

Richard Jones

WHITE TOWELS | 025

I have been studying the difference
between solitude and loneliness,
telling the story of my life
to the clean white towels taken warm from the dryer.
I carry them through the house
as though they were my children
asleep in my arms.

Ted Kooser

SELECTING A READER | 002

First, I would have her be beautiful,
and walking carefully up on my poetry
at the loneliest moment of an afternoon,
her hair still damp at the neck
from washing it. She should be wearing
a raincoat, an old one, dirty
from not having money enough for the cleaners.
She will take out her glasses, and there
in the bookstore, she will thumb
over my poems, then put the book back
up on its shelf. She will say to herself,
"For that kind of money, I can get
my raincoat cleaned." And she will.

Dorianne Laux

SINGING BACK THE WORLD | 004

I don't remember how it began.
The singing. Judy at the wheel
in the middle of *Sentimental Journey*.
The side of her face glowing.
Her full lips moving. Beyond her shoulder
the little houses sliding by.
And Geri. Her frizzy hair tumbling
in the wind wing's breeze, fumbling
with the words. All of us singing
as loud as we can. Off key.
Not even a semblance of harmony.
Driving home in a blue Comet singing
I'll Be Seeing You and *Love Is a Rose*.
The love songs of war. The war songs
of love. Mixing up verses, eras, words.
Songs from stupid musicals.
Coming in strong on the easy refrains.
Straining our middle aged voices
trying to reach impossible notes,
reconstruct forgotten phrases.
Cole Porter's *Anything Goes*.
Shamelessly la la la-ing
whole sections. Forgetting
the rent, the kids, the men,
the other woman. The sad goodbye.

The whole of childhood. Forgetting
the lost dog, Polio. The grey planes
pregnant with bombs. Fields
of white headstones. All of it gone
as we struggle to remember
the words. One of us picking up
where the others leave off. Intent
on the song. Forgetting our bodies,
their pitiful limbs, their heaviness.
Nothing but three throats
beating back the world—Laurie's
radiation treatments. The scars
on Christina's arms. Kim's brother.
Molly's grandfather. Jane's sister.
Singing to the telephone poles
skimming by. Stoplights
blooming green. The road,
a glassy black river edged
with brilliant gilded weeds. The car
an immense boat cutting the air
into blue angelic plumes. Singing
Blue Moon and *Paper Moon*
and *Mack the Knife*, and *Nobody Knows*
the Trouble I've Seen.

Museum

On the morning of the Käthe Kollwitz exhibit, a young man and woman come into the museum restaurant. She is carrying a baby; he carries the air-freight edition of the Sunday *New York Times*. She sits in a high-backed wicker chair, cradling the infant in her arms. He fills a tray with fresh fruit, rolls, and coffee in white cups and brings it to the table. His hair is tousled, her eyes are puffy. They look like they were thrown down into sleep and then yanked out of it like divers coming up for air. He holds the baby. She drinks coffee, scans the front page, butters a roll and eats it in their little corner in the sun. After a while, she holds the baby. He reads the *Book Review* and eats some fruit. Then he holds the baby while she finds the section of the paper she wants and eats fruit and smokes. They've hardly exchanged a look. Meanwhile, I have fallen in love with this equitable arrangement, and with the baby who cooperates by sleeping. All around them are faces Käthe Kollwitz carved in wood of people with no talent or capacity for suffering who are suffering the numbest kinds of pain: hunger, helpless terror. But this young couple is reading the Sunday paper in the sun, the baby is sleeping, the green has begun to emerge from the rind of the cantaloupe, and everything seems possible.

Calm

1

September sun, a little fog in the mornings. No sanctified terror. At night Luke says, "How do you connect a *b* to an *a* in cursive?" He is bent to the task with such absorption that he doesn't notice the Scarlatti on the stereo, which he would in other circumstances turn off. He has said that chamber music sounds to him worried. I go out and look at the early stars. They glow faintly; faintly the mountain is washed in the color of sunset, at that season a faded scarlet like the petals of the bougainvillea which is also fading. A power saw, somewhere in the neighborhood, is enacting someone's idea of more pleasure, an extra room or a redwood tub. It hums and stops, hums and stops.

2

In the dream there was a face saying no. Not with words. Brow furrow, crow's-feet, lip curl: no, it is forbidden to you, no. But it was featureless, you could put your hand through it and feel cold on the other side. It was not the father-face saying no among the torsos and the pillars of aluminum nor the mother-face weeping no, no, no at the gate that guards rage; it was not even the idiot face of the obedient brother tacking his list of a hundred and seventy-five reasons why not on the greenhouse door. This face spits on archetypes, spits on caves, rainbows, the little human luxury of historical explanation. The meadow, you remember the meadow? And the air in June which held the scent of it as the woman in religious iconography holds the broken son? You can go into that meadow, the light routed by a brilliant tenderness of green, a cool V carved by a muskrat in the blue-gray distance of the pond, black-eyed Susans everywhere. You can go there.