

Jesus of Walmart

Poems

Richard Broderick

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All Present And Accounted For

Earth is the heaven of animals.
It is only on earth they are fully
present and no where else. (Even
in your dreams, the wolf and
the snake are no more than shadows
of your projection.) No brown bear

ever waded the fall run, catching
salmon, but wishing he were
someplace else. No milk cow
plans for the future or dreams
of changing places with the sleek
Jersey on the cover of this month's

Dairy Digest. Dogs do not fall
into a brown study, cats have
no second thoughts, the honey-
bee gives it full attention
to the hive or the flower.
Horse and cattle may be driven

to distraction by biting flies
(themselves a model of insistent
presence), but in doing so they
give themselves to madness
without stint. That goat you saw
while out driving in the country

wasn't really sullen; that was some
feeling of your own you'd rather
leave behind standing on a hillside
glaring at the road. Yes,
you have seen apes and lions
looking bored, but that was

Night Shift

Tonight your father returns to you as a woman,
death freeing him to face in two directions.
It's awkward for a little while:

his bony frame draped in crinoline,
his mouth shining beneath lip gloss, the long
silence he's endured making his voice rough,

pitched somewhere in the middle range,
like an old-fashioned clock on the verge of striking.
Now you can see the softness that was there all along

when he yielded to illness, in the maternal impulse
behind the years you've spent nurturing his memory.
If he picks you up bodily now as he used to do

when you were a boy, don't turn away.
Don't resist. Let him plant a fatherly kiss.
It's not just your dream anymore. It's also his.

Upon Receiving My Brother's Ashes

Good-bye, brother. And hello. Our childhood
died with you in that sealed Florida room
where you exiled yourself, the shades
drawn, your swollen heart burst at last,
nothing in the refrigerator, the TV on.
Now there's no one to ask
the name of the neighbor boy's cousin
who fell through the ice on Mirror Lake
and drowned, or of the candy store
out on the highway, or where we were the day
we drank homemade root beer, then played
pirate ship with other kids in a dusty barn.
All I have of you now is this bronze box
filled with ashes (not even a proper urn),
the sweepings of your life. What would I
find if I pried open its seal and peeked inside?
Some powdery substance, gritty and fine,
like the beach we used to play on, the sand
so hot in the mid-day sun that even
in the time it took us to run to the lake
the soles of our feet would burn.

Jesus of Walmart

They liked the radiant smile, his upbeat manner
and so, despite a scanty work record—
“Assistant carpenter, then three years
wandering the hills”—they hired him
as a greeter, the wages from his full-time,
28-hour-a-week job not enough to cover
the company’s health insurance. “Get sick
around here and you just have to heal yourself,”
muttered a disgruntled “associate,” a 50-ish mother
whose crippled daughter got up the very
next day and walked, everybody calling it
a miracle, just like that special order
of tee-shirts that sold for \$1.99 each.
Now he wanders the aisles in a pair
of plastic sandals made in China,
reminding shoppers of special savings
they’ll find if they only keep on searching,
pointing out the counter where
you can redeem coupons clipped from
somebody’s discarded newspaper,
consoling the single moms when they
discover food-stamps can’t be used
to buy the sugary cereal their fatherless
kids clamor for each morning. In aisles
lined with desolate frowns he smiles,
asking weary late-night shoppers if he
can help, talking softly, respectfully
to those who have never known anything
but contempt and the presumption
of guilt. To the illegals sneaking in
after a hard day of underpaid work,
men named Jose, woman called Maria,
he speaks in tongues they haven’t heard
since leaving home in search of plenty.