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Roy Bentley
Entomology

The queen is somewhere in the lath and plaster,
served by ravening drones who couldn't care less
that their presence in these old walls is pestilential.
Soon I'll pay to have a suited stranger in the house
who'll drill and pull out the nest and infestations.
Whatever wing-music they make, it isn't good.

I spirit my wife and the kids into a beater LTD.
Head for the Sunset Motel. The room has fleas—
yet another species of tunneling gluttonous pest,
an irritating lilt of skeltering life with a purpose.
My father has stayed to assist in the eradication.
To monitor which studs and joists are effected.

He knows about being nickel and dimed to death,
is pleased to oversee the latest lopsided exchange:
the removal of the termites and a reconnaissance
of the damage, what it will take to make it right.
After he has lectured me for the umpteenth time
about the futility of teaching and writing poems,

he and I tap dance around the truth about poetry:
that it has everything to do with threat and beauty
and learning to chew the combination like a bug.
He gnaws at me. Says, Hand the man a check.
After, on the car ride to the grocery, he says
he wants me safe. I almost let him have it,

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driving in a deluge, the windshield wipers
making treble screeching noises like insects.
I want to tell him I prefer drifting from disaster
to disaster to surrendering and settling for less.
Instead, I tune the AM station from country
to rock. A song about a stairway to the stars.

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Photograph of Amy Winehouse

She has her right hand inside her belted shorts—
a digression from the work of self-immolation.

Her head is down. If she was looking into the lens,
the fuck-you eyes would be below the beehive,
the plagiarized look of the Ronettes, swept-up hair
and Cleopatra make-up to showcase misery
or living a long time without hope. The image

brims with the false-eyelash proposition that most
humans are created to be handsome clowns,
some of whom make records with a girl-group sound.

If those eyes did, in fact, look up—the hand
would keep at its circling. In the song “Back to Black”
he says she died a hundred times. You believe her,
and count shot-to-hell tomorrows in which she can ask

all she wants whether we’ll love her. She’s past love.

She’s as dead as Frank Sinatra or Sarah Vaughn.
Only after we see death for what it is, which is final,
can we hear the soul part company with the body
because it knows what’s coming. Has begun to grieve.

Maybe you pray for her. Maybe you want to see her
burn. Either way, the grave is one form of forgiveness.

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Labor Day

And when, by the hair, the headsman held up the head

Of Mary of Scots, the lips kept moving,

But without sound. The lips,

They were trying to say something very important.

—Robert Penn Warren, “A Way to Love God”

The day before the coughing fits began, my father was changing out my Hayward Power-flo pool pump in his grandson’s blue Little Devil sweatshirt, smiling and wiping PVC pipe sealant on a maroon shop rag. I took a photograph. After cancer, chemotherapy, he smiled differently. Like the act itself was defiant. Like a layer of fear was hanging over him like a mist over a pond or swimming pool and could not be easily scattered. I always thought it would take a truckload of angels to haul a man like my father into believing. In his case, it took a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer. The slow death of a wife. Then his life was like a house broken into. The heart’s rooms resonated with absence and a leaden echo that said what it said about trusting. About what we filter, what passes through regardless. He had a photograph of the two of them at Christmas. He’d touch the wheat-colored frame. The glass. Say, *Good night, Sweetheart* or *I love you, Nettie Bentley*. One night, I overheard him praying in his bedroom, petitioning his God above the music of FM Country. I heard strings of faltering words followed by silence.

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Then more talk as if he was fixing something. Making repairs. What had happened set off an alarm, though what was taken proved unrecoverable. Lost or stolen in some Florida where the perfect blue water in pools stays perfect only as long as we work to make it so; and, even then, the shop rag isn't where we left it, the new model pool pump a poor fit, the wrong one but maybe close enough it can be made to do the job with a bit of swearing or calling out to the Almighty.