

New March

It was spring, and that meant it was near the season to stop going outside. Spring was when the neighbors—the neighboring neighborhood—stretched its muscles. When the flowers came up, that's when they wanted to hit you.

She was a painter. Flowers, yes, and grass and the dogs. She didn't paint people but she smiled at them as they sat on the benches. She hadn't decided, if this year she liked people.

Be careful, one of them on the benches told her, Now is when the ambushes go up.

Oh, she said. It's awful, isn't it? She looked about her, and though she was worried she couldn't tell, Which were the ambushers and which weren't? She wasn't the kind to say, that's the ones, or, there they are.

Well goodbye then, she said, I'll see you when it's not so bad. Petals from the tree had dropped to her acquaintance's lap, one on the scarf that covered her hair.

She went home and started a drawing, a beautiful, big dog that stood—wide-jawed and dappled—to guard the park. There were flowers, yes, and the wind and new soil.

Oh, she said, and started quietly to cry. Later, she thought, she'd march straight out the door.

A Curse

He was a well loved man. He went to the café and the faces looked up, blue glow and caffeine, and they loved him. They loved him.

He was shot in the street. A word! the shooter said, full of hate. Two ugly words!

He had a funeral to which no sons or daughters came. He didn't have them and his parents had disowned him. They loved and disowned, unable to own such a man.

On the coast his mother looked at the boats. The dinghies bobbed and the sails swayed. A pod of dolphins shot for the sky.

Arthur, she said, I wish we'd had a son. I wish we'd had a boat.

Yes, he sighed. I wish we'd had the time.

The funeral was a party of hats and champagne. They loved the man, this gentle man. The man who'd cursed God so.

The Innocent

He looked up at the wasp nest, hung from a branch in the walnut tree. Give you 50 bucks to hit it with this, the boy had said. In his small hand was a walnut.

The boy and his friends stood around the corner of the house, sniggering and peeking out.

He eyed the nest, a-sway in the breeze and lazily orbited by its makers. They were yellow-green and shone. They floated round and around.

He was an old man. He'd forgotten what it was like to lose his job, to be broken hearted, to face his uncertainties. He had so much—and the wasps were little soldiers in toy coats.

Do it, the boy shouted. Go ahead if you want the 50. The boys looked at each other with doddering heads and in imitation of the old man's grin.

He brought his arm back and threw. With all the experience of his lifetime he hit the nest square on, the walnut bursting the paper shell to disappear inside.

Oh! the boys said and covered their mouths. Oh he really did it.

The man turned to them, even as the wasps found his neck and arms, even as the boys gaped. You see, he said, standing in the sun. You see what you can become?

The boys ran to their homes, shut their doors, never again to undo what they'll make.

Denominations

He was told he had to pass math. Math, said his math teacher, either you're part of the problem, or part of the solution.

After class, he took his textbook out under a tree. There were the most beautiful berries in the tree—exact globes of red and blue that took up the blue afternoon light—and the most beautiful birds that ate them.

What do you think? he said to the numbers in his book. Do you see these wonders? Do you hear these songs?

The numbers arranged themselves into columns and forms. The numbers equaled themselves in abstraction.

That's what I thought, he said.

At the edge of the campus was a lake. The lake was human made, with a wall of dazzling geometry that held it in and shaped it.

Here, he said, gently, to his textbook, and he threw the book upon the lake. I was never going to pass: in any case.

The book drifted smoothly to the bottom, solving all questions, ears stopped with water to the world.

Some Unobserved

She put her hat in the middle of the sidewalk and took the bench. For half an hour, the people stepped around it. It was a big hat and red.

At home she asked her son what he was doing. He was dressed in black and his fingernails blue.

He put his chin on the top of her head. I don't know, he said, I'm sad.

My love, she answered. My great one.

He drifted through the door, her true-loved ghost of hair and clothes.

On Saturday they went to the park, husband, ghost, and she.

You two are quiet, the husband said. Through his bottle the bright sun shone.

Yeah, she said, I guess we are. She missed her hat, her sad, unreasonable hat.

Ice Cream Man

The ice cream man turned her jingle on and her truck sang down the street: *I came to the river and I couldn't get across, so I paid five dollars for a big bay hoss.*

The sky was in its purple phase and on this street was a man she knew. There he was, tucked into the shadow of a sycamore, the dollar in his hand.

What'll I get you?

The man pointed to the strawberry shortcake ice cream bar pictured on the side of the truck.

As always? she said.

The man nodded.

Not for a dollar. She ducked inside the truck and came back with a bomb pop. As always, she said.

The man shrugged. Sometimes your prices are different. Sometimes the strawberry shortcake is a dollar.

Never, she said. That's the other ice cream man.

The man shrugged. He held the bomb pop by its stick, the paper wrapping still intact.

The ice cream man sighed. I got a lot more on my route, Dan.

He held the bomb pop out to her, the paper wrapping in red and blue.

She took the bomb pop and ducked into the truck, came back with a strawberry shortcake. That's the other ice cream man, she said.

No, he answered, all your prices should be the same. Same company, same prices.

I got a lot more on my route, Dan.

He unwrapped his strawberry shortcake, took a bite, and then handed her the dollar. The sky was in its black phase, the streetlight full of bugs.

The ice cream man is my favorite part of summer, he said.

I know, she sighed and closed her sliding window.

She got into her seat and started down the road: *Went out to milk and I didn't know how, milked the goat instead of the cow.*