

David Southward

Sighting

for Richard Roe (1941-2019)

We watched the sun sink in a meadow's hush,
where honeyed light and browsing prospects drew
three deer, on tiptoe, from the tangled brush
to animate the canvas of our view.

The bucks stood straight-necked, listening, on a knoll;
the doe, less cautious, broke into a trot
that ended with a graceful capriole
between high banks of wild bergamot.

A whistle from our party made them turn.
They eyed us. But before a dialogue
could open (or give reason for concern)
the doe trailed off. She'd noticed something: fog,

a white sea forming in the meadow's hollow.
She entered it, as if it held no threats —
as if its lure were too strong to resist.
The bucks, though hesitant, were moved to follow.
One by one, their small black silhouettes
dissolved like wishes in the pooling mist.

What He Saw in the River

A pumpkin: floating, opening underneath
like a peplum skirt. Hopelessly waterlogged,
it let the current lap its navel pleat
and nudge it to shore. Through frayed clouds, sunset
burnished the rind a Chinese-lantern orange.
It glowed inside the skyline's mirrored blues,
drawing his eye toward the deeper murk

on which it floated: cold black tea
infused with moiled silt, with gasoline
from tugs and cruisers. Crossing his forearms,
he leaned against the railing to observe
the rumpled husk — revolving like a moon
above an uninhabitable canyon —
and thought of how the mind makes what it sees

a sort of hub around which all else turns.
Monstrous garbage, punted with fatigue
at the very holiday it represented
(as if its hanging on might anchor time
too firmly), its ennui reminded him
of what one keeps forgetting. Weightlessness
is always nature's underlying state.

Shaping his lips around the word "November,"
he felt time slip for a moment from its tether
as nightlamps along the walkway flickered on.
He watched the pumpkin drift and disappear
into reflections — like a sun's dissolve —
where shadows widened and a drawbridge spanned
the current, churning coins of fiery light.

A Reader's Life

I can remember reading at fifteen —
pouring my heart's hot wax into a scene
as if to sample what I might become.
Tycoon, spy, gangster, wizard: through the hum
of fiction's film projector, I could feel
a latent lifeforce smolder and unreel,
as characters gave momentary form
to adolescent instincts. In that storm
of self-creation, stories served as maps
to outlawed regions — tantalizing gaps
in the firewall of childhood's guarded sphere.
Each book disclosed an indistinct frontier
I'd make my way through, sniffing on the breeze
the future's untried possibilities.
There seemed no end of places one could go,
people to love, scoundrels to overthrow —
and thus no chance of ever growing bored.

How different, now, my sense of the reward
a novel holds. With life's race two-thirds run,
it's not the things I'll do, but things I've done
that flicker in the background as I read.
Scenarios I've lived come back to feed
my sense of human sorrows, wishes, fates.
I pay more heed to style: how it creates
a voice one can believe in. Now I find
the works that wholly occupy my mind
hold few fantastic promises for me;
rather, they change or deepen how I see
the lives of others. Books help me make sense
of history's endless livestream of events,
whose currents drive the storms that rage today.
Though times seem tense, believe me: I would stay
forever, if I could—to go on seeing
what's written of this theater of being.

A Writer's Trouble

I've started far more poems than I'll finish.
It never fails: the moment they take shape,
the passions that inspired them diminish;
my thoughts are patched with so much mental tape
they lack the easy breathing of conviction
and die, unwanted, on a half-blank page.
Are others guilty of such dereliction?
And do our stillborn poems seethe with rage
in some backwater limbo of the soul —
bitter they've known so little of our love,
pining for closure, desperate to be whole?
Like surly teens who spurn the powers above,
they badmouth us for trifling with their lives.
We deadbeat sires, with our fickle drives.