

T.V., Ghosts, and Poets Past

Tiffany Darrough

I can't teach today.
The knot in my heart has grown
so tight, I gasp for air like an old man,
and my belly burns
with the anxiety that grips me.
So I play hookey on the couch
in my pajamas until noon.
The cat sleeps in my lap, the dog at my feet,
and outside the chickens bark at the door.
But the panic doesn't stop
even after I garden and water the plants;
so I must walk.
I walk past homes and orchards and children
to Tiffany Street.
My name; should be my street.
I feel like I am walking onto a movie set.
My pace slows.
Tudor houses, clipped lawns, four-door sedans.
An old woman leaves her neighbor's house,
coffee cup in hand,
they chat on the porch, laughing.
Lucy & Ethel.
They embrace, wave goodbye,
and the old woman walks into her home,
still smiling, the petunias on her porch
a royal shade of purple.
What does she say when her husband
comes home from work

and asks her how her day went?
I keep walking,
an alien on a planet of '50s sitcoms.
A man clipping his hedge says, "Howdy."
I wave. Maybe his wife will bring me
milk and cookies.
Maybe they will adopt me.
There are no children here
like in my neighborhood.
The children of Tiffany Street
are grown and gone.
Only Nana & Poppa live here
under these sleepy Sycamores and Elms,
the smell of ginger, Ben Gay, fried
chicken in the air.
We planted an Elm last week,
in our backyard,
but I am still taller than it.
I keep walking.
They don't know that I am Tiffany also,
on this Tiffany Street. I should belong
but I don't. Not even vaguely.
Downtown passes in a blur of images,
poetry creating in my mind
and disappearing. The Ghosts
of Poets Past haunt me.
Sexton, Plath . . . she killed herself
in her own oven. The womb of the home.
I keep walking.
When I was nine my favorite
show was the Brady Bunch.
Mom would buy us store brand
Tiki Punch and Twinkies and
we could stay up late.
The Brady kids got a new mom and dad,
killed off the old ones,
no divorce; too messy.
I think of my own family.
One birth, three kids,
four parents; too messy.

I keep walking.
I would have been 18 when she was born,
if Katie had been mine.
Megan crawls up under my shirt and hides.
We play a game of birth.
She coos, I grunt and pop
her out between my knees.
She laughs, born in seconds on the floor.
“Let me in! I want inside!”
We keep playing until I want to cry.
Aaron was inside. He pushes Megan away.
“Let me back in, Mom!”
But he is too big. Too big to even
fit inside my shirt and play the game.
I hold him tight to stop him from growing,
even if it’s just for that one second.
I keep walking.
Past the parade preparation,
the rodeo floats and shiny bright saddles
lined up in the parking lot
of the school where I teach.
I am compelled to go in,
to sit in my chair and stare
at the empty desks.
But a student might spot me.
I keep walking.
I heard the phone when I was gardening.
The unmistakable honey voice,
a blonde voice on the machine,
his ex, not mine this time,
with schedules for dentists and grandmas.
I want to hate her but I can’t.
I am too educated.
I keep walking.
Homestead Avenue.
I think of Ma Joad, as the wind whistles
off the Gabilan Mountains.
Steinbeck’s mountains, mine too.
“You’re tough as an old boot,” my husband says.
I protest, “No, I’m a delicate thing.”

“No, you’re tough as an old boot.
That’s why I love you.”
I know he’s right, but I’m not sure I love it.
Some days I don’t want to be tough;
I want to be numb.
I think of when I was younger,
and fantasized about being a nun.
I imagined life could never be more still,
alone, in the garden of an ancient convent.
The wind picks up as I near home.
A student drives by and waves.
I have no anonymity in this small town.
Rick will be home soon,
to our house on Wilma Drive.
I think of the Flintstones and my
husband as he bursts through the door each night
like Fred Flintstone, shouting “Bullah, Bullah,”
his own caveman call,
then sweeps me off my feet,
his dark-haired Wilma with bones in her hair.
And life is good.
When I return to my couch
The cat looks at me as if he doesn’t know me.
The dog is equally unimpressed.
They don’t know the journey
I have taken today.
My children will look at me
the same when they return.
To them I’ll be the same.