

Whispers (set of 3 themed poems)

by Sally Houtman

Whispers I

Sitting across from you at the Donut shop
at 3 a.m. hair and beard pure white,
working on his second cup of coffee,
black, from the half full pot you share,
the ragged stranger tilts his head, shoulders
raised, tells you about the halfway house,
the drinking, two failed marriages, no kids.
The wall clock's minute hand sweeps a path
towards morning as he pours another cup,
and he is on to junkboats on the Mekong,
the stench of napalm, fields pock-marked
with craters left by bombs. He lights a cigarette,
sucks in hollow cheeks, rolls up one khaki sleeve
to show a thin, barbed scar that runs from wrist
to god knows where. His gaze averted, head
angled toward the cold-fogged window, he leans in,
asks if you can hear them, the whispers of the dead.
You take a sip and shake your head. "No," is what
you tell him, but the hair on your neck stands on end.

Whispers II

When you step into the street it is
barely daylight. There is a certain
rawness in your chest. Far too early

for the subway, you feel compelled to walk,
to be far from any place you've ever been.
And so you walk, without a plan, coat pulled
tight around you, collar up, boot-crunching
through the snow. You walk halfway to State Street,
past the rooming house, the clustered buildings,
past the Russian bookshop and the rent-to-own
appliance stores, on up a hill to the edge
of an empty lot and there you stop. You wrap
your hands around cold metal bars, gaze
through wrought iron posts into the cemetery beyond,
to the rows of names you know are there but cannot
read.

Then, pulling back, you slide one finger down
the slim scar on your wrist, fill your lungs, and,
with back straightened, turn your ear into the wind.
This is how it is for now in the world you must inhabit —
the walking and the waiting, your ear tuned
to hear dark whispers, the smell of something
burning, night turning quietly to day.

Whispers III

At the corner of Jamison Road and Fifth,
you squint into the sun, clasp the key
that dangles from a length of twine
around your neck, try to still the tremors,
as you wait for the crosswalk light to change.
On days like these your focus drifts and ripples.
In this cage of brick and waste and hurry,
you sometimes find it hard to breathe.
On the street, a late-model sedan
attempts to beat the light, guns its engine,

leans on its horn. This is, for you, a sound
most problematic, far too shrill and several decibels
too high for the time of day. But that moment
of redirection draws your gaze across the street
to where a weathered man is standing, chin dipped,
eyes squeezed tight behind thick lenses, agitating
foot to foot. As you watch his rhythmic sidestep
you grow strangely aware of the synchrony
of sound and movement, feel compelled
to listen, leaning slightly forward, to the hiss
the tires make, and soon you begin
to hear *it* — a sound like breathing,
a pulsing, death-wing whisper, and,
looking up, you wonder if he can hear it, too.
When the light turns green you usher forward,
moving toward him, and it is in this sudden
rush of movement that he lifts his head to straighten,
stands root-sure, arms outstretched with palms
upturned to brutish sky, like a book of scriptures
open, saying, *We had nothing when we came here,
and there'll be plenty of it left when we are gone.*

