without stopping. She kept saying it.  
 I thought something inside her  
 had broken to make a word sound  
 that way. And the only person  
 I keep alive these days can't wash  
 his face without remembering that sound.

But maybe that isn't much, just a  
 moment's soft pressure, one of many  
 perfect fossils recovered  
 from grief, like Lynn, or my sister's  
 husband, who waved at her from  
 the roof as he stepped away  
 from the policeman's outstretched arms.  
 I'd say if I could. I'd say  
 exactly what to make of human wishes.  
 But when did saying something  
 make it stop. I want to stop.