

Dog Minded

(From *New Madrid*, Summer, 2013)

Nothing is more mindful than the dog's nose –
in leaves and autumn detritus, or homing in on
a squirrel's scramble along the top of the fence,
its scuffle up the bark of an oak. I am becoming
a student of dog, my teacher oblique, mystifying.
A flash of white wings overhead, a cry: gull. They
are everywhere here, schoolyards, playgrounds,
parking lots – these urban streets are shore, not
an inland landscape, like the one I left, gulls seen
only along the river, coming up from the bay.
Now a form goes silently by over the rooftops,
I'm too late to see what it is, catch only a glimpse
of its passage. This winter if we put up feeders,
what birds will come? Walking the dog, I see
sparrows, crows – are there finch, nuthatch?
Cardinals? Jays? Put up the feeder and find out.

The sky's steeped in pure fading light: amber-
toned, intensely luminous. Less than a month
from the solstice, most trees on Tonawanda Street
are bare, all the leaves down but the oaks' dry skins,
coppery still, with scarlet undertones, stubbornly
clinging. How can I root myself here, find a world
to observe? A striped cat sidles along the walks,
disappears into a backyard. Even a mindful dog
can't keep track of all of Tonawanda's cats. Back
from walking him, I find that the old white tom
who lives next door has come to our back porch
and curled up, a ragged white pile on the ragged
white mop, where he sleeps now in Sunday
morning's sunshine, thin, glowing, tender.

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Waste

My next door neighbor, woman living in half a rundown house – the other half, where her dead brother lived, vacant now, partly emptied, the kitchen torn out, some windows broken – stops me while I'm coming back from planting petunias and marigolds in the triangle at the corner a few of us try to keep up – asks me, "Why did they have to shoot that boy? He didn't belong to a gang, he sang in choir, he was saying the Lord's Prayer after they shot him." It was the 23rd Psalm, I don't say, the paper said that lying on the sidewalk in front of #70 he was repeating "the Lord is my shepherd...", then fell silent.... I don't know if he died there or in the ambulance or at the hospital. It was two weeks ago, the story covered for two days in the *Globe*, until the execution-style shooting of an even younger boy, even earlier in the day, on a crowded square a few miles away, distracted the media, politicians, obscured Tonawanda Street's quiet little murder, leaving a cluster of candles and stuffed animals, scrawled signs, "Peace", "I love you, bro", "We miss you" where he'd fallen.

This afternoon I'd walked up the street from the triangle the way I had the night of the shooting, when coming back from yoga my friend Diane and I found the street blocked by police cars, blue lights flashing; I got out of her car, was allowed to walk home when I told the policeman at the barrier I lived at #84. Parts of the street were cordoned off by yellow tape, there were police, plainclothesmen, reporters, neighbors out on porches – after I got home my husband and I went out too and saw an officer going door to door – when he got to our house he told us there'd been a shooting, a young man was dead, asked what we'd heard, seen. A little later another detective came to question our daughter-in-law who'd been upstairs rocking her baby daughter to sleep, when she heard gunshots, a car peel away. While they talked, a phone kept ringing – the dead boy's cell phone, in the detective's pocket.

I don't have an answer for my neighbor's question, though she asks it again, argues as if with me – he hadn't done anything, he was a good kid, church-goer, wanted to be a musician. She tries out an answer herself: they shoot you if you won't join a gang. As I walked up the block from the triangle I'd been picking up garbage. Last summer I used to go clean up there every few weeks, and on the way back collect trash from the sidewalks along our side of Tonawanda Street, but I've gotten ... what? lazy, tired, disheartened. There's a Pentecostal church at the corner, a high stone wall around it, a garden inside that's well cared for, but the sidewalks along it are always filthy, the church can't or won't keep them clean. Broken beer bottles, styrofoam fast food boxes candy wrappers chicken bones half-eaten burgers apple cores condoms soda cans dog turds orts and shards of glass food shit perennial as if it fell like snow or rain – in winter the church doesn't even shovel snow, scrape off ice.

This day I pick up only the most flagrant leavings, a crushed can, a coffee cup, a wad of tissues. When I get to my neighbor's there's a plastic soda bottle at the edge of her lawn – I'm about to pick it up when I see her, out whacking weeds – and I'm embarrassed to touch it; that's when she starts talking to me about the shooting. I say yes, it's horrible, no, I can't understand why "they" do this. She goes back to her weeds and I start mulching, deadheading. An hour later I'm finished, get out a broom to sweep up mulch in the driveway and see that the bottle's at the curb – she must have kicked or tossed it there – I pick it up, add it to our recycling. This neighbor has an arbor of potted plants on her rickety second story porch that's wonderful in summer – profuse exuberant bloom. I know the house, grounds must be too much for her to keep up alone, she doesn't have money, time, energy.

Every day I walk my son's dog along sidewalks, streets covered in effluvia, refuse. When we pass #70 I pull him away from the candles, paper signs, stuffed animals of the memorial, make sure he doesn't urinate on it. What does it say to a child growing up here to have to pick his way among this flood of constant cast-off waste, to live in this wild confusion of adult creation? There are gardens, spots of bloom, but I imagine this seems a world in which beauty is accident, sport, in which everything is disposable, including the life of each child; in which there is no safety, order, no common bond, no safe pasture to enfold them.