

# 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.*









