

Paper Birds Don't Fly

Poems

Al Ortolani

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The Last Farm on 87th Street

A few head of Black Angus stare dumbly at traffic.
At dusk, as the twilight drains behind Taco Bell,
a woman jogs in a reflective suit. The cattle
become silhouettes. Gradually, the night
slips between the house and the barn
like cold, dark silk. Cattails, clumped
at the pond's edge, are swept
by the lights of a semi on the interstate.

This is loneliness—the empty seat of the tractor,
the shed's open door, the winter air
in deepening darkness—nothing
levees the flood of change. A bucket
hangs on the water pump.

Returning the Artificial Tree

So I hand her my receipt for
the artificial tree and I say
maybe you can tell me the best
way to do this, and she says
without taking the paperwork—
Let's see, you bought this tree
before the sale, and now you
want to return it, and then
buy it back at the sale price.
And I said yes, I guess you read
my mind. She grinned, you'll
save so much, her fingers
flying through the numbers.
When the transaction was complete
and I had pocketed my 20%
in crisp bills, I patted her on the
arm and said that I liked
the way she did business.
It's just common kindness
she replied, and I waved goodbye,
stepping between the empty
orange carts, the stack of 2 x 4's,
and the box of ten penny nails.
This will pay for my grandkids'
carriage ride through the Plaza
tonight. I considered returning
with an invite: turkey first
at my daughter's, the
clop clop of the horse, then
a photo by the fountain.

Paper Birds Don't Fly

Last night I had a dream
that my father, six years
dead now, left me a message
folded into some kind of origami bird.
He left another for my sister.
I guessed since we were the oldest
of his children, he had
expected us to join him sooner.
There was a girl in the dream,
maybe a younger sister, maybe
a little dead girl sent as a messenger.
I don't know how these things worked.
Sitting at the table with the paper birds,
she unfolded mine and began to read.
I couldn't make out a word
she was saying. I took the note
from her hand and his handwriting blurred
like a camera lens losing focus.
I woke in frustration, trying to will
myself back into sleep
into the dream of my father
where I was sure he'd tried
to cross over
like he had so many times
when he was living.

Asphalt

The road crew hired temps
between semesters
to stand beside the hopper
shoveling. The foreman
disliked college students.
He never learned our names,
referenced us by the tools
we carried—Skip and I
were Shovels, scraping the hot
mix into the conveyor.
Ronnie the college drop-out
advanced to Rake.
He followed the paver,
flicking the screed ridge
to a smooth seam.

All summer I shoveled the city
streets, made-do with whatever
shade I could catch. Each day
at five, we cleaned the tools
with diesel and putty knives.
Then we sprayed our boots,
kicking our steel toes against
a bar of rail line. We wet rags
with the diesel and scrubbed
our hands and faces.

Then I drove home, a towel
on the seat, another on the arm rest.
I hung my work clothes
on the fence behind the house.
They appeared capable
of walking off on their own.