

MARK COX

Fatherhood

Your life will be half-over when you arrive
at this porch yourself, the stars close and clear
through your breath, the moist, misted breath
of the one world we all contribute to, fully present,
quivering with distances. And if the back-light
from your kitchen door throws a skewed rectangle
into which you fit like a coffin,
know that I'm behind you then, helping you
not to turn around, helping you to stand straight up,
taking in the blades of cold, going on and on,
though your body stays rooted firmly
at the edge of all you've built.

Once my dirt is turned, your gardening begins,
and so I offer this soil I didn't know I was making,
this darkness from which flower light arcs,
perennial, inextinguishable,
spearing all with beauty.

Drive the trowel deep, separate the ribs,
tamp far into me your guilt and shame. I will
no longer be separate from you then, together
as we could not be while I lived. We'll be as lilies
sprouted from the same bed, having gouged out our place,
now bowed with rain, now upturned and listening.

And I will be with you on your father's rounds,
this late, when the only sound is your neighbor's heat pump,

and the hanging plants twisting on their chains,
once you have been compelled back into the house,
floorboards shifting beneath the carpet.

The nightlight in the children's bathroom
glows on the bath toys in the hall.
Nothing has been put back,
which means all is where it ought to be, and
the children, exhausted after a long day
of touching everything they own at least twice,
seem to have fallen from jungle gyms
into their beds, their lips dry when you kiss them,
their faces cool, their hearts rhythmic in some dream place.

From one room to another in the house of yourself,
surprising a silverfish, straightening frames,
repositioning your mother's pillows on the olive couch;
that's how I see you, turned inward, finally,
having acquired something to lose,
a shadow in boxer shorts bending over the sleepers
with the weight of fatherhood
like a sleeping newborn on your chest,
her ear to your heart.

Soon you will turn even deeper into the house
and the warmth of a woman who will forgive your absence
if only you turn fully and to her alone.

Just a little while longer, you'll think,
then I'll go to bed,
just one more moment
and perhaps they'll smell your skin, sense you there,

perhaps dream of you watching over them,
doing what you can to accept the darkness for what it is,
to leave it outside pressed against the windows,
leaning in its turn, over all of you.