

## MARK COX

---

### SILL

On the kitchen sill,  
in the square brick house  
my aunt aged and died in,  
the flawless hand-blown pear  
will neither rot nor last.

My daughter, too young  
to ever think of this again,  
once took it down  
and placed it in a bowl,  
with the breakfast oranges.  
She'd thought it lonely, I guess,  
with just the sunlight against it,  
that single breath,  
exhaled, perhaps, just after lunch,  
smelling of cheese and peach schnapps.

Dust is the pollen of our dying,  
even children sense this,  
and after she'd wiped it clean  
with her flowered dress,  
she held it suspended  
by its delicate, disproportionate stem  
and lowered it into the wooden bowl.

Her great-aunt, though,  
had little patience with disorder,  
couldn't bear the clean, unblemished outline  
where it had originally been,  
and that was that.

Moments ago, after assurance that her family  
would all recognize each other in heaven,

my daughter asked who would take care of her things.  
And when I said her babies could, she cautioned  
that babies can't even take care of themselves.

Neither can we, of course, never quite tall enough  
to reach the light switch, never quite able to drink  
from the wall-mounted fountain of contentment,  
we stuff our pockets with beads and bottle-caps,  
we organize our knick-knacks as best we can.

My aunt's squat, miniature tract house was razed.  
Her window sill exists only in the heaven of children.  
The pear, it could be anywhere,  
like the last breath of the old German who made it.  
Likewise, her porcelain salters  
and the hummingbird still hovering  
at its glass flower.





DUNES

Despite the curvatures adapted each to the other,  
The slackening skin that in sleep feels lost without that other's;  
Despite the slatted fencing that marks their yard from others',  
And the offspring at play within, their testament to others;  
Despite all the others they have embraced and refused;  
Despite all otherness between them  
They've acknowledged and recused;  
They can no longer in mystery come to each other,  
With the quickening and total surrender to another  
That both empties each and fills the other.  
And so they go on, because each goes on, despite the other:  
To each their own wind-ironed waters,  
To each their own bruised sky and horizon,  
Their own shames, their own redemptions,  
Awakening to each night's newly shifted sloping,  
Each day by unremitting day's abiding,  
Without need for another day or lover,  
They endure side by side, in their time, no other.

## THE BRIEFCASE

They bought it early in their courtship, at one of the estate or moving sales they avidly frequented, piecing together a life from the treasures and trash of other couples—young then, oblivious, able to profit from others’ losses, to foresee utility and beauty in the discarded and worn. “Contents a mystery,” the tag said, “Combination unknown.” Even so, it was a bargain—a sleek, hard-shelled executive attaché, its four dials frozen at 0009, the point of boredom at which someone stopped trying. Even recounting this story, he aches with methodical sequential labor, feels the dream overcome by drudgery, the way her dinged muffin tins and Jell-O molds signaled an end to each merged ingredient—became, finally, intractable result, which, like good children, they shut up and ate, year after year. When it finally clicked open at 9998, all he found within was another tag, one that showed the combination he now knew, and directions for customizing that code, making it their own, for which, obviously, it was too late, there being nothing left of their early hope to entrust there, that trapped air of possibility belonging, now, to others—perhaps you, parking on their weed-ravaged lawn as you have, walking arm in arm up the drive toward the heaped folding tables and the garage door propped open with a brand new broom.

LIKE A SIMILE

Fell into bed like a tree  
slept like boiling water  
got up from bed like a camel  
and showered like a tin roof.  
Went down stairs like a slinky  
drove to work like a water skier  
entered the trailer like a bad smell  
where I changed clothes like a burn victim  
drank my coffee like a mosquito  
and waited like a bus stop.  
A whistle blew.  
Then I painted like I was in a knife fight for eight hours  
drank like a burning building  
drove home like a bank shot  
unlocked the door like a jeweler  
and entered the house like an argument next door.  
The dog smiled like a chain saw.  
The wife pretended to be asleep  
I pretended to eat.  
She lay on the bed like a mattress  
I sat at the table like a chair.  
Until I inched along the stair rail like a sprinkler  
entered like smoke from a fire in the next room  
and apologized like a toaster.  
The covers did *not* open like I was an envelope  
and she was a 24-hour teller  
so I undressed like an apprentice matador  
discovering bullshit on his shoes.

**RED LEAD, 1978**

The way a boy might kick a can,  
or a field goal, or a stone to skip  
down one long empty street  
toward a home that held no warmth for him;  
as if putting on a sock or unbuckling a belt,  
some small gesture shared by all of us,  
he kicked him in the face. Then,  
standing like a hunter over his trophy,  
one foot on the tailgate,  
he dabbed blood from his boot  
with a napkin.

Behind us, clouds muddied the horizon,  
pigeons peered from their nests in the girders,  
and the latticed shadows of the bridge  
lay like a puzzle on the ground.  
To the east, the broken-toothed St. Louis skyline  
yawned up into haze. *It is a trial*, the stanchions said,  
*bound here as we are, our sorrows given*  
*so we won't float toward heaven too soon.*

Spot primer, finish coat, blood, dust and asphalt,  
squabs laid gingerly down to die  
by bottle caps full of water. For miles  
that paper napkin rode the Missouri,  
getting darker and darker, going under,  
being pulled apart and into  
the fierce, filthy river of everyone.