

MARYANN CORBETT

Paperboy

Snow, for sure, because it was late December and central New York, that time he was talking about. And he must have been ten or twelve, so that would put it in the early Twenties. That helps me fill things in.

Would it have been his morning paper route? Should I imagine the milkman, the iceman, in half light, horses impatient there in the cold, their breath fogging the gaslamps? (Yes, horses, because he told me that only the rich had cars.) Should I picture him slouching from porch to porch, landing papers with a toss, getting the placement right, or at least as right as he could with his gloveless hands, knuckles red now, and shoved in his jacket pockets between throws? The rest of the clothes are easy to conjure up: The cap, the knickers, the stockings, those I know from Bettman Archive photos. From him I know that since he was the oldest boy, he at least had clean, whole clothes. And galoshes, since there was snow.

Not morning, though. Too early to speak to people sociably, and he did the evenings, too. And there cannot have been any tossing of papers, however careful. He'd have to go up the steps, go to the doors, because—and this was the point—it was Christmastime, and in that part of town, that nice, respectable neighborhood of porches on well-kept Edwardian houses, people might give him a little something.

So evening. The rest needs little change. I have to imagine him stamping the snow off, pulling his jacket straight,

his bag straight, taking his cap off, ringing the bell,
wiping the fog from his hated glasses, trying
to smile, to look American, holding the paper.
He keeps doing this. Here I become unsure.
The only details on which I can depend
are the sky in its leaning down to a darker blue,
and the moon, and the threads of cirrus, and the snow.

I have to imagine him, at his route's end, stepping
from the last porch, standing still a moment,
shoving his red hands into his pockets,
and taking off at a dead run, toward home
to play the scene that I'll need to handle deftly,
lightly, the one where his mother takes his earnings
and cries, so happy at eighteen extra dollars.

(Most of these things I have to reconstruct.
What I remember is this: the green back yard,
the Fifties suburban night, the mimosa blossoms,
the pale pink lawn chairs, him sitting on one,
his feet propped on the other, him lighting his pipe,
the little flame flaring briefly as he draws,
the smoke encircling. Little creases at
his eye-corners when he smiles, just visible
despite his glasses, and the clean knife edge
of the moon as he tells this story in the dark.)

Maryann Corbett's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *Measure*, *The Evansville Review*, *Christianity and Literature*, and other journals in print and online. Her chapbook *Gardening in a Time of War* was published in 2007 by Pudding House. She works as a legal-writing adviser, editor, and indexer for the Minnesota Legislature.