

Michael Phillips

Scranton Days

I remember when we were beautiful.
I watched you cross Mulberry onto Clay
From my third-floor window as I contemplated
A patch of Anthracite sky, where no stars
Were in view and certainly not in reach.
You buried your mouth behind a paisley scarf
And braced your shoulders against the wind.
In our Scranton days, gloom was our rite of passage.
I can see the cyclone fence you walked beside,
Cordoning off the Victorian with the caved-in roof,
The Christmas lights sagging from the boxwoods in February.
I keep returning to this, as if I missed something,
As if there were more to see that time eroded.
Or maybe I'm remembering it wrong.
Maybe you weren't wearing a scarf.
Maybe the wind wasn't blowing.
(But the wind was *always* blowing.)
I remember the sky seemed to hang lower
In those days, as if it might crush us.
Did you notice it, too?
Even the ground felt thinner then,
And every day was a struggle not to fall through.
I know I'm not making this up.
You carried the smell of the cold air into my room,
Plopped onto my unmade bed, and unwound your scarf.
But the rest is lost, unutterable, as if I vanished and
Then reappeared twenty years later,
Struggling to picture you walking below my window.
I keep coming back to your paisley scarf,
The sagging sky, the ground giving way beneath us,
And that we were beautiful.

Stray Thoughts at the Midway Point

Midway on my walk I rest on a boulder
At the junction of Mill Creek and Raccoon Trail—

The farthest point from my car—
And gather strength to finish the loop.

It's hard not to fall for Indian summer's false promise
When even the stone beneath me is warm.

They're calling for a big wind to pick up tomorrow
That'll last three days and sever every last leaf.

It's estimated there are 3 trillion trees on earth.
That's 400 for every person.

Does this include dead trees still standing
And saplings barely sprouting from the leaf litter?

I'm turning 38, the halfway point to 76—
The supposed life expectancy for an American male.

All the girls I've ever loved are now middle-aged moms.
I don't know why, but I find that comforting.

Richard Wilbur said we are the woods we wander in,
But that's too large a place for my soul to inhabit.

Lately I've longed to shrink,
To condense myself down to a pebble

That rattles around in my daughter's pocket
As she plays barefoot in the grass.

Animal Magnets

-for Nora

Sleep's hopeless so I drink coffee and wait for morning.
My sight settles on the animal magnets on the fridge,
their gaudy colors stark against stainless steel.
They're scattered at your eye-level.
The fish and dog are on their sides,
the poor turtle on his back.
I return to the window, hoping for the first
shred of dawn, but there is only
the dark pressing against the glass.

It's hard to be awake and alone at 3 am,
especially when it's cold and the wind is up.
I kneel on the floor and handle each animal,
relishing the glossy finish on my fingertips,
the smooth contours of the jig-sawed edges.
Do you know each by name?
Have you a favorite?
Can giraffes and hippos really exist?
Can you imitate the lion's roar?

The silence of a house can be hard to bear,
like the sight of a cleared woods where you played as a kid.
Even the walls seem flimsy when you sleep,
as if your laughter and shrieks hold them up.
When you wake you'll find the animals where you left them.
We'll rehearse their names, imitate their sounds,
and fill the house with their language.
Until then, I'll be here, sipping coffee,
waiting for the light to fill this window.

Homely Grace

I was sleeping over so I had to help
my altar boy cousins clean rice from the floor
of St. Pat's in West Side after a wedding.

With narrow torsos and no qualms of crawling
on hands and knees, we were tasked with plucking the
galaxy of grains beyond the vacuum's reach.

It was June, but the A/C had been turned off.
Few lights were left on— to pinch pennies, I guess—
Leaving the painted-glass windows lusterless.

At first we joked and talked, but the long hours
ground us down until we toiled silently,
each boy adrift in a private raft of pews.

I raked my fingers over the rug and plucked
each grain into a cup till my fingertips
scorched and reddened from friction and my eyes strained.

I whispered silent prayers for deliverance,
to be free of those dirty floors and bad light, but
the stillness of the cavernous space made the

task seem solemn, that a single overlooked
grain of rice constituted moral sin or
a grave dereliction of sacred duty.

Though I came to no conclusions, I wondered
if maybe God didn't enter through our hearts,
as I believed, but through tender fingertips

and other raw places where the flesh has worn thin.
I didn't dare utter these thoughts out loud and
kept on searching, determined to fill my cup.

The House on Bald Mountain Road

The late August light brings it all back—
 Light that seeps through amber glass,
 sluggish, resigning.
My grandmother sips anisette on the crooked porch,
 rosary beads coiled in her aproned lap.
 Bald Mountain Road freshly oiled to tamp the dust.
The barn bulges with junk, where my uncle killed the rattler
 that struck his boot, where I dare not explore.
 I stand at the barn's dark maw, my face in shadow,
clutching a paper bag of penny candy
 —Mexican hats or cinnamon coins?—
 gifted by my mom with an admonition to stay in grandma's sight.
The yard—my grandfather's yard—of wreckage and debris—
 parts of things, nothing whole, nothing intact—tells the story of him.
 The only one I know first-hand.
The Farmall with dry-rotted tires, thistle poking through the radiator.
 The rusty well pump, birdbath, and clothesline.
 The grass claws at the house's cracked foundation.
All of it reassembled, unbidden,
 By this light—
 this weary August light.

Michael Phillips has published short stories and poems in several publications, including the *Kentucky Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *Tar River Review*. He has an MA in English and works as an editor for a nonprofit healthcare research institute outside Philadelphia.